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Michelle

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Michelle is the school psychologist at the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. She tells us how she came to think of herself as hard-of-hearing. And she reminds us that all people - both hearing and Deaf - should be open to how others want to identify themselves.

Contact us (<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/contact.jsp>) if you want us to respond to Michelle or ask her a question.

Living between the hearing and Deaf worlds

When I walked on the Gallaudet campus 7 years ago, I had very little sign language skills and hadn't met a Deaf adult. As I became more competent in my signing, I was able to communicate with various people on the campus. I found at Gallaudet a place where people were like me, they grew up feeling isolated within their own homes, they struggled at school, they had a hard time making friends, they were made fun of because they didn't understand questions or they talked funny, they were pitied or they were admired, simply because they couldn't hear.

For the most part, the people I met identified themselves as Deaf and I was puzzled, because some of these people had more hearing than me. Yet, when they explained that it was more of a cultural identity, relating to the language and the history, I got it. I found it comforting to be surrounded by those who shared similar life experiences to me.

Finding my identity

Regardless, it was then when I began to question my own identity. Was I hard-of-hearing? Was I deaf? I asked several Deaf people. They told me I was Deaf because I had a hearing loss - end of story. Okay, that solved that problem, so I tried the "voice-off" thing all the time. Small problem though, my signing was really lousy (the Deaf couldn't understand me) and my husband couldn't sign (he couldn't understand me)... and I could hear some things in the environment, was I supposed to ignore the sounds I heard in order to appear deaf????? sighhhhhh... this was going to be more complicated than I thought...

Then I needed to go back to where I came from... I grew up in a hearing family... no one signed... I got by with reading lips... my hearing loss wasn't identified until I was in kindergarten (labeled hyperactive and having learning difficulties up until that point though)... born before the enactment of public law 94-142 (also known as the Education of All Handicapped Children's Act) school didn't know what to do with me, so they said "oh, she'll be fine here". I wasn't. I understood nothing, knew nothing and did everything I needed to do to get by (copy, cheat, whatever)... Meanwhile, I had few friends, and was called stupid or retarded because of my speech on a daily basis... there was no counselor at the school to support me so I was left to figure it all out on my own... that was pretty much the case until I got to Gallaudet and realized that I was able to learn, I just needed some sign language support.

So, back to the original question, hard-of-hearing or deaf? I don't believe many people would argue that at the age of 30, when you are from a hearing family, have a hearing husband, have hearing children, hearing friends and are new to the concept of sign language that it would be easy to adapt into the Deaf culture. Yes, I am audiologically deaf but not culturally deaf, I grew up in a hearing culture, and there's not much I can do to change that now. By not accepting this fact would mean that I would need to abandon my family, my friends, my husband and my children, and that is not going to happen anytime soon.

Being hard-of-hearing

Simply put, I am hard-of-hearing. I am lucky enough to be able to speak on the phone, talk with my children and carry on a conversation (sometimes) with one person through lip reading. I cannot go to the theater without an interpreter, I cannot watch TV or a movie without captioning (thank goodness for modern technology) and I cannot participate in a conversation with a large number of people.

I know I am one of a few people who identify themselves as hard-of-hearing (I King Jordan was the first person I met who identified himself as hard-of-hearing as well as my audiologist at Gallaudet!!)... It can be frustrating at times since there are so few of us. And it seems like everyday I need to be reminded that I don't really fit in either the Deaf not hearing world. When I meet a deaf person and I say that I am hard-of hearing, they respond, "Oh, really? You look hearing". When I am around hearing people in public, as soon as I speak, heads turn and people talk very slowly to me or perhaps they even give fingerspelling a shot in order to "help" me!! sigh...

Nonetheless, as tough as some of those experiences were for me growing up, in retrospect it prepared me for what I do today with the children here at PSD. Walking that fine line between the Deaf and hearing world allows for me to support each child and their families with various perspectives and an open mind.

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<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/meet/deaf/michelle.jsp>