

Interviewee: Sheri Hostovsky
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Abstract: Born in 1963 in San Francisco, California, Sheri Hostovsky is the only Deaf member of an all-hearing family. Diagnosed at age two, the doctor didn't know what caused Sheri's deafness, and her family never learned American Sign Language which is Sheri's first language. She formed her Deaf identity from a young age, attending the American School for the Deaf in Connecticut from age three to sixteen; being mainstreamed in a public high school in Chicopee, MA; and attending Gallaudet University for a short period of time. Currently, Sheri is an active member of the Deaf community in Central Massachusetts. But Sheri herself is the first person to tell you that her life has not been perfect. Having dealt with addiction and traumatic experiences, Sheri is a strong survivor. As if that weren't admirable enough, Sheri wants to help other women become survivors, too, especially other deaf women like herself. And she's doing just that! At the Rape Crisis Center of Central Massachusetts, located in Worcester, Sheri helps with the Our Deaf Sisters Survival Support Project (ODSSSP), an outreach program specifically geared towards educating the Deaf community about sexual assault, and advocating for community members who have been affected. For Sheri, this is not just another job, but a duty to equip all women, both deaf and hearing, with essential knowledge to help protect themselves. In this interview, Sheri's strength shines through as she discusses her pride in her Deaf identity, her strength at overcoming obstacles, and her desire to help other women.

- KM** Hi everyone, my name is Katie Marone. This is my sign name. I'm a senior at Holy Cross. I'm an English major in the deaf studies program
- AC** Hi, my name is Ada Chen, this is my sign name. I'm a senior, sociology major, two concentrations: women's studies and deaf studies.
- KM** What are we doing today? Ada and I are interviewing Sheri Hostovsky.
- AC** What are we doing this for? We're doing this for the Worcester Women's History project, and we're going to focus on two things today. Sheri's connection to Worcester, and Sheri's experience in Worcester.
- KM** I'm going to start the interview, and later, Ada's going to come in and we're going to change places.
- SH** Hellooo
- KM** Ok. What is your name?

SH My name is Sheri Hostovsky, and my sign name looks like this...

KM Okay. It's nice to meet you

SH It's nice to meet you as well!

KM Where were you born?

SH San Francisco, California.

KM What year were you born?

SH 1963

KM What was the day you were born?

SH August 7th, 1963

KM Okay... were you born deaf?

SH Frankly, I don't know. When I was around two, my mother noticed that I wasn't talking or responding to her. We went to many doctors and got examined and the doctor told her that I was deaf. But the reason why is unknown.

KM Is your family deaf?

SH Nope, I'm the only deaf one.

KM How many brothers and sisters do you have?

SH One older sister and one younger brother.

KM Did you have parents?

SH I don't have a father. My parents divorced when I was just a baby. I grew up with my mother.

KM Can you tell me a story about your childhood?

SH Ok. I started the deaf school when I was very young, around 3 years old. I was still just a baby. I went to the American School for the Deaf in Connecticut. Otherwise known as ASD. That's where you go when you did your internship. Very cool! I grew up there. During the week, I would attend classes and on the weekend, I would go home.

KM What kind of classes did you take at ASD?

SH Until I was 5 years old, I learned what it was like to be deaf with myself and how to sign. In first grade I started learning English, math, science, history; all the normal classes.

KM How do you identify yourself? Do you identify yourself as deaf, culturally deaf, or just living in a hearing world? What do you feel?

SH Ok. Growing up was both deaf and hearing for myself. I identified as a deaf because I was at the deaf school and all the children there came from deaf families and I connected a lot with them. When I was home with my family,

they were all hearing. I would speak; I would read lips... so I'm half in the deaf world and half in the hearing world. However, I do have a very strong connection with the deaf identity I carry. When I'm with hearing people, I speak. But I prefer being in the deaf community.

KM And your family never learned sign language? Do you talk with them? Or how do you communicate? Do you sign English? What other ways do you use to communicate?

I would speak. Would I only speak? No. There was a lot of gesturing and moving around. Communicating with my family wasn't easy. I come from a *very* smart family; *very* skilled in the English language. Matching up with that was very difficult with me. It was quite a challenge.

SH A while ago, I was very mad. I asked my mother why she never learned how to sign. I told her we could never have full communication; there was a lot of stuff missing between the two of us. I was living in a life of isolation. But my mother told me I had to be able to communicate with the hearing world.

KM When you were at school at ASD, did you learn how to read lips; did you use sign... what'd you learn there?

SH It was all signing. All the teachers were deaf, all the staff in the dorms were deaf, all my classes were taught in ASL. There was a speech class that I did take though.

KM Now, at ASD, not a lot of teachers are deaf, many of them are hearing teachers, and they use total communication. Um, I know this because I have an internship now there, at the American School for the Deaf, I go there on Monday and Friday and they use total communication. I tutor different kids, and it's *very* hard for me to use total communication; signing and talking at the same time. What was your experience with total communication when you were growing up at ASD? Was it hard for you? Can you explain?

SH Ok. When I entered the school in 1966, total communication hadn't been setup. It started when I was in the... 6th or 7th grade I think, that's when I first saw total communication. Personally, my experiences were ok. I come from a hearing family, so understanding English wasn't too difficult for me. I do know many deaf people who struggle with total communication. They are not familiar with the English language. They don't know how to read lips. When I'm talking with somebody who's using total communication, I notice my ASL becomes more like the English language. I prefer signing strongly in ASL. That's where my true emotional connection lies.

KM Do you have many friends from ASD still?

SH Not anymore. My life after 11th grade was very different. I quit high school at 11th grade and went to Gallaudet, I'll explain more about that. But first I traveled all over the country. So I just lost contact with my friends from home.

KM You said, after you finished high school at ASD ... what'd you do?

I dropped out of high school at 11th grade and then I went to Gallaudet, but before that I did transfer high schools and went to a public school in Chicopee, MA. That was a really wonderful experience for me growing up.

SH At the deaf residential school, we were all the same, but when I went to the public school, that was what the real world was like for us. Then I quit and decided to take a placement exam to go to Gallaudet, I passed, and I moved away from home.

KM So how many years did you spend at Gallaudet?

Oh a very short time, only six months. I just want to let you know that my life has not been perfect. I am an alcoholic and a drug addict. I am in recovery now, but when I was younger I was QUITE the boozer. I drank all the time; I did drugs, so I couldn't finish school. My addiction prevented me from achieving my goals. I wanted to work as a teacher, but I couldn't focus on that, I was only focused on the drugs.

SH

KM You said that your experience in the public school was good, I know that many many deaf people who've gone through mainstream education had an awful experience, why do you think your experience was a good one and not bad?

Well I grew up with a hearing family. It was... normal for me. Also, I went to all the parties and it didn't matter that I was deaf, the hearing kids would communicate with me, they thought it was cool "d'ya want a drink? D'ya wanna come smoke?" It was so fun! I really enjoyed that. The educational aspect was not nearly as great, but I had friends, and that's what was important to me

SH

KM So when you were younger, you thought education wasn't important, has that changed now? Do you think education is important,...or it just doesn't matter... or....

Yes, education is *very* important. Especially when it comes to people who have problems with addiction. When people have addictions, they don't get to achieve the same goals as other people who don't have it. They don't have the same opportunities within the deaf community. So, it's very important to have that knowledge.

SH

KM Ok, well that's it. Now Ada's going to come in and change. Thank you very much. And Ada's going to finish the interview.

SH Good job signing!

KM Thank you!

AC How are you?

SH I'm fine, I'm good.

AC Okay, when you finished school, what'd you do?

SH Just to clarify, you mean what did I do when I finished Gallaudet?

AC Yes

SH As I told Katie before, I was an alcoholic at that time, and that affected my life for 15 years. It meant that school and work were not a priority in my life at the time. I lived in a lot of different places and I made relationships with people who shared the same lifestyle as me, kind of crazy. I even hitch hiked from Massachusetts to California. My whole life did not have a direction.

AC Oh. Are you married?

SH I was married, but now I'm divorced.

AC For how long?

SH I was only married a short time, a year and a half, but during that time, I was sober. I didn't use drugs or alcohol at all during my marriage. During the relationship with the father of my three children I was *not* sober. But during my marriage, I was sober. But today I am divorced.

AC Ok, um, where do you work?

SH I work at the RCCCM, which is the Rape and Crisis Counseling Center of Central Mass. I trained there two years ago in regards to sexual assault. It was an amazing experience, wow. The training there, I just fell in love with it and knew I wanted to work there. I volunteered there for one year and then they offered me a job. I was so excited!

AC The ODSSSP is the Our Deaf Sister Support Project. I was laid off because they didn't have enough money to fund the program anymore, but I still volunteer there regularly

AC How did ODSSSP start?

SH It started in 2005. I wasn't there at the time, but it was established through three different components. The RCC, the CLW (which is the Center of Living and Working) and the ODSC (which is the Our Deaf Sister Center). I think that's right, I'm not too clear on the history, but I'm sure it's fine. I got all the major points. The ODSSSP was started to set up programs in the deaf community because deaf people really needed those services. The RCC teaches the CLW about rape and what it means and the CLW in turn learns about rape and sexual assault and teaches the RCC about deaf culture. It's a really amazing exchange of information between the two programs. We recruit all deaf people for the program and they become volunteer counselors. It's a survival outreach program with in the community.

AC What do you do at ODSSSP?

SH Well after the training's finished, the volunteers set up... Presentations? Yes, we do presentations, but we also do one-on-one's with *anyone* who contacts the center. Also, the deaf women who took the training are involved in the program as well. We setup outreach programs so that we can raise the awareness about rape and sexual assault to deaf people who may not know about it. The project goes out to different areas and explains what rape and sexual assault is and about our program and people realize;

- “oh wow, that happened to me,” then they come to our center.
- AC** Do you think it’s important for people to know about sexual assault?
- Definitely! I, myself, had no idea I was a victim. I was in an intimate relationship at one point in my life and whenever my partner wanted me to have sex, I would just concede, and I didn’t realize that I, I could have said no. And that happens to many of us. We weren’t educated about it in
- SH** school. Sex wasn’t really talked about when I went to school. There was no health education. So we’d always learn from social environments and our knowledge about it was very limited. The training that I had at the RCC really opened up my mind, I was amazed. I really understood how important this was for the deaf community.
- AC** Do you want to share a story from your work experience?
- The staff’s all hearing and I’m the only deaf person there. But they are wonderful people. They have amazing hearts and they have really rich experiences. They face many challenges and I feel like I can really connect with them. As Deaf women, we have a right to know what’s going on around us. For so long we walked around ignorant, but not anymore. Now we want people to know their rights and that it’s ok to speak up and how to protect ourselves against awful or traumatic experiences. I was a victim before in my life, and I learn now how I can become a survivor. And I
- SH** really wanna show others that they can become survivors too.
- When I was addicted to drugs and alcohol, I felt a lot of things built up inside of me, I couldn’t work, I couldn’t take care of my children, it really affected a lot of parts of my life and it prevented me from doing what I could do, and had the potential to do. After I weeded out all negativity in my life, I was really able to focus on myself and find direction for my life. I was able to grow as a person. Now that I understand how to help myself, I can help others.
- AC** Do you work with all hearing people? Or do they learn sign language?
- The people I work with are really enthusiastic. Some of them are very natural signers or some of them gesture, but their hearts are open to communicating with me. There’s one person who’s a really great signer and
- SH** who practices interpreting for me. It’s really cute. Some hearing people have the natural tendency to sign and others are awkward and they can’t really communicate well and sign with me, and I used to not have patience for those kinds of people, but now, working with these wonderful people, I have developed the patience I needed to communicate; it’s really nice.
- AC** Back then, hearing people thought deaf people were stupid. What do you think?
- I think they’re stupid! Ha. I mean, fine, if you’re gonna call me stupid, I’ll
- SH** call you stupid! But now I think it’s really important to educate hearing people that deaf people are the same as hearing people. The only thing we can’t do is hear! Our experiences, our life, our family, our relationships, the

bad experiences, the traumatic experiences... all the things in our life are the same as hearing people. We have our own ASL identity and that makes us unique and different than hearing people. But if they call me stupid, I feel bad for them because they're ignorant.

KM Yeah, ... ok. The three of us are almost finished. We wanna ask you one more question. What's one more thing that you would like to say to let people know about you, about your experiences... what do you want to let people know?

SH Alright, to the deaf community; I really wanna express that teenagers shouldn't smoke. Teenagers are so young, and smoking just leads to other addictive habits. Addictions prevent you from achieving what you want in life, and your goals. For me, it prevented me. Smoking at a young age led me on a path that was really hard to recover from. I met so many amazing people who are successful in their life, they have direction, they just sky rocket to the top. It's awe inspiring in the deaf community.

AC/KM To hearing people; remember what I just said about the deaf community. Thank you so much! We really enjoyed our interview with you.

SH Thank you, I really enjoyed the interview process as well.

AC/KM Bye.

SH Bye.