

Interviewee: Heidi Reed
Interviewers: M. Siobhan Straub and Caitlin Dold
College of the Holy Cross students
Northeastern U. students (interpreting): Robert Farahole
and Amanda Dupuis
Prof. Wendy Watson- Northeastern University
Transcriber: Amanda Joy, Salter College
Date of Interview: February 19, 2010
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts



Overseen by Prof. Judy Freedman Fask, College of the Holy Cross, Deaf Studies Program
DFST 350 Course: Experience in the Deaf Community
Signed History Project

Abstract: Heidi Reed is a native of Massachusetts. She became Deaf at 18 months old due to antibiotics. Heidi was raised orally (using speech and lip-reading for communication) in a family who could all hear. Heidi first became aware of Deaf culture and learned American Sign Language (ASL) at the age of 25 when she attended graduate school at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. There she had a newfound identity and awareness of herself, as a member of the Deaf community. This experience resonated with Heidi so much that she felt drawn to do something about advocacy for the people with whom she identified. Heidi pursued a career in human services and is now the Massachusetts Commissioner for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. This amazing woman advocates for the rights of Deaf and hard of hearing people in Massachusetts and is an incredible role model to all women.

What is the Worcester Women's History Project?

It's the oral history project of women in Worcester.

What does it do?

It's a collection of stories about the experiences of the women in Worcester.

What is the Holy Cross connection?

The Deaf Studies department recognized the history was not full. It didn't include the Deaf women's experiences. Holy Cross students interview Deaf women and want a full history. Want to find out their education, experiences growing up, and perspectives on deafness, community involvement, and family life.

CD: My name is Caitlin Dold; I'm a senior at The College of the Holy Cross. I'm a double major, in Sociology and Deaf studies. My sign name is "C" at the nose like making a flower.

SS: Hi, I'm Siobhan Straub, a junior at Holy Cross. I'm a Psychology major and a minor in Studies. My sign name is "S" at the chest. Today we have Commissioner Heidi Reed of the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing (MCDHH). First, we'll begin with family history. I know growing up you had your parents and sister, but what was life like?

HR: I grew up with my parents and my sister living with me, and all of them are actually hearing. My sister and I are fraternal twins and we're very close.

You were married, correct?

HR: Yes, I was married to my husband for 25 years, and (very sadly) he passed away three years ago, but he was a wonderful husband. He himself was hard of hearing.

What did he do?

HR: Well, my husband and I first met because we both worked at Delgado College, in New Orleans, LA. We were advisors to new students so we worked closely together. We became really good friends, started dating, and then we were married.

Where did you grow up?

HR: I'm actually a native of Massachusetts; I was born here in a town called Norwood, and then my family moved to some other small towns in Massachusetts; New Salem, Duxbury, and Marshfield. Then when I was ten years old we moved to New York where I continued my education. After that I went to college, and then I went to work, and then I came full circle all the way back to Massachusetts in 1988 because I really do feel Massachusetts is my home.

You have moved to a lot of different places. Where in New York did you live?

HR: Upstate New York, in a town by the name of Warwick.

Regarding communication, how did you feel about it growing up? Was it good growing up in a hearing family or was it ok?

HR: Well I was not born deaf actually. I became deaf at the age of eighteen (18) months from antibiotics. At that time, I had already started to talk a little bit, and as I mentioned I do have a twin sister, and we were talking together, just babbling and then I became deaf. My family had no idea that I was deaf; it was only until they tried to get my attention and I wouldn't even look, so they decided that something was not right here and brought me to the doctor. They found out that I was deaf at age two. So, at that time, I was learning to speak, but obviously, I hadn't completely learned how to speak. It wasn't really clear, and I really couldn't hear and take in new sounds, so I couldn't fully learn English. My parents decided to raise me using lip reading. I had hearing aids, the old fashioned kind that sat in a harness which was fastened around the chest. That was to help me manage the volume of my voice. Now understand that the hearing aids did not provide enough sound for me to understand speech. Suppose a dog was nearby barking or an airplane was going overhead, I could hear those environmental noises. The hearing aids helped me understand my surroundings, but they didn't really help me hear and understand what other people were saying. I use speech reading to watch what others said and my own voice to communicate with other people.

How were you exposed to Deaf culture and where did you learn your Deaf culture, specifically?

HR: I happen to find a great work opportunity in the community after college. It was a program where I provided human services to people including individuals who were Deaf. They would come to me and they would ask, “You’re deaf, so how do you communicate”? I know I’m Deaf, but I wasn’t Deaf in a cultural way yet. It was then that I became interested in learning about Deaf culture and I wanted to learn more and become more involved in the community I started to study sign language. I started to finger spell and sign, very slowly. And then I decided to go to graduate school at Gallaudet University, and there I really started to learn sign language and became immersed in the culture.

What positives did being Deaf bring to your family and bring to yourself? Positive experiences, I know a lot of people say that there is now a positive view, but there use to be a negative thought about it. Now there’s a lot more people thinking there is a positive thing. What positives did it bring to you and your family?

HR: For me as I learn more about Deaf culture, it just opened so many doors to different benefits. My family now understands the same benefits as I do. There are more opportunities to help me communicate, and now that I use sign language, I can talk to so many different people. There is so much technology that I can use. Before I went to Gallaudet, I never knew about a TTY. If I needed to make a phone call, my family would have to make it for me, but now I can do it myself. There are so many things I can do. I can do pretty much anything anyone can do. The technology available now makes a wonderful difference in being able to socialize and interact with people.

So which communication do you prefer? Do you like to speak or sign?

HR: I consider myself bi-lingual. I grew up using English and then I learned sign language, and it’s been a great experience for me. The people I work with use American Sign Language (ASL) everyday and at the same time I still use English to communicate with people who are not Deaf. I would say I’m very skilled at both.

When did you learn sign language?

HR: I learned sign language when I went to Gallaudet University, at the age of 25. It was pretty late in life.

Was it hard to acquire the language?

HR: Growing up, yes. I had to be very dependent on lip reading, and I had to be one on one to even understand someone. And on top of that, I had to be familiar with their type of speech. If I met a new person and they talked with an accent or had a speech pattern which I was not accustomed to, I couldn’t understand them, so there were very few people I could communicate with. All others, it was like see you later, and we would never have any type of connection. But

then when I went to Gallaudet and learned sign language, it opened up so many more doors for me. I could communicate with so many more people. It was just great!

You've been Deaf for most of your life, so how do you identify yourself in terms of your Deafness? Deaf, hard of hearing?

HR: I'm a person on the fence. I'm Deaf, but I grew with the experience of a hearing culture. Then I learned about the Deaf culture later in life and I can definitely see the benefits and positives of both. Both of those cultures are ingrained inside of me.

What kind of school did you go to? Did you go to mainstream school setting, residential school, signing school, or oral school?

HR: My school was completely mainstreamed. I was the only Deaf person in my elementary school, my middle school, my high school. It was just me. It was very hard for me to really keep up with lectures and what was going on. So as a result, I became adept as a reader. If we were having a discussion in class, or the teacher was writing on the board or turned away, I couldn't understand what they were saying. So in order to keep up with the work I really became dependent on reading, I soon became to love it, and I was reading everything. I also became a really adept writer; my notes would be really intensive. The teacher would arrange notes for me and so would my classmates. Reading was really an important part of communication for me, and if we had homework that we needed to read, I would always be the first one to have read it.

So, you didn't have an interpreter, correct?

HR: Correct. There were no interpreters at that time. My sister would actually really help me out because we had class together. I could definitely lip read her really well because she's my sister and I was very familiar with her speech. We might be in class together doing a project and the teacher would be having a discussion and I would have no idea what was being said. I would tap my sister on the shoulder and ask her what was being discussed and she would relay the message to me.

With your sister, did you find that you were connected with other people too or was she your connection or did you feel separated?

HR: I feel that I had a very small number of friends. With a large group, everyone often talks at the same time and I can't understand them, but on a one on one basis is much better. With my group of friends they all knew how to communicate with me, they knew they could write notes to me, they knew they could come up and speak to me one on one and that would be totally clear. So I didn't necessarily need my sister there, I just need a small number of people.

Did you find that people around you were interested in Deaf culture or did that happen when you got older?

HR: In today's world people are so interested in Deaf culture; you see a lot of Deaf pride in people wanting to know more about that and what Deaf people actually can do. The use of sign language has brought tremendous social change in the community. I often see new parents coming up to me asking me how they can teach their babies new signs. I have people coming up to me who have recently found out that their children are hard of hearing and what to do; they are really interested in that. I always tell them that Deaf and hard of hearing people can do anything you can do; you just have to keep an open mind and learn. There are many benefits to be gained from the experience of Deafness and Deaf culture.

Once you graduated high school, what did you see for your goals and options in life?

HR: Upon graduating high school I knew I wanted to go to college. As I said before I'm an avid reader and writer so I love being a student, and I really enjoyed learning. So, that influenced me to go to college. My bachelor's degree is from William Smith, a small women's college in New York, and I picked that school because it was small. I knew that the class sizes would be smaller and it would be a better opportunity for me to understand the teacher, as well as have access to teachers for one-on-one sessions. I really enjoyed that experience. I majored in English, because I do love to read. But I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with my degree. I graduated and began working with people who had disabilities. The people I worked with included Deaf people, and I became very interested in learning more about the culture of Deaf people, so I decided to go to Gallaudet (a college for the Deaf in Washington, DC). Education is so important.

We're actually going to change focus to your work now. Where and when did you start working?

HR: I'm going to tell you about the opportunities that are most important to me. When I first started college, my summer job was working with children. They were young children, around the age of two. They were all hearing. Being Deaf, it was hard to communicate with them. They didn't know any sign language. And I had to learn to relate to them and how to communicate with them. They learned to come up to me, and stand right in front of me and gesture. We learned how to meet each other's needs in that way. I think that it was a really good experience for me because I learned how to relate to young children and to help them. I really enjoy working with people and that was one of my first experiences doing so. Then still in college, I had another summer job that was really interesting. I lived in the country, near many migrant farm workers' camps, and during the day they would bring their children to me and I would take care of them. They were very young babies. That experience was really interesting for me because all the farmers spoke Spanish. So then again there was this communication difficulty, but we used gestures and really worked hard to communicate I really enjoyed working with babies and helping other people.

Throughout college I didn't really know what I wanted to do. There were a lot of different work opportunities for me. I knew I enjoyed working with people as I said before and I knew I really wanted to make a difference. I knew I just wanted to do something that was important to the world and could benefit people and open doors for people. I decided to go Gallaudet and I studied for my Masters' degree there. There are a lot different of opportunities I could do. I was

very open to opportunities. I could work in the community, work in schools, and do different things involving people. I was just trying to match my skill set and seeing what I would enjoy the most. Then when I graduated from Gallaudet I was offered the opportunity to work in a community college program and become an advisor to new students who were entering the college. I would provide support for them; help them with orientation and training, which would also help prepare them to become successful in their lives.

You have many different roles and responsibilities in work. How do you balance them?

HR: I have many different roles and responsibilities at work. I have taken on increased responsibilities over the years and I have in the past struggled to balance that. I have been an advisor, been a manager, been an association leader and now I'm the commissioner. I keep changing positions and adding on more, but I really enjoy my work. There are times where I am required to go to meetings and events on the weekends, at night but I've always been really enthusiastic about it and it's been something that I've enjoyed doing. It really has been a big part of my life. My husband was always very supportive of that. We knew we had our separate jobs; we were both social workers. We would make time for family and make sure we had time to catch up together. We would make sure that we had time to do our work. I was always careful to balance time for myself, my family, and work.

So, you are the Commissioner (of the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing). What are some of the positives and negatives of being the commissioner?

HR: There are sooooo many positives to working with the Deaf and hard of hearing community. There are tremendous opportunities to share knowledge and experiences. Everyone's stories are just so different and interesting. Now I like to tell people how to live if they become Deaf or hard of hearing. Let them know the technologies and all the things they are able to do. That's a great part of my job. Now I really like to inform them that they can live a full life as a Deaf or hard of hearing person. There are so many positive things about my job. I work with a great team of individuals that are just so skilled at what they do. People contact us every day with so many different questions and my staff is always able to answer them, quickly and efficiently. It's such a supportive environment.

What was it that your husband did again?

HR: Before my husband passed away he worked for the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Before that he was the director of a program serving Deaf school children.

Now we are going to change gears on your political and community involvement. Do you find yourself politically motivated?

HR: My position here at MCDHH is appointed by the governor and it is a tremendous honor to be appointed the commissioner, but it's also a huge responsibility. It's great to make connections with other directors and to be involved in projects about policies and help move forward and work together. It feels very gratifying. It's nice to have connections with different

legislators. Currently I have connections with three different legislators and it's really great to work together with them and see their different philosophies and approaches toward a common goal. And they have projects that include Deaf and hard of hearing people so it's important that I work together with them to make sure these projects are successful and able to be accessed by the Deaf and hard of hearing communities. And it's important that we continue to work together with different legislators to make sure the voices and concerns of the Deaf and hard of hearing are approached.

You worked with a number of politicians. When did you become the leader?

HR: I was appointed in 2002.

I know it's a powerful position; it used to be men commissioners now it's become more women commissioners. What have you seen change?

HR: Well right now I work with many different commissioners who are men and women. I'm actually the second commissioner to serve here at MCDHH. And the first one was a woman. I think it's a challenge to advise for change in a positive way. I often work with commissioners from other agencies, agencies who are approached by people who are Deaf and hard of hearing and need access to services. So we have been working together so that the other agencies are now ready to successfully respond to Deaf and hard of hearing consumers. It's important to share our knowledge, share our expertise and work together to help promote and improve services for Deaf and hard of hearing people.

What would you see as the most important issues in the Deaf and hard of hearing community?

HR: First it's so very important that children get the very best education they can. Young children who are Deaf and hard of hearing must have an effective education in order to live a full and successful life. It is so important that they have access to education. They need to have advisors and teachers who they can communicate with in the schools, so they have the same access to all that the school offers to other students. It's also so crucial to have health care access for the Deaf and hard of hearing communities so if they go to the doctor, they have communication access whether that is through interpreters or CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation Service) services. It is critical that we strive to support the communication access rights of Deaf and hard of hearing consumers.

Do you find the government supports your policy changes? Have things improved for the Deaf and hard of hearing?

HR: We continue to educate, and that's a process. Many people have still never met a Deaf or hard of hearing person. It's just really important for us to continue to educate the general public and legislators who we work with as well. It very beneficial to continue to share our stories and educate people so they know how to communicate with Deaf and hard of hearing people.

For people who aren't familiar with the Mass Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, what else do you do?

HR: We just try to be as visible as we can possible be. We go to many different events and trainings, and we have exhibits all around the state. If you go to visit our website, we have a range of pamphlets and printed materials with tons of information that you can access. Our most successful publication is the “Savvy Consumer’s Guide to Hearing Loss.” That publication is available on our website we also post on our website a directory of the many programs and services available throughout the state.

What does MDCHH do specifically for the Worcester area?

HR: We have a regional office here in Worcester. Our regional office provides services to Deaf and hard of hearing consumers. We have case managers who manage different cases for the Deaf and hard of hearing individuals; newborn babies, children, and families that have Deaf and hard of hearing members. We also have staff to provide coordination of interpreter or CART servicers. Our staff travels throughout the state, though our headquarters is in Boston. We also have a very strong Deaf and Hard of Hearing Independent Living program in the Worcester region, The Center for Living and Working. This agency is contracted under MCDHH.

So, what is your connection to Worcester?

HR: Worcester is just a vibrant community in Massachusetts. And I know we have a lot of Deaf and hard of hearing consumers all around the state including Worcester, who come to us for support and to work with us. We want to see everyone in the state, who is Deaf and hard of hearing working together towards the common goal. Many of those people live here in Worcester.