Interviewee: Joan Phillip
Interviewer: Steve Wych
Date of Interview: March 27, 2007
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts
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Abstract: Joan Phillip was born in 1959 in Worcester, MA. She, her parents, her two sisters, her ex-husband, and her two children are deaf. She talks about her childhood and the difficulties she faced trying to communicate with other children and her cousins who were not deaf and did not know sign language. She enjoyed attending the American School for the Deaf in Connecticut, a residential school, because she felt comfortable and safe in an environment with other deaf children. She discusses the differences in educating deaf children today. Her father was a big influence on her. He was very active with the Worcester Deaf Club and she is continuing that tradition. The College of the Holy Cross set up an award in her father's name for his work with deaf people. Joan is the Director of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Independents Program at the Center for Living and Working in Worcester. She talks about her role educating deaf people on their rights and how to be more independent. She also shares her opinion on the difficulties non-deaf parents of deaf children face when dealing with decisions on the options for their children.

Steve Wych: Hello?

Joan Phillip: Hello.

SW: Your name is what?

JP: My name is Joan Phillip.

SW: You were born when?

JP: I was born in 1959. and I was born here in Worcester.

SW: Here?

JP: Yup. I was born here and I also grew up here in Worcester.

SW: You grew up in Worcester. You live in Worcester now?

JP: No. I actually live one town over from Worcester. My town is called Shrewsbury. But it's really close about 10 or 15 minutes. It's just right next door. I stayed close by because my mother still lives in Worcester so we're close.

SW: Why did you move from Worcester?

JP: Well, when I got married, they were looking for a house and we found one here that we liked so we bought it, and I’ve been living there since. And I’ve been living here for more than 18 years.

SW: Do you have brothers or sisters?

JP: I have two sisters, but no brothers. My oldest sister’s name is Marie, my second sister’s name is Sue and I’m the baby of the three.

SW: Are they deaf?

JP: Yup. All three of us are deaf.

SW: Tell me about your mom? What does she do? Does she work with hearing people?

JP: Well, a while ago, I forget the name of the company, but my mom worked as a seamstress, the company she worked for made clothes and my mother used a sewing machine. Most of the other people at the company were not deaf. But she was very good at her job and was able to pick up the skills very quickly.

SW: Your mom communicated how?

JP: It was pretty tough. My mother told me stories that I remember about working alone and the people around her were talking but she just worked by herself. Sometimes she would try to communicate by writing back and forth but it was a pretty lonely position she was by herself most of the time.

SW: I know at the College of the Holy Cross, the Deaf Studies Program set up an award for John Phillip. I heard that your dad

JP: Yup. That’s my dad.

SW: I heard that your .. tell me about your dad, what does he do? Does he work with hearing people?

JP: Yup my father is from a family of ten children so it was a big family, and my father’s deaf as well as one of his sisters. So growing up in school, originally he went to school that taught speech and lip reading, but at work he had a similar experience my mother. Most of his… the other employees at the company were non-deaf. He worked as what we call being a Filer. He was very good at his job, and his boss would always ask him to take on responsibility, because he knew that he was good at doing the detailed work. In terms of communication, he did a lot of gesturing also used a method of writing back and forth, but like my mother spent a lot of time alone. It wasn't easy to communicate, which gave him time to focus on his work and duties there. During lunch time or when there was a break, for 10 or 15 minutes the non-deaf employees would be socializing and interacting but he would be alone pretty much.

SW: Growing up, you had many deaf friends.

JP: Yeah. Growing up, I was born here in Worcester as were my sisters, so the three of us grew up here, but we went to school in Connecticut. And we had a lot of deaf friends there. It was really easy to socialize and interact with other deaf people there at school. But over the summer a lot of people went home and they spread out all over the place. So the school was in Connecticut and most of my friends lived there, but my sisters and I lived in Massachusetts so we came back here and pretty much it was just the three of us, for the summer together and when the two of them, my sisters, went to college I was even more alone. I liked being at school more. It was more of a safe environment for me. Everyone had the same method of communication and it was a lot more easy to interact with other people.

SW: Your friends are deaf, your parents are deaf, your friends parents they might have been hearing. How was the communication different?

JP: You mean my parents? How did their parents communicate?

SW: Yeah

JP: Well my parents, their grandparents none of them signed they didn't know any sign language. My grandmother spoke a lot, and moved her mouth to try to let my mother read her lips. It was difficult though. And for family gatherings, my mother would always be alone while everyone around her would be speaking. My fathers experience was pretty similar. Like I said before he came from a big family of ten children so everyone around him would be talking but it was hard for him to be really engaged since they didn't know sign language. On my fathers side his parents moved here from Albania. So communication was also a little different because they were immigrants. But something that helped my father a lot was being involve here in Worcester in the Men's Deaf, The Deaf Men's Club.   It really kept him busy and gave him a lot to do. He was involved in sports and you don't need to communicate the same way with sports so that helped and his brother was also involved. But in terms of my grandparents, none of them signed and they still don't use sign language.

SW: You married?

JP: I was married. But now I'm divorced.

SW: Is your ex-husband deaf?

JP: Yup. I married a deaf man.

SW: Do you have children?

JP: I do. I have a daughter who is 23, and a son who is 20. And both of them are deaf.

SW: Were you surprised when your children were born deaf?

JP: No. When I was pregnant the first time, with my daughter my family got together and talked about the possibility of my child being born deaf. We thought about our family tree and in my parents generation my fathers' sister, my aunt, she's deaf, my mothers brother, my uncle, he's deaf, and the next generation, there's me and both of my sisters all three of us are deaf, so its possible there'd be someone deaf in the next generation, and we were prepared for that. And we were willing to accept a deaf child if we had one, likewise we were willing to accept a hearing child, we'd just teach them sign language. Either way we were prepared. But no I wasn't surprised.

SW: Your aunts, uncles, or cousins deaf?

JP: So on my fathers' side of the family, his sister, my aunt, was deaf. In the family of ten my father was the second oldest and then my aunt who was deaf was the ninth out of ten, so they were very spaced out in age. On my mother's side her brother and her were also spaced out in age 17 or 18 years, I forget exactly. My mother was born first, and her parents tried to have another child, but couldn't get pregnant so they gave up. 17, 18 years later they got pregnant again and my uncle was born deaf. Of all my cousins, none of them are deaf.

SW: During big social gatherings, you communicated how with your hearing family?

JP: I have a few cousins, well, when I was growing up my grandmother lived near me. My cousin lived with my grandmother so we grew up playing together and we just gestured a lot and were able to communicate fairly well, we were really close. Now I wish some of my cousins that were closer would sign more, but they don't. My aunt who is deaf, she has three children and those three cousins who are non-deaf do use sign language, so communication with them is very easy. None of my other cousins sign, so it's just those three cousins the children of my deaf aunt. It's not always easy to communicate, but with one of my cousins, who passed away a long time ago, we grew up together and communication with us came fairly easy, we were able to work through it and she didn't need to talk for us to communicate she picked up some signs, we gestured, and we made it work pretty well. I just want to add that my grandmother, my fathers' mother, it was a tradition in our family that for Christmas Eve, the whole family would gather at her house. We called here 'Nana' and every year for Christmas Eve we would gather at Nana's house the whole family would get together. The non-deaf family would get there and be hanging out socializing talking and when the deaf family had members would arrive we'd do our greetings say hello and then migrate to a different room in the house and for most of the night we'd stay in those separate rooms, we didn't socialize very often. It was more comfortable for us to stay in those separated groups for the sake of communication. Occasionally a family member would go back and forth between the groups but it didn't last very long, it just wasn't as comfortable.

SW: I understand that your family was strongly deaf, were your neighbors deaf also?

JP: Nope. I don't have any neighbors that are deaf. When I was growing up, when I was a little girl I had one neighbor that was deaf, remember my grandmothers house was close to mine. In the first floor of her house lived a deaf family and I was able to interact with them until they bought a house somewhere else and moved away. Ever since then I've had all neighbors that are not deaf.

SW: With your neighbors you played together, you grew up together, how did you communicate?

JP: It was not easy. I remember it always being a struggle to try to communicate. If it was one on one we can try to communicate by writing or something it was a little bit easier, but as soon as the group got big, and the kids were playing together, if I tried to join I felt left out. Everyone would be talking and to try to keep up with communication and follow what was going on was hard. They would also make fun of me. For example, they would say, "say this word, maybe the word 'cat'. Say the word cat." I would try and I would speak and I would try to say the word cat and they would make fun of me they thought I sounded funny the way that I said it was different from them. After that experience I stopped using my voice. I wasn't comfortable speaking. The only time I feel comfortable using my voice is with my animals, when I'm at home with my pets. My dog or cat, I don't care about speaking with them because I know they won't make fun of me.

SW: Worcester has many different cultural areas, where did you grow up?

JP: The area I grew up in was called Green Island. I grew up in that are and at that time, there were a lot of immigrants moving in from Albania and Armenia. I remember seeing a lot of immigrants coming into the area at the time. Now it's changed a lot. It's a lot more mixed today. There's a lot of African Americans, Hispanics, Whites, there's a lot more diversity. But during my time, it was mostly just immigrants from those two countries, Albania and Armenia.

SW: For a deaf person growing up in Worcester before, and for a deaf person growing up in Worcester now, how was work, school, socializing different?

JP: You mean growing up in Worcester back in the day and growing up in Worcester today, how are they different?

SW: Yes

JP: For different generations? Well when I was growing up my sisters and I went to school in Connecticut at the American School for the Deaf. Other students tended to be in mainstream programs and be one of very few deaf students in their school. The generation before in my parents time, there was a school called Upsala Street School and they had a program for deaf students. That was during my parents time. When I was growing up there were some programs for deaf students but not many students were involved they were pretty spread out. You could stay in contact but it was not very easy. Today there's more mainstreaming school programs, and within those programs the ages are all put together sometimes it's one student sometimes it two or three within that school, but it's different from the way it was when I was growing up where it was much more common to go to residential schools for deaf student. Part of what changed that is money coming from federal and state funding. Those cuts made it so that it was more difficult for students from out of state from Rhode Island, or Vermont, New Hampshire, to come here to go to the American School for the Deaf and stay in the residential school. So now within the state there's a bigger group of students but it's not as common for them all to go to residential school together. They're a lot more spread out.

SW: Where'd you go to school?

JP: I went to school in Connecticut at the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, Connecticut. I'm the fifth person in my family to go to that school. My aunt went, my uncle went, both of my older sisters and then me. I'm the last one from my family to graduate from the American School for the Deaf. And I graduated in 1978.

SW: Did your teachers know ASL?

JP: Most of the teachers who taught us did. Some didn't have great skills and were a little bit awkward. And as students we would correct them, and sometimes we'd play jokes on them, we'd teach them wrong signs that they take out into the community and then use and be corrected. But it was all in fun. But most of the teachers who came ASD, yup they knew sign pretty well.

SW: If the teacher didn't know ASL, how did you communicate?

JP: Well if the teachers didn't know sign, first we'd complain. And then we'd try and teach them and they'd pick up a few signs here and there but most the teachers who came in this school at least knew some sign language. Most who didn't left. I remember for example my English teacher wasn't a great signer, and English is an important class for deaf students as English is our second language. So if we didn't understand each other we'd have to teach him ASL. Sometimes he didn't understand us and we'd have to write on the blackboard what we were trying to convey.

SW: After you graduated high school, did you go to college?

JP: Yup. I went to Gallaudet University for three semesters and that's where I met my ex-husband. We fell in love, got married, dropped out of school and didn't finish college.

SW: How do you feel about deaf education today?

JP: Well a lot has changed. Like I said back when I went to school, many students went to state residential schools and there were peers there for students who all communicated the same and most the teachers knew sign so it was a fairly safe environment. And there was a lot of benefits of going to state schools, there's a lot of activities that students can be involved in, different sports student could be involved in. Today, more and more deaf schools have been closed because more students are being sent to mainstream programs. And I really have a lot of concerns about those students alone in a non-deaf environment because its not the same as before when students would go residential schools and be around their peers. There would be 20 – 30 students sometimes 15 in a classroom learning from each other and now there's 2 or 3 maybe even 1 deaf student in an all non-deaf environment. And a lot of student struggle. And when they fail out they get sent to residential schools and the residential schools become sort of a dumping zone, and they have to take over those deaf students' education. And that's not fair to the deaf schools or for the deaf student. Also, school or students get diplomas who aren't well educated just to get them out of the educational system and they come to where I work, and they don't know how to read, they don't know how to write, and I wonder how did they graduate from high school. So it's quite alarming the education system today. Some deaf students are successful, yes, but a high percentage aren't.

SW: Who is the most important person in your life?

JP: I'd have to say my father. Really he was a huge inspiration to me growing up and a huge role model. My father was very involved in the Worcester Deaf Club and he was a great motivator for deaf people in the area. He was always supportive of deaf people congregating and getting together and socializing for example in sports or other leadership roles, and he was also a very big supporter of hearing people, Like You! Learning sign language. He'd be very supportive of that and encouraging he thought it was a great idea for hearing people to learn sign language and to understand deaf culture and how deaf people communicate. And I'd always watch my father's leadership and admire that. Back when I was growing up there were no services for the deaf. And when deaf people need help, where did they go? They came to our home. I remember many times sitting at the dinner table sitting as a family eating and our doorbell light would go off to signify that there was someone at the door. And my dad would go answer the door and there'd be a deaf person that needed help. My dad would invite them in offer them some dinner, and they would usually go sit in the living room. My dad would come finish dinner with us and then go into the living room where they would discuss the deaf persons' problem. And my dad would try to help it whenever way he knew possible, and that was really internalized his leadership skills was a huge inspiration to me. And now I'm really involved in the Worcester Deaf Club. I love the Worcester Deaf Club! And we're celebrating our 60th Anniversary this year and it's a great feat because many deaf clubs have been closed all over the nation. And I'm trying to keep his dream alive through the Worcester Deaf Club and through my involvement in the Deaf community.

SW: Do you have other role models?

JP: I would have to say my sister. My oldest sister Marie and I are six years apart. My second oldest sister Sue and Marie are two years apart and Sue and I are four years apart. So we're still very close. But my oldest sister was also a role model. Growing up I was always really shy about my English, I was a little embarrassed about my written English, and I but my sister always encouraged me, she never let me use my deafness as an excuse. When she went away to Gallaudet College, at that time it was Gallaudet College, I'd miss her a lot, so we'd write letters back and forth. She would get my letter, read it, and would make a copy, and would edit it, giving me advice on words, spelling, how to use present and past tense, language and grammar, and I would receive it and we would and learn from it, and we'd do that back and forth and I learned so much from those letter. And at that time, we didn't know that ASL was our first language that didn't really come about until the 1970's, when ASL started being recognized as a language and then I really understood that English was my second language and understood why I struggled with it, and really then I was liberated to use English without embarrassment.

SW: You work at the Center for Living and Working, how many years have you worked there?

JP: I've work there for 22 years now. 22 years wow. When I started that job I never thought I would last that long. I came in as a part-time position cuz the other person who now lives in Texas, convinced me to come and work for the Deaf and Disability

Services. And I had a little bit of experience in that area so I came in and I worked for about 12 hours a week, and I grew in the company and I grew to be the Director of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Independents Program. Looking back that desire to support and motivate deaf parents relates to my dad and how he loved to support deaf people and encourage deaf people, and I really love my job. Every year I see the program grow. And deaf people succeed and become more independent. And the job is very based on the individuals clients needs and so I like that and I also like living in Worcester.

SW: Why do you work there?

JP: Well I work there to teach clients to be more independent and to teach them their rights. For example, a lot we teach a lot of clients the rights for an interpreter. A lot of places don't provide interpreters so we help them teach them how to speak out. And we also teach them how to setup their home for a safe environment. For example how do you setup doorbells that have flashing lights and alarms that have flashing lights and we also help them ask their landlords to teach the landlords responsibility for deaf equipment. We also do a lot of one on one discussion about family issues or in what ways they need support. A lot of my jobs is referrals too and how to get different contacts and references to people. I do those different kinds of things. Also, a lot my work is traveling to different hearing agencies that don't know anything about the Deaf Community we provide workshops and teach them how to use deaf equipment like TTY's and Deaf 101 for example about deaf culture, sensitivity to communication issues, those kinds of things, we do a lot of traveling in that regard. It's similar to a program you guys had here called Deaf Deaf World; we do that type of workshops.

SW: You work with all different kinds of people, and all of their levels of independence they vary, why do the levels differ?

JP: Well, there's first a variety of age, I work for people from 18 to about 85, and those needs differ a lot. There are also different communication needs. There's hard of hearing people who might have been born hearing but since lost their hearing and they have special needs and people who are born deaf have special needs as well. Within that deaf group there are people who are oral, some gestural, some people who grew up with no exposure to language and we try to teach those people sign language. And also some people who are quite successful and who come to us just for basic resources and basic information. So it all depends on the individual and my staff is trained to work with all those different types of people. We work with everyone on an individual basis.

SW: How's the American Disabilities Act influence your work?

JP: The ADA really helped my work. It has helped us encourage our clients to speak out and claim their rights to a qualified interpreter. The ADA has vague language but language that says people are required to provide a qualified interpreter. For example, a medical setting or hospital settings are really covered by section 504 of a federal law known as a Rehabilitation Act. But different places such as libraries places that receive federal funding, they're required to provide an interpreter because of the language in the ADA, and also deaf access in those places. So without the ADA those place could just tell us "I'm sorry we don't have any money for interpreter." But because of the ADA now we're able to force those places and require them to provide an interpreter.

SW: What do you feel most proud of?

JP: What do I feel most proud of? Well I'm very proud of my accomplishments related to my work and with the deaf community and in deaf programs. And other than that my children. I was a single mom when my children were young, and I worked really hard to raise good children and both are wonderful kids, they're both in college and I'm really proud of what they've done.

SW: 90% of deaf children have hearing parents. For hearing parents they give birth to a deaf baby, what do you wanna tell them, what should be their priority?

JP: I understand the hardship that non-deaf parents go through when they have a deaf child. With their history of spoken language in the household it's hard to have a kid with different communication needs, and I understand the despair. But I think it's important for parents to try to consider all the possibilities and what the options are for their child, what resources they can tap into for their child. Most parents when they have a deaf child, the first person to give them advice is their doctor and their pediatrician. And most the advice they give is to not use sign language and to use hearing aids or maybe even to get cochlear implant. But parents should really be aware of all the options that they have. They should go meet deaf community members see what our lives are like. Go and observe different schools, mainstream and deaf school settings. And keep an open mind to the possibilities they can maybe visit parents who have deaf children and see what their experience were like raising a deaf child. The important thing though is to keep an open mind and then make a decision. A lot of parents get so afraid when they find out they have a deaf child, their first instinct is to try to make them like them and either use hearing aids or implant them. But a lot of times those children struggle with their implants or with their hearing aids. And they lose a lot of educational time. They struggle during their formative years because their parents are forcing them to be like them. And then when they finally find out there's a problem, it's too late. Those important years for education are gone. I understand the heartache, but it's important for parents to keep an open mind.

SW: That's it. Thanks for coming.

JP: Well thank you for inviting me and for a great interview.
OH yeah!!!