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Achievement: From a Lack of Knowledge to an Appreciation of Deaf History

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When John Day asked me to share my experiences with you on this Open Forum theme - Achievements: Libraries Change Lives - I told myself you are first going to hear about the impressive achievements of the deaf community which have changed society. Although there is a long list, I will highlight a few. The world's first public school for deaf people was established in Paris, France In 1735, the first one in the world. A second school was established in Rome in 1784. I do not know if any public school for hearing people had yet been established. I do know there were none in the U.S. when, in 1816, the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, went from there to England and France to study methods for teaching deaf children. Bringing back with him Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher from Paris, the two men - with the financial backing from a hearing parent a deaf child - helped start and run the first public school for deaf students in the United States. This school for the deaf eventually gave some ideas to two educators in the U.S., who eventually established public schools for blind students and hearing students, respectively, in the late 1830s.

A second important contribution was the telephone. In 1876, Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, a teacher of deaf children and husband of a deaf woman, worked on devices to help deaf people hear. He did not succeed in this endeavor, but did invent the telephone. It was a wonderful device, but - ironically - unavailable to deaf people for almost 100 years, until a deaf man invented a device that enabled deaf people to have telephone access.

The third item I will mention here really consists of multiple contributions. Thomas Alva Edison, as is well known, said that his deafness was an asset and contributed to his success in developing numerous patents, including those inventions that benefit the library.

There is one more important contribution. I think everyone should recognize. In the closing years of the 20th century, a deaf man, Vinton Cerf, and a small group of his science colleagues developed the Internet.

For many years, I, along with a group of library friends have been encouraging both the deaf and library communities to take deaf history seriously. We are continuing our efforts in this direction.

Incidentally, in the coming month, the last week of September, deaf delegates from all parts of the world will meet in Rome, Italy, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). This is the oldest global organization serving people with disabilities.

The WFD has been interested in the IFLA for a long time and has worked closely with John Day and other librarians who are concerned with library access for all. The WFD initiated an annual event in 1958, known as the International Week of the Deaf, which is observed in the last full week of September. If you want to start including the needs of deaf people in your current library program, observance of this week might be a good beginning. The WFD has a fact sheet about the week and will encourage deaf people to get involved with their local library. I have personally gone from knowing very little or nothing about deaf history to having a deep appreciation for it. Even though I am now a librarian, myself, I never knew about deaf history until after I started graduate school for my masters in library and information science in midlife. Many library colleagues and also members of the deaf community, especially young deaf people, when learning of my profession, assume that I have read many books and know all about deaf history because I used the library all my life. This is not true.

I grew up in rural Nebraska and Wyoming (Central USA). My parents never took me to a public library. I do not remember if I ever saw them reading a book, but I do remember their being “glued” to the radio, to which I naturally had no access. This is the way they kept up with world events. The only reading materials I could find at home were newspapers. I read everything in them. One grandfather, himself having a hearing loss, took a special interest in me. He would take me aside and encourage me to read his large piles of magazines that were mostly *Colliers* (now no longer in existence). Grandpa and I communicated through writing. Even though he had a hearing loss, I, oddly enough, never considered him a part of my deaf world because he did not use sign language.

I attended a residential school for the deaf in Omaha, Nebraska, 500 miles away from home. This school forbade the use of sign language in the classroom and even asked parents not to learn it. No one at the school knew why, but eventually many of us learned the reason in 1981 from the book, “Deaf Heritage,” by Jack R. Gannon. This first-ever published narrative history about Deaf America told us about the international educators’ meeting of September 1880 in Milan, Italy. Delegates at the 2nd International Congress on Education of the Deaf voted to outlaw the use of sign language in the education of deaf children in favor of using speech and reading lips. The delegations from the U.S. and Great Britain were the only ones to vote against this course of action.

For years, deaf people had been brainwashed to believe that sign language is bad and that it should not be openly used. We were led to believe that we should be ashamed of our disability. I, along with most other deaf children around the world at that time, hid our sign language in public. I also grew up with no access to TV, movies, and telephones, and limited access to community activities that relied on hearing. My knowledge of the world was restricted to what I read in the newspapers or what I learned from reading letters and the diary that my mother encouraged me to read. Later as a student at Gallaudet College (now University) I had unique opportunities to visit many museums and libraries in Washington, DC. Even then my knowledge about the rich history at Gallaudet University was very limited.

Deaf people growing up then and even now, I think, looked to hearing people for information, thinking that they knew everything simply because they could hear.

The D.C. Public Library in Washington, DC changed my life.

I now have self-esteem. I now see that all people who are deaf or have some form of hearing loss, their hearing family members, people with career and/or common interests in deaf culture, auxiliary aids, diversity and services, and those who are also blind or have learning differences, need to learn from each other and work together as one interest group - the deaf community.

In the past, I tended to separate myself from the above-mentioned groups, and I also avoided hearing people who are blind or have learning differences. No more! I love working with them all.

The library also brought me insight into the diversity of populations, including those with ethnic identity. I did not have good knowledge of this until I became an active member of the ALA and other library organizations.

My first job at the D.C. Public Library was a clerical one, but I know it was a very valuable passport to the future for me. It was at that library that I actually first began to appreciate reading the various subjects that appeared in the materials that came across my desk, as I was responsible for recording every new book that came into the library system. From that point, I became more aware of the real world. This was also the place where I learned much about dealing with people who did not know about deaf people.

During the 1970's, when the disability community began to demand rights for its people in relation to education and jobs, I took the opportunity to start graduate school. I will never forget the many questions my library classmates asked me about deaf people. This is something that had never occurred at my workplace. My classmates and I learned from each other in preparation for our profession. My professor encouraged me to write a booklet about deaf people. While working on it, I was surprised to learn many things, including some information with which I did not agree. When I became the first "Librarian for the Deaf Community" - the first such library position at a public library - I took my responsibilities seriously. While searching for facts to help me provide the public with exciting programs and activities, I also learned a lot about deaf history.

When I started my new position as Librarian for the Deaf Community, there was no book, which spoke positively about the deaf community. All that people could find was focused on the problems of hearing loss and deaf people. Actually, our problems are no different from those of others, except in the area of communication. It is the communication barrier that causes problems. If our needs were known, there would be no big problem. I decided to start something that would help with the communication barrier. To make a long story short, I developed an information resource for deaf people and those associated with them. It is called THE RED NOTEBOOK and I encourage you to look into it. It is now also soon to be available online.

I feel fortunate to have associated with caring librarians at the DCPL. Molly Raphael, now the DCPL Director, was actually the first one to push me hard in convincing the DCPL administration to establish a full-time library position to focus on services to the deaf community. My first experience as an advocate! Anyway, three months after I started this position, I attended the ALA annual conference for the first time. While at the ALA conference, the DCPL asked for a meeting with interested ALA members to discuss establishing a unit within the ALA structure to focus on deaf needs. In 1979, I became the first chair of the new section, now called Library Services to the Deaf Forum (we will celebrate our 25th anniversary in June 2004). I am still learning, and I thank the library.

You want to become involved, but are not sure where to start. I would suggest that you start making plans to observe International Week of the Deaf in 2002. You thus have a year to start making plans with your local community and to ask for support from your local businesses, etc.

As we all know, libraries preserve the past and encourage the future. A nation, a culture, or a community that does not understand its own past will remain mired in its mistakes. Schools and society may make mistakes, but we all can help make it easier for both deaf and hearing people to communicate together and make opportunities for libraries to come alive with the rich world of achievements that benefit everyone.

I appreciate this opportunity to talk to you. When you return home, please think about the 70 million deaf people living in all parts of the world - 80 percent of them live in developing countries where local authorities are not familiar with their communication needs and where few deaf people have access to education.

Their lives can change if all libraries and librarians are willing to work together. The Friends of Libraries for Deaf Action (FOLDA) invites you to get involved.

Thank you.