



Attitudinal Barriers Faced During My Adolescent Years Regarding Career Options

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Workshop: Assumptions and Expectations Concerning People Who Are Deaf

My first memories of thinking about careers or what I would like to be was when I was a very young girl. I loved to watch westerns and I loved horses. My dream was to become a cowgirl and live on a ranch. However as I grew older and a little more mature I realized this would not be an option for me unless I married some rancher or cowboy. My first serious thought of careers was wanting to join the air force and become a pilot. I wanted to fly like birds and be free in the air.

I never thought of myself as being much different than my friends. I was about 14 or 15 years old then. It was also at that time that I experienced the first sudden drop in my hearing, moving from being a person with a moderate hearing loss to a severe hearing loss. I could still use the telephone, but this loss of hearing had a serious impact on my grades in school. I went from being an "A" student with a few "B" grades to being a student who got "B" and "C" grades. Neither I, my parents, nor the teachers connected this to my hearing becoming worse but just to the fact that I was not as smart as my sister!

At the same time I was to hear from my father that I could not go into the air force because I was hard of hearing. Being a veteran of WWII he knew the military would not accept me. I remember being disappointed with that knowledge but gradually accepting that. Over the next three years in high school I do not remember having any specific thoughts about careers. I remember during this time of my life being depressed dealing with my hearing loss. I also remember reading many books about Black and Jewish people and the oppression they experienced in the southern parts in USA and in Germany during WWII. I had no books to read about deaf people so I read about other oppressed groups. I think at this time I began to realize that my deafness or hearing loss would limit me. I did not know what I could do and no one ever talked to me about my future. I think my parents decided for themselves that I would not be college material...that I would get married and have a family like so many of my female cousins did. I had a boyfriend at that time and it seemed what they expected would happen.

I also did not want to go to college after high school and took a job as a clerk in a small Five and Ten Cents store in my hometown. After working there for two months I was fired because I could not hear my boss (who owned the store) when she was trying to get my attention from way in back of the store. She basically told me I was not capable of working in their store. I remember this being a painful experience and never was really told why she fired me. But my parents and sister knew because of one my sister's friends who worked in the same store told them. It was my parents who told me I was fired because I was deaf. After a very long crying spell that night after losing my job, my father sat down with me and told me he thought I should go to college. Because my parents never had a college education and were blue-collar workers they struggled with how to advise me. But they did help me go through the process of applying to the local community college, getting some financial help and trying to booster my shattered ego (there was not much there at this point in my life).

So at the age of 19 I started Delta Community College taking the general liberal arts program with hopes to transfer to a four year college after completing my AAS degree. While at Delta College I learned to spread my wings a little more, taking a shine to history, geography, and anthropology courses. I loved those courses. I barely tolerated the science and math courses but got through those with passing grades. I wanted so much to become a teacher and teach Social Science, but I was discouraged from this because I learned that I would never be hired to teach in a classroom. Looking back on that I wish someone had encouraged me to become a map maker. I loved maps! But once again I had to make some decision. Well, my sister was in the social work program at Michigan State University (MSU). So I thought why not do that.....I liked working with people and there must be some other deaf and hard of hearing kids like me who are floundering around without any support or someone to advise them.

After two years at Delta College I applied to MSU and was accepted as a junior in the Social Work Program starting there in the Fall of 1971. About one month after I started my program at MSU I experienced another significant hearing loss, dropping from severe to profound. I was no longer able to use the telephone. So my first semester at MSU was another major upheaval! My smallest class was about 100 students...my largest was over 500 students. I was floundering in my classes. At this time my Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) doctor referred me to the MSU Speech and Hearing Clinic. There I met two audiologists who tested my hearing and evaluate what type of hearing aid I could use. The two women were trying to be helpful to me, but they actually caused me to be very confused and disoriented during this period of my life. They tried guide me away from working in fields that required me to use my hearing.....they discouraged me from going into social work.

They referred me to a counselor at the Counseling Center at MSU. Now this was a good step. The counselor was very supportive. He gave me the whole battery of interest and career tests, interpreted them to me, and encouraged me to talk about my interests and what I wanted to do with my life. All my interest tests results showed a strong interest in working with people in social work, teaching, counseling, etc. He encouraged me to explore my interest in education and to talk with a person who was head of the Deaf Education program at MSU. However all his encouragement was in vain because at the same time the two audiologists were telling me I needed to go in to science fields or fields that did not require me to work or communicate with people.

Then the head of the Deaf Education program would not consider me as a candidate for their program because I was deaf. Her question to me was how would I teach young deaf kids how to talk and use good speech? (Michigan was an oral state). They did not allow deaf teachers to teach in their educational system. Totally confused.....thoroughly defeated.....with tears in my heart and soul....I left MSU after four months there and never returned again.

I spent the next six months in total depression....feeling like I could not hold a job because I was deaf and why go to college if there was no one who would hire me. But I did meet with my VR counselor who was new and tried to encourage me to explore different career options and to be open to possible science related fields. I spent my time cleaning my parent's home, cooking dinners for them and going out and interviewing people who worked as medical technicians in x-ray labs, medical labs, different types of hospital careers, etc. Everywhere I went I was told this is not a job that a deaf person can do. And of course with my broken spirit I believed them.

But at the same time...I kept remembering my counselor at MSU and his encouragement of trying to get me to listen to my heart and listen to what I wanted to do with my life and that was to help other deaf people like me. Then my VR counselor suggested that I go to Central Michigan University and meet a friend of his who was a professor in the Speech and Audiology Dept. at CMU. I knew him from several years back when I attended the CMU Summer Speech and Language clinic for young kids. Well in a nut shell he tried to help me by telling me I could major in Communication Disorders and then maybe from there continue on my path or goals to work with deaf and hard of hearing people. He also introduced me to Dr. Fred Bess who was head of the audiology department. It was like a life line had been thrown to me and I broke down in tears. I was so overwhelmed and grateful that someone wanted me and believed in me. Looking back on

all of this....I realized that it was a couple of audiologists who helped break my spirit but it was two other audiologists at CMU that gave me hope....and from there on...I decided that I would not let anyone else try to control my decisions, but I must find the strength to follow my heart. And this is exactly what I did.

At CMU I started to blossom again. Faculty and students were supportive and encouraged me. I did well in all of my classes except for the phonetic course which I think the professor passed me just out of the goodness of his heart and watching me struggle to hear sounds I obviously could not hear.

So from the age of 22 to 24 I set my own course.....moving closer to my goals. In my senior year I took two graduate courses. One in hereditary deafness and the other in counseling. The hereditary deafness course is where I learned I had Ushers Syndrome. It was fate that I decided to do my research paper on Usher Syndrome leading to my discovery that I had this condition. But it was the counseling course that lead me to my future career. Dr. Bess encouraged me in my endeavors and helped me find three graduate programs in counseling and rehabilitation for the deaf. He told me I was capable of graduate school. Before that I felt I was fortunate just to get through school with a Bachelor of Science degree but never smart enough for a Masters degree!

Thus I applied to the University of Arizona for the graduate program in counseling, but I also arranged an interview with a counselor at the Michigan School for the Deaf (MSD). A hearing friend of mine went with me because we were both interested in the same careers. We met with a hearing counselor at MSD. Well I can report the results of this interview were totally negative. He did not encourage me at all. He bluntly told me that I would never get a job; that he did not know any deaf person who was a successful counselor. He knew one deaf person who was trying to be a good counselor and was a total failure. Well believe me this was not good news to hear.....however I decided the hell with him.. and my friend agreed. Her comment was "This guy is a total jerk"! My pure little ears were so shocked to hear her talk this way but it made me laugh and we laughed all the way back to CMU.

Well here I am all these years later. I have been a counselor for many many to college students who are deaf, hard of hearing and deaf with secondary disabilities, soon I go to Toronto to give a presentation at an international conference for Educators for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Soon after I return from that I head to Long Island and Helen Keller NC to work in their Summer Youth Program for a few days. In the past several years I have presented locally in Rochester, the state of New York, national and internationally on deaf blind issues.

I left my position at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf where I had a wonderful career for 24 years. Before I left I set up some goals for myself. One was to be a moving force in helping the Rochester community improve services to deaf blind, deaf/visually impaired people. I am doing that as chair of the Deaf Blind Collaborative Committee and we are currently working to see if we can get an affiliate with Helen Keller National Center. Hopefully if we are successful this will mean funds, etc. The other goal was to become a member of the American Association for the Deaf Blind board. This mission was just accomplished and I started my duties on May 6th. This will move me in the position to have more of an impact on a national level.