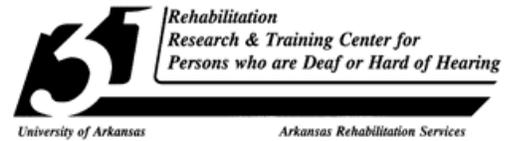




Selected Proceedings of ALDAcon 2005



PRESIDENT'S LUNCHEON

Speaker: GABRIELA FRANK

GABRIELA FRANK: I would like to say I am so honored to be here. So very happy to be here. This is my first time at ALDA, and I'm terrifically honored because I know that each one of us has our own story. Any one of us could be standing here and offering material from our lives that will enlighten or inspire, educate or share.

When I met Carolyn ten years ago, this was the first time I met a community of other people that were either hard of hearing or completely deaf. I hadn't, up to that point, met very many people like myself. And it had been sometimes a lonely journey, as we all know. It's amazing when you find otra familia, another family of people who share this experience. I'm honored to be here.

My own story begins in Berkeley, California, I'm the product of a mixed marriage. My father is Lithuanian Jewish. That's where I get this wild, black frizzy hair. He was in the Peace Corps in the '60s when President Kennedy started the program. He was in the first wave of people going to South America. He met my mother, Peruvian woman of mixed ancestry, part Indian as in descended from the Incas, part Chinese, which you can see in my cousins. When I travel, I take my mother's maiden name, which is Chinese, and part Spanish.

They married and came to the United States and were an unorthodox couple but lived in an unorthodox city, Berkley, at an unorthodox time in the '60s. They were part of the hippie movement and I had an older brother, a neurosurgeon who did his doctoral work at Stanford. He was a protective older brother. They learned that the next kid in the family, which was me, was not speaking when she should have been speaking at the age of one, two.

The first sign that I had been born with a hearing loss was the fact that, as a newborn, I was sleeping right through the night. I wasn't waking up. My parents used to come in the middle of the night to wake me up, make sure I was still okay. I wasn't distracted by

the noise as many babies are, waking up at this time. I wasn't speaking. And in the early '70s it wasn't routine yet for newborns to be tested on their vision or on their hearing. So there were many theories that were floating around. We went to some doctors, talked to specialists, we talked to friends and we talked to all kinds of people. People were saying, well, sometimes the second child is slow. Maybe she wants attention. At the time, we had several languages being spoken in the house. We had Chinese, Spanish and Quechua, the Indian language. Maybe she is confused, which makes no sense. Many children are bilingual. Children absorb languages faster than adults do.

But there were many theories. I was a happy little kid. One thing that I did, I imitated other children in the playground. I used my eyes. This is one of the first signs you can get for a young child who is hearing impaired.

My brother was taking piano lessons and started when he was about seven. At the first lesson, there was little Gabriela, who was sitting with her body up against the instrument and I was feeling and learning the songs this way. It turns out there is a music gene floating around in the Frank family. Lucy Frank, my grandmother, she was gifted. My brother and father do not have it, but it went to me. Music doesn't care if you hear or not. The predominant sense that we associate with music is hearing. We can't imagine anything else, any other way of experiencing it. I came through the back door, so to speak. I heard nothing, nothing.

And there I was at the piano, learning my brother's songs and improving on them. I didn't like that they ended a certain way. I wanted to add more sounds and I would sit up against the stereo and learn the Peruvian songs that my mother used to play when she was growing up, and all the LPs that my parents brought back from Peru. They made sense to me. I couldn't tell you how, but I would take the songs to the piano and they made sense to me. I was figuring out a dance at the piano, learning how to navigate across the keyboard, feeling how the notes when you went to the left were thicker and they lightened up as you went right to the higher notes.

There was a world of sensation behind music that came so immediately to me. And so my parents couldn't believe that I was retarded or that I was seeking attention. I seemed so normal, bright, and precocious in many other ways. Not only this, it seemed like I was reading also. Again, my parents used to read to me every night. They would hold me close to their chest so I would feel the words come through, much the same way as I experienced music coming through the piano. Little kids are amazing. They pick up languages and they just make sense in ways that we've forgotten. If we can tap into that, imagine how we would absorb the world, combining with the adult intellect that we have now.

So they decided to enroll me, in spite of lots of dire warnings, they decided to enroll me in a mainstream normal kindergarten class. My first teacher, Mrs. Dukart, just a little German woman about my height, used to work with deaf children before she went

mainstream. She saw me, all the same signs that you would see in children who are adapting without thought, without shame, without preconception. Plus, there was a piano in the classroom and I was a horrible little show-off. I was bossy, take the little kids and make them sit next to me, tell them what to play and I would play along with them. It sounded good. She talked to my parents and said, "I think your kid is hearing impaired. I think she has a hearing loss." At that time, hearing aid technology had advanced for its time. She said you might want to look into this. Cochlear implants were not really a reality.

My teacher was also an amateur cellist. She went with my parents the first time to the hospital where they were going to try out hearing aids. She brought with her a recording of Bach cello suites, the first by Bach. The first thing I heard when they attached it to the mysterious box was a piece of music. I never had an experience like that since, that it was, as I described to other people, like growing a third hand, to discover this other sense.

I do remember hearing the seat belts click in the car on the drive home. I could feel it click, I didn't know of this other way of identifying that action through sound. I remember going to McDonald's and being very confused by the noise, not being able to walk right. There was so much sound coming at me from all directions. I remember not liking how the piano was speaking to me. It took a long time, and to this day when I practice I take off my hearing aids.

From that point, it was an interesting journey of navigating two worlds because I can function in the hearing world. I puzzle my audiologist also, because I score high in some areas of exams that they administer and score abysmally low in others. The areas in which I score high are all those musically related. When I listen to people speak, I don't really hear consonants and words. I hear notes. I hear C Sharp going to D, descending to D, going up to F. I hear what key this person is in.

My mother, I kid you not, she always goes into F Sharp minor when she's mad. I can tell. I have something called perfect pitch, which is a way of hearing sound as if it was colors. If I close my eye and play a note on the piano, I can tell you what it is, if it's A or B Flat. In some ways, I hear better than hearing people. I don't hear less. Hearing is volume, but music is everything else other than volume.

Sometimes I identify it as an advantage. We have an advantage sometimes of being challenged with a loss like hearing loss. From when you're born, you accept it. There isn't that much of a struggle. Sometimes the struggle comes in how others react to it. The fact that I could not speak properly for many years and was in speech therapy for many years made me an object of fun in the playground. That's where it was difficult. The fact that movies weren't close captioned. That was difficult. It wasn't about me, so to speak. Which is why we're here—to make the world conform a little more to our reality. Because they should. We are good people to know. They should make it easier to access us.

Along the way, I was very precocious as a child. My parents always said you can do it, whatever you want to do. You may have to sit in the front row. You might like foreign films better because you can get the closed captioning. I loved the French and Spanish films. I was unusual as a little kid in this way. And they never said music is something you can't do. In fact, most people didn't even know that there was anything, quote unquote, amiss.

At the time that I met Carolyn I was an undergraduate pursuing my first degree in music as a pianist, but also as a composer, and interested in exploring my Latin American heritage. When I traveled in South America, the challenge was to learn Spanish. I couldn't learn it in a conversational way. I had to learn it in an academic way. I had to lip read. I had a great resource in the telenovellas, the Mexican ones I have found on TV—the Mexican soap operas. They are so dramatic and the women wear so much makeup. The lipstick is outlining their lips and it's easy to lip read. They speak so dramatic: Aye, you kill me! You kill me!

It was great. I could graduate to the newscasts where the anchors spoke very quickly but clearly. I would go to the movies and get the vernacular, the slang, and all the adjustments that are made in everyday speech. And I learned Spanish this way. I learned Quechua later, the Indian language. That was hard because I didn't have the resource of a television show. By this time, I was traveling more in Latin America.

In traveling in Latin America, you come across other difficulties that we don't have here. There are no disabled access buildings. There are no phones with volume controls. Very few interpreters. Everything is noisy. Here I can say to my friends: Can we go to a quieter place? My friends would let me adjust, sit with my back to the window so I could see them and lip read. All these different things, it's a geography that I have to learn. When I came back to the United States every time, life seemed too easy in comparison. Nothing seemed difficult, to get around and live my daily life.

Around this time, as I was going to Michigan, I learned a really important lesson, that once you think you've gotten a handle on something like hearing loss, it will change on you. It's a filter through which you experience your life, but it won't stay still. And I never expected that my health would change or any other circumstances would come into my life. All my life I felt invincible, because I defied the norm. If I wanted to go to Latin America, I went to Latin America. If I wanted to do a concert at Carnegie, I would do it.

The day after my doctorate, I was diagnosed with Graves disease, affecting my thyroid. I noticed that my hair was falling out, losing weight, gaining weight, irrespective of my lifestyle. I noticed I was shaking a lot and it got worse when I performed. People thought I was nervous. I have nerves of steel. So it just didn't fit, what was going on.

When I was diagnosed, it made a lot of sense. The treatment was not difficult, not really.

What was difficult, was the ensuing second phase of the illness where I was also diagnosed later, two years later with Graves eye disease. This will affect your eyesight. This is when I ran into trouble.

My first sign of this was that my eyes weren't blinking together. Then I noticed that everything was darker. And then over months it took, I noticed I wasn't lip reading so well. I wasn't hearing people. I noticed it most due to hearing in the beginning stages. I didn't realize how much I used my eyes to hear. It got worse from there and it has been about four years now that I have been working with this.

People think that, because I'm an artist, I'm being cool and eccentric by wearing shades all the time. But it's really to protect my eyesight. I have been through three surgeries, been through radiation, been through a lot of drug therapy. I have two more surgeries coming up. I lost the eyesight in my right eye pretty much and the left eye has gone in and out. The darkest times were when I lost my eyesight completely and we didn't know if it was going to come back.

I remember the first day this happened. I have a terrible habit of every night not keeping track of where I put my hearing aids. I put them on the bedside, on the dining table, in the bathroom. In the morning, it's a hunt to go find them. This morning, when I woke up and I opened my eyes, everything stayed dark. I realized that something had happened. I went around and was stumbling for two hours before I could find my hearing aids so I could call somebody.

So the hearing loss will keep filtering experiences. Throughout the last four years, as I have been struggling with this new level of challenges, there were days when I thought life was unfair. There were days when I thought, is this karma? I'm not even 30 and I have the rest of my life to live. There are going to be more difficulties. This is not right.

I had one of many moments of epiphany that I've had. The first was, I remember how it was when I was born with hearing loss and how easily I accepted it and adjusted. It came to me with shock, I realized if this had been backwards, if I had been born with the vision loss first, the same vision loss that I have now and I became hearing impaired later, the vision loss would have been easy. I would figure it out and I would be struggling with the hearing loss. It's a mindset. Not something I have to give up as an adult. I can learn how to accept it again. It made so much sense to me, that I could tap this almost naive acceptance that we have of acceptance as children and weld it to this adult intellect that I have now.

During this time, ironically, musically things took off. I'm a composer, which means that, although I concertize, as a composer we can be like Willie Wonka's Chocolate Factory and just send out our chocolates into the world and let people enjoy them, but we can be mysterious. It can take on a life of its own. Nobody even knows what I look like. As I withdrew in my illness, people would wonder: Who is Gabriela Lena Frank! She has a mysterious illness. She's deaf, she's blind, she's short! She's Latina. It was this thing

building up. So, when I did start to go back out into the world, people were surprised. You can't even tell. She looks completely normal. But this is what a hearing impaired person looks like. This is what a visually impaired person looks like.

I'm 32 now. I hope I haven't even begun to live my life. Sometimes I look back and I go: Damn! I really have been through quite a lot. There have been naysayers, and people who have really rooted for me. I'm largely a positive person, happy person; I'm happy with my life. It's important for us to have a strong support group in our family or in a family that we may create. I was looking for a second family when I met Carolyn in the Say What Club.

Some audiologists that I have worked with hated it when I came into the room. I was so bull-headed. I wasn't passive. Some people with acquired hearing loss want to submit to the doctors and audiologists. They want help. Me, I knew exactly what I needed. I was very old fashioned -- I didn't want digital hearing aids. I wanted analog. I want it without the helix, without this material. They wanted to be on the cutting edge. I came in knowing exactly what I want.

These continued experiences are informed by each of our private backgrounds. And the kind of support system I had was part of my background. I had two parents that were very much in favor of my wanting to do whatever it was that I felt I needed to do with my life. For the most part I had very good doctors. My friends adjusted fine. My roommates in college began to learn that they better not start speaking to me too early in the morning. I didn't have my ears on yet. That's what they would say: Are your ears on or ears off? They would come up to me, take their finger -- do you have your ears on? They would adjust in restaurants and actually find the best seat. They would automatically repeat things, just assuming I wouldn't hear if it's very noisy. And now I can't see so well. I have become a champion of bluffing. I can bluff to the press, bluff to the reporters, to the musicians, to the audience. Bluffing is not so good.

If I have my support team around me, my publisher, my agent, family or friends, whatever, they repeat things or answer for me. It's funny for me to watch them in action, actually. I find another large part of my experience has been humor. There's something almost innately ridiculous about how we fit and don't fit and how unique all our experiences are.

I don't kid myself in thinking that I have a complete handle on it. And one of the reasons why I continue with music is that I feel like it is something that allows me to get closer and closer to myself. It's something, because it forces me to go out into the world and confront sound and take my conception of sound and give it to a hearing world in the form of the music that I write, that I am always dealing with my hearing loss.

Somebody once asked me if I would take it back. If you had asked me during my darker days of the illness, I would have said: What kind of fool question is that? Of course, I would take it back. But coming through it, I wouldn't take it back. I really wouldn't take

back any part of it. I don't know what normal sound is like. I can't imagine what my life would be like without the way that I hear. I just don't know. People ask me: What is it like to be hearing impaired? I can't describe that. What is it like to be a woman? I don't know; what is it like to be a man? That's a very difficult question to answer. But I wouldn't take it back, because there's not a lot that I'm scared of. There's not a lot that has been more challenging or scarier than what I have been through already.

I feel like when you're part of a minority group, it gives you perspectives that you wouldn't have otherwise. And every new perspective you have is another way that you are strong.

I'm very moved and very honored to be here. I have learned so much just by talking to the people that I've met over the years, in the last ten years through Say What Club, through other venues. And you know, I don't speak to you in the medium of music so much, but more in the common experience of just figuring out what it is that we need to be happy. Something like hearing loss doesn't have to be an impediment to that.

I really do think that music speaks louder than words.

Born in Berkeley, CA in 1972, Dr Frank holds degrees from Rice University and a doctorate (2001) from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Gabriela Lena Frank has been hailed as representing "the next generation of American composers." Gabriela has been featured and recognized by a number of organizations. Her work has been elected to Chamber Music America's list of "Top One Hundred and One Great American Ensemble Works." She was also recently given the coveted Young American Composer Residency with the California Symphony for the 2005-2008 season. She currently makes her home in the San Francisco Bay Area and travels often in Latin America.