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DEAF WOMEN: AGENTS OF CHANGE

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“...I would say this to every deaf girl and woman: learn whatever you have a chance to learn; keep your eyes open, your mind attentive, your hands active; try to find out what talents you have, and bring them into play until they yield you your daily bread; first, last, and evermore, do not be discouraged;---after each rebuff, try anew; you will win at last.”

May Martin (Stafford)¹ (1899, p. 81)

I continue to enjoy my role as guest editor for this second special issue in the tribute to bilingualism pioneers Marie Jean “MP” Philip, Nathie Lee Marbury and Barbara Marie “Kanny” Kannapell. Because of the current dearth of literature about Deaf² women, I sincerely hope that I will help overcome the paucity with these two special issues. I wish to convey my deepest gratitude to Society for American Sign Language Journal editor Jody Cripps and Society for American Sign Language organization’s president Sam Supalla for their confidence in me and my team of writers. I also appreciate learning the ropes of editing a journal. Both Cripps and Supalla were patient as we went through the lengthy back-and-forth developmental editing process. We even had several Zoom sessions that were helpful.

The title for this second issue on Deaf women, *Deaf Women: Agents of Change* refers to the Deaf female agents of change, which is true for Marie, Nathie and Kanny. Also in this issue, three additional Deaf women are subject to discussion in the form of featured articles for their contributions to society. These women continue to be the agents of change in their own ways.

The quotation above by May Martin (Stafford) is highly relevant for this special issue. Martin was an early graduate of the National Deaf Mute College (now Gallaudet University³) and the first female, either Deaf or hearing, professor there. What she wrote in 1899 reflects the relentless pioneering spirit that Marie, Nathie, and Kanny showed in their advocacy work over one hundred years later. The coverage of other Deaf women living outside the United States points to some universal urgings for respect and equality. Deaf women prove to be strong and resilient. I raise my hands and wave them to celebrate all of the Deaf women in the world.

1 <https://archive.org/details/ProceedingsOfTheConventionOfTheNationalAssociationOfTheDeaf3rd-8th/page/n513/mode/2up>

2 Some authors have opted for the “Deaf/deaf” designation. Some have chosen not to do so. “Deaf” refers to people who are culturally deaf, whereas “deaf” refers to the audiological condition (Woodward, 1972; Padden & Humphries, 1988).

3 For those not familiar with the history of Gallaudet University, the institution underwent several name changes: National Deaf Mute College (1865-1894); Gallaudet College (1894-1986); Gallaudet University (1986-present) (Atwood, 1964; The 2014 Gallaudet Almanac, 2020).

MY PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF MARIE JEAN PHILIP, NATHIE MARBURY, AND BARBARA KANNAPELL

As mentioned in my previous editorial in the 6.1 issue, I was fortunate to know each of these three honorable women: Marie, Nathie, and Kanny. While growing up in Baltimore, I frequented Gallaudet College (now University) for various sporting and theatrical events with my Deaf parents and older Deaf sister. There, I recall seeing Nathie on campus, long before I became a student there. My whole family adored her because she had an aura to her that drew us all. Unfortunately, I never had any professional interactions with her, but whenever we met socially, we were sure to strike up informal conversations. She would, for example, always ask me if I had been good or if I was working hard in school, emphasizing how important it was to be good and smart.

With Marie, I looked like her twin sister, at least when we were younger. On my very first day as a Gallaudet freshman, several upperclassmen mistook me for Marie because we had very similar features: short, curly-haired, bespectacled. For example, one sophomore or junior woman became cross with me because I had missed an appointment with her. Having absolutely no idea what she was talking about, she suddenly realized that I was not Marie. Because these blunders happened almost all day, I naturally became curious about her. So a mutual friend arranged for a meeting later that evening at the infamous Rathskeller (a pub at Gallaudet). When Marie and I saw each other for the first time, we stared at each other for a good while before we started talking, comparing personal likes and dislikes. That evolved into a long friendship.

One memory that stands out is how Marie taught me that professional criticism from a friend does not mean the end of a friendship. It was at The Fourth International Workshop for Deaf Researchers in Ariccia, near Rome, Italy in 1991 where I gave a presentation on fingerspelling (see Figure 1). In my lecture, I said something that escapes my memory, but Marie strongly disagreed with my comment. The discussion that ensued had upset me and I burst into tears. That must have scared Marie as she took me aside, telling me not to take it personally and she flashed the international ILY sign. From this lesson, I came to realize that we do learn from criticism. Marie and I went to several conferences and there is a photo of us together at 1997 Deaf Studies Conference as seen in the 6.1 issue of this journal (Figure 3 in Gertz et al., 2022, p. 50).

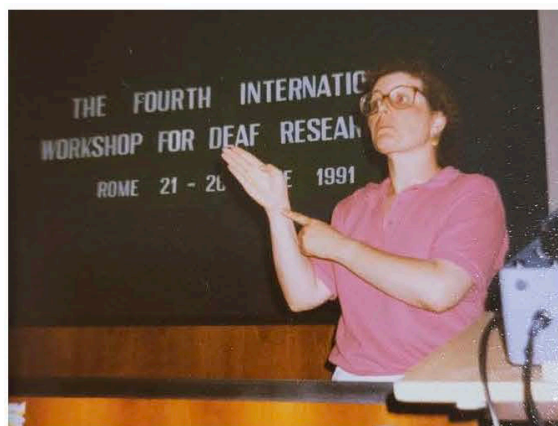


Figure 1: Arlene B. Kelly signing “BALTIMORE” at the Fourth International Workshop for Deaf Researchers; Rome, Italy; 1991.

With Kanny, I was very fortunate to have taken a Deaf Culture class under her tutelage while studying for my Masters in Linguistics in the early 1990s. Even better, I later became her Graduate Assistant in one of her Deaf Culture classes. This sparked my interest in teaching, and the rest is history in which my teaching career spanned close to 30 years. I truly appreciate Kanny taking me under her wing, showing me the ropes of teaching, especially in developing and sharing syllabi and materials, and dealing with challenging students.

A BRIEF BACKGROUND ON MULTILINGUALISM IN AMERICA

Because Marie Jean Philip, Nathie Lee Marbury and Barbara Marie “Kanny” Kannapell were pioneers in the area of bilingualism for Deaf children with ASL and written English, it would be prudent to explore the history of multilingualism in America. This concept has been prevalent in America since the Colonial period with the arrival of immigrants mostly from Germany, Holland, France, Sweden, Poland and Italy (Crawford, 1987). There were some attempts to impose English on the immigrant children. For example, in 1753, Benjamin Franklin urged for the establishment of English schools that favored one language over others (Crawford, 1987). Native American children were also victims of forced Anglicization by being sent to boarding schools (Nieto, 2009). While native languages were not fully eradicated, Anglicization evoked a sense of shame leading to exclusive use of English.

There were some positive trends that took place with multilingualism in early American life. Deaf American children had no formal education until 1817 when the first permanent school for the Deaf was established in Hartford, Connecticut: the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons, now known as the American School for the Deaf. This was made possible by the efforts by Laurent Clerc a Deaf French teacher, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, an American minister and Mason Cogswell, the father of a Deaf daughter. The fact that this school supported ASL and English as two languages must be appreciated.

The favorable attitude towards ASL and bilingualism within deaf education at this time coincided with more and more German-English speaking schools being established in big cities such as Baltimore, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee by the mid-1800's (Crawford, 1987). Kloss (1998) explains that laws authorizing education in English, German or both were adopted by several states. A domino effect resulted: Spanish-English education in New Mexico; instructions in languages other than English in Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska and Oregon (Crawford, 1987).

However, xenophobia grew as more immigrants arrived in America, thus the English language was forced upon immigrants as an assimilative tool for social cohesion, especially in workplaces (Crawford, 1987; Nieto, 1989). Deaf people thus experienced a big change in attitude from society. Supporting this trend, oralism took over deaf education around the time of the 1880's and continued for one hundred years. Signing was forbidden from use in many schools for the Deaf. Deaf students found themselves having to learn to speak orally and their teachers were only allowed to speak to them and there was no more signing (Baynton, 1996; Carbin, 1996).

The lesson learned from history indicates that the American message to multilingualism varies from being supportive to outright hostile. In more recent years, the public and policymakers have returned to being supportive of languages other than English. Fortunately, Deaf people began to experience a reversal of attitude towards their language, ASL. Two important federal bills were signed into law in the 1960's. The first was the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, prohibiting discrimination in public places and places of employment for all, including Deaf people.⁴ The second law was the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, also signed by President Johnson that provided school districts with federal funds to establish bilingual programs.⁵

In 1974, a watershed Supreme Court case known as *Lau v. Nichols* spotlighted on the language needs of students in American schools. In San Francisco, only about a thousand out of 2,856 Chinese students (who did not speak English fluently) were provided supplemental English instruction. The Lau family sued the San Francisco Unified School District for violating the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Supreme Court decided in their favor.⁶

4 <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act#:~:text=This%20act%2C%20signed%20into%20law,-civil%20rights%20legislation%20since%20Reconstruction>

5 <https://study.com/learn/lesson/bilingual-education-act-1968.html>

6 <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/ell/lau.html>

The *Lau v. Nichols* case inspired many in the Deaf community. Kanny paid attention to this case while she was a doctoral student in sociolinguistics at Georgetown University in the 1980's, sparking her lifelong advocacy for ASL-English instruction for Deaf children. Marie had begun in the late 1970's working as a research assistant with Dr. Harlan Lane at Northeastern University, piquing her interest in ASL-English bilingualism. Nathie was drawn into bilingual education just as strongly as the first two Deaf women.

HONORING THREE DEAF WOMEN

For this special issue's tributes to Marie, Nathie, and Kanny, I want to thank four contributors for agreeing to write a tribute to celebrate the lives of these women. MJ Bienvenu and Jessica Meehan wrote the tribute for Marie, and Carolyn McCaskill and Niesha Washington-Shepard for Nathie. Finally, the tribute covering Kanny is from Bienvenu and Kathy Jankowski.

CELEBRATING THREE ADDITIONAL DEAF WOMEN

I also have two featured articles that cover three additional Deaf women for this special issue. The first Deaf woman is artist Betty Miller who is deceased, yet she must not be forgotten. I thank Pamela Conley for accepting my invitation to write this article.

The remaining two Deaf women in this special issue live in Iran, thus giving readers an international view on the gender issues. The names of these women are Katayoon Guity and Farzaneh Soleimanbeigi whom I believe are very inspiring given the circumstances that are happening in their country. I thank Ardavan Guity for accepting my invitation to write this article.

All in all, this has been a truly incredible journey and honor for me to work on two journal issues with thirteen authors, as well as Cripps and Supalla, for almost two years. It was enriching for me personally, giving me an opportunity to bring the authors' voices to the stage. Having said this, it is with much hope that this issue, along with the preceding one, will bring enlightenment to the readers about the global Deaf Woman experience.

Sincere acknowledgements are extended to Noah Beckman of Gallaudet University Library and Jerrod Grill of Gallaudet University Archives. They were helpful in making my guest editorial job more easily managed than otherwise.

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