

Interviewee: Ying Li
Interviewer: Camille Alvarado
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Abstract: Ying Li was born in 1973 in Dalian, China and now lives and works as a teacher in Worcester. After suffering from a severe illness and a very high fever as a toddler, her hearing deteriorated and she became deaf. In this interview, Ying Li speaks about her family's experiences coming to terms with her deafness and her own struggle to communicate and learn to identify herself in a hearing world. She discusses her education as a young child, meeting other deaf children and learning sign language for the first time. She also reflects upon her experiences in graduate school at Gallaudet University—the country's only deaf university, located in Washington D.C. Ying Li also talks a bit about the services and education available to deaf children in China.

CA: Hi, my name is Camille, and I will be interviewing you today. Would you please introduce yourself?

YL: Sure. My name is Ying Li. I'm deaf and I'm from China. Now I work here in the US.

CA: Where were you born?

YL: I was born in a city called Dalian, China.

CA: Is it near any other cities?

YL: Yes, it's near Beijing

CA: What year were you born?

YL: I was born in 1973

CA: Were you born deaf?

YL: No, I was born hearing

CA: How did you lose your hearing?

YL: When I was about one-and-a-half I developed a really high fever and I was sick, and slowly my hearing deteriorated and I became deaf.

CA: Can you hear some things?

YL: Yes, I can hear a few things. I do have a digital hearing aid, but I can't understand every word, but I can hear some sounds.

CA: How old were you when your family found out you were deaf?

YL: When I was about one-and-a-half, they found out.

CA: Did your family accept your deafness?

YL: When they first found out, not really. My mother was especially upset. She cried all day; she did not want to accept it. But a friend of hers really tried to encourage her to accept my deafness, and explained that I could be successful and that I would be fine, so she did try to accept it after that.

CA: Are your parents deaf?

YL: No my parents are hearing and my sister is hearing as well.

CA: How did you and your parents communicate?

YL: Most of the time I read their lips or pass notes back and forth.

CA: Do you remember the first time you met another deaf person?

YL: Wow, let me think. I guess I would have to say when I was in elementary school. I went to a school for the deaf and that was probably the first time I met another deaf person and my deaf classmates.

CA: Do you remember how you felt?

YL: Oh, I was excited. This was all so exciting, and the sign language was so different. I really wanted to learn.

CA: How old were you when you started school?

YL: I was eight.

CA: Did you go to a school for the deaf?

YL: Yes, when I was eight I went to a school for the deaf.

CA: Do you remember your first day of school?

YL: Hmm, yeah. The first day it was very awkward. I didn't feel ready to go to school. I missed my parents, so it was a little bit awkward. My language was awkward because I was still learning sign language, but I got used to it and it was fine.

CA: Your elementary and high school experiences, were those good or bad?

YL: I was really interested in a lot of different things, and I got to take part in sports and dance and I was also interested in art. So overall I had a really good time.

CA: Where did you go to college?

YL: I went to college at in a teaching school in Dalian.

CA: Were there other deaf students at your school?

YL: Yes, there were two deaf students, just two of us.

CA: Was your college experience good or bad?

YL: I would say a little bit of both. You have to understand there weren't any interpreters for me in my classes, so I would have to watch the teacher very closely and that was difficult. Luckily I had a good friend who I taught sign language, so she was able to try her best to interpret for me in class, so that was good.

CA: While you were in China, did you get any assisted services to help you with your education?

YL: No, no we didn't have those.

CA: Where did you go to grad school?

YL: I went to grad school at Gallaudet in Washington D.C.

CA: How did you learn about Gallaudet?

YL: A long time ago, around 1998. There was a Gallaudet professor who used to come to Dalian. His name was David Martin and he would come around every year and give lectures on linguistics and education. I was really interested and I would always ask him questions about Gallaudet, so that's how I found out about it.

CA: Did you learn ASL before or after you went to Gallaudet?

YL: I learned ASL before Gallaudet. I actually learned from a professor and two graduate students who were interns in Dalian, so I learned ASL from them.

CA: What was your experience at Gallaudet like?

YL: Well, I have to say that it was a really wonderful experience. It was challenging, but overall it was wonderful. I remember learning ASL and just picking up so quickly. I was also exposed to deaf culture, and it influenced my life every day as learning something new. It was just incredibly wonderful.

CA: Did you go to any other schools?

YL: Umm, Yes, after I finished grad school, I worked one year as a preschool teacher and then when I was done with that, I moved to Texas and I went to Lamar University and I got my PH.D. And that was in deaf education and deaf studies.

CA: Where was your education most accessible?

YL: For me I think I'd have to say Gallaudet that was the best education.

CA: Does China have the same thing as an IUP?

YL: Umm, yes actually I do, it's a recent development. It was set up about five years ago, and they copied the same system the U.S uses.

CA: What are the educational choices for deaf children in China?

YL: Oh, there are many options for them; they can go to oral school, bilingual, bicultural schools. Basically the same options they have here in America.

CA: What services are available for deaf children in China?

YL: Oh, there are many different services that are offered. They have interpreters, counselors for the family, ASL classes. They can go to vocational schools. There are many different things to help deaf children.

CA: In order for the kids to get those services, do they need to be evaluated for language or cognitive skills?

YL: Not that I know of, but keep in mind I'm a little far behind in China's policies in regards to deaf education, so I don't know. That's a very good question.

CA: Thinking about your own experiences, what do you think is the best education for deaf children?

YL: Well, I have to say the best thing for deaf children at school would be exposure to deaf culture and to language. That's the best thing you can do for children.

CA: Are you married.

YL: Yes, yes I'm married.

CA: What is your husband's name?

YL: My husband's name is Guillermo, but we just call him Memo for short.

CA: Is he deaf as well?

YL: Oh yes, of course he's deaf.

CA: How do the two of you communicate?

YL: Oh, using ASL

CA: When you go visit family, how do you communicate then?

YL: Oh, like most people do—writing notes in English or using body language and gesturing.

CA: Do you live in Worcester?

YL: Yes, yes I live here in Worcester.

CA: When did you move to Worcester?

YL: I moved here in the fall of 2005.

CA: Do you work in Worcester?

YL: Yes I do.

CA: Do you like working and living in Worcester?

YL: Oh, I enjoy it a lot. I really love working as a teacher.

CA: What is your favorite part about living in Worcester.

YL: Oh, let me think, good question. Well I guess I have to say I really love the sports here at Holy Cross. Basketball and hockey, I just really love watching them. I just get so into it.

CA: Before you moved to Worcester did you live anywhere else?

YL: Yeah, I lived in Texas—you mean before Worcester? Yes, I lived in Texas.

CA: What is your favorite city to live in?

YL: Well you mean in China or here in America, which one?

CA: Both

YL: Oh, both. I have to say the favorite I've ever lived would definitely home in Dalian.

CA: Well, you're deaf, a female and Chinese, but how do you identify yourself.

YL: Oh, well it's a little confusing. When I grew up, I didn't know anything about deaf culture and I was a deaf girl in a hearing world—grew up orally so I didn't really know -- am I deaf or hard of hearing? I didn't have a label to identify myself by. But when I came here and went Gallaudet. I finally found identity for myself. I realized, I'm deaf and I'm Asian and identify myself as deaf first. So I'm a deaf user of ASL.

CA: Thank you very much

YL: Thank you.