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**Late-Deafened Women Beat the Odds:  
If Only I Knew Then What I Know Now!**

Vicki T. Hurwitz

Hello. First I want to explain that many times when I've done this presentation I really didn't give a lot of information about myself. I didn't think it was important to do that, but after each presentation over the years people would say to me, "Well, who are you? You're talking about other Deaf women, other women who are hard-of-hearing, and other women who are late deafened, but you're not telling us about yourself. What are you like?"

I was born to hearing parents. I was born deaf. My father was killed in World War II at the time I was two months old. I lived in Richmond, Virginia where I was born. Now what were we to do after my father died? We moved in with my mother's parents, and we moved to a very small town in Virginia called Suffolk.

It was my grandmother who realized that I wasn't responding to sound or someone calling to me. At age 3, I got tested at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, and they found out I was deaf. My mother remarried when I was 3 1/2 years old. My stepfather knew that my mother had a deaf child before he married her, but that didn't matter to him.

My parents and especially my grandparents wanted me to get an education in speech training. My grandfather decided to go to the library and find out where the Deaf School was that had oral training. He discovered three. One was the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York. The second one was the Clarke School near Boston. The third was the Central Institute for the Deaf here in St. Louis, called CID. So my father looked for a job here in St. Louis. I was on the waiting list for CID at that

point. We moved to Peoria, Illinois and I attended a self-contained classroom in public school. Then we relocated to St. Louis.

I entered CID when I was 5 years old. These are my classmates. I am right here (indicating). I was the short, chubby girl. When I was 6, my sister, who is hearing, was born. At the time I was 14 years old and my sister was 6, my other sister was born. Four years ago, she became the principal of CID where she'd been working for 28 years. When I was 14 years old, I was mainstreamed in a public school until graduation. Then I went to William Woods College in Fulton, Missouri. That was where the Missouri School for the Deaf was located, too.

While I was a student at William Woods College, I did volunteer work at the Missouri School for the Deaf. I learned Sign Language from the children while I read books and told stories to them.

Alan, my husband, and I married after dating for 4 ½ years. His parents are deaf. I went to community college for one year, but I quit. I preferred the married life. I wanted to start a family. My son was then born and we moved to Rochester, New York in 1970 when he was one year old. My husband got a job at NTID, which is the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. That's also where we found out that my son was hard-of-hearing at age 3. We adopted our daughter when she was 16 months old. She also is deaf.

I did a lot of volunteer work over the years. I also did a lot of community service work. I had a lot of different jobs. Four months ago I retired, and I'm so happy because now I can play a little bit more. I can spend more time with my beautiful grandchildren.

Now I'm going to move on to the real meat of this presentation. This presentation will focus mostly on late deafened women because I think that it fits more with your interests. First, I want to explain why and how I started to focus and do research on deaf women. When I was growing up, I took social studies classes and history classes as we all did. I never really enjoyed them. I hated to remember all of the names of all of the *men* we learned about. We always had to memorize all of the names because it was going to be on the test, but I couldn't relate to them.

So where were the deaf women in the history books? There were none. You know about Betsy Ross, right? And you know about Florence Nightingale, right? You know about Martha Washington. But that wasn't enough. When I was working at NTID, I was the student development coordinator, and met many students. The women students who were deaf, hard-of-hearing or late deafened, had no particular goals. I would talk with them to find out what their goals for the future were, and there were none. They had no idea. I would ask them if they knew about other deaf women who worked at NTID because at that time, we had a growing number of professional women working at NTID. The students did not know who they were or where they were at NTID. At that point I took on the responsibility to meet with the deaf students to educate and show them that they, too, could succeed.

Many of those women had low self-esteem. Many of their role models were men, their fathers. For some, their mothers, but mostly their role models were men because the men were the ones that they saw who were successful. We don't mean to criticize the men. They were being great role models. In fact, my husband is my role model.

The first book about deaf women was published in 1989, finally. It was a good start. It has a lot of facts although not all of them are true. Some of them were factual, some not, but it was a good book to use for a resource. That helped me to do more research, to find more information. I found many books written by deaf women. Most were written about themselves, though. Unfortunately those books are now out of print. I got most of those books through the Internet at Amazon.com's used book section and many other Internet sites.

There are many magazine and newspaper articles about deaf women as well. The deaf librarian at RIT, Rochester Institute of Technology helped me find more resources and information about the deaf women.

I'd like to start with Pocahontas although she was not deaf she happened to be a great-grandmother of two deaf great-grandchildren. I found that out several years ago while doing research. One of her ancestors had made a chart, which I'm going to show you in a little while. That chart explained about the two grandchildren. They were called deaf mutes at the time. We don't say that today, but years ago that is what deaf children were called. Pocahontas' grandson was hearing and his name was Colonel Bolling. He married a deaf woman, Mary. They had two deaf children. Colonel Bolling set up the first School for the Deaf in Appomattox, Virginia in 1812. The American School for the Deaf was not the first deaf school for the deaf in America. The first one was in Appomattox, Virginia. But that school was short-lived, and so, the American School for the Deaf became known as the first deaf school.

This is the family tree. At the top you will see Pocahontas, and coming down the tree you will see where the grandson married the deaf woman. Then here are the two deaf grandchildren.

I'm sure that all of you in the room have heard of Helen Keller. Have you heard of Laura Bridgman? She happens to be the first deaf-blind girl to be educated in America, not Helen Keller. She received her formal education 50 years before Helen Keller. The reason Laura Bridgman was not recognized years ago as Helen Keller is that Helen Keller's family was very wealthy. They had the money, and so they were able to obtain whatever Helen Keller needed and advertise whatever she was doing. Laura Bridgman was very isolated. She had a family who lived in poverty and didn't have that type of financial ability.

I wouldn't call her late deafened, but she did lose her hearing when she was young. She was born 1829 in Hanover, New Hampshire. She had scarlet fever when she was 2 years old. She had two older sisters and a brother who died from scarlet fever. She survived, but because of the fever, she became deaf. She also lost the senses of smell

and taste. She had no human language with people until she was seven years old. When she was eight years old, she went to the Perkins School for the Blind, near Boston. She didn't even know that she had a name at that point.

Dr. Samuel Howe was a researcher and an experimenter. He wanted to display her as a way to raise money to educate the children who were deaf-blind. Laura learned her A, B, Cs and finger spelling in three days. She was a brilliant girl. She also learned how to write. You can see here on the overhead.

She wrote letters, she wrote poems, she also wrote her autobiography. Charles Dickens visited the school and met Laura and was very impressed with her. He wrote a paragraph about her in one of his books during his travels through America. A few years after she graduated from the Perkins School, she realized she was not happy at home. She felt very isolated. So she went back to the Perkins School to become the sewing instructor. She was very skilled at sewing and making clothes. In fact, when Anne Sullivan was planning to meet Helen Keller for the first time, she was teaching at the Perkins School, and she knew of Laura. Anne's class of students had bought a doll and given it to Laura for her to make a dress for the doll. Then, Anne took the doll to Helen Keller when she first met her. When you see the movie about Helen Keller, you'll see her waving the doll. That's the doll that Anne Sullivan had taken to give to Helen Keller from the school.

Laura was a groundbreaker in deaf-blind education. Two new books by different authors were published about five years ago. Neither author knew that the other had written about Laura Bridgman. The books had different facts in Laura's life.

Laura Redden Searing. She was a unique and special woman. She was a writer. She was born in 1840 in Maryland, and then she moved to St. Louis, Missouri. She lost her hearing when she was 11 from spinal meningitis. When she was 15, she was mainstreamed first, but she did not succeed in that program, so she was moved to the Missouri School for the Deaf. She was there for only three years. But she graduated as Valedictorian of her class at the School for the Deaf. She was one of AG Bell's students so she could learn to lip-read and to speak. However, she didn't do well. She went on to become a professional writer during the Civil War.

She depended on paper and pencil writing for communication. She would interview soldiers like General Lee Grant. She interviewed many famous men who were soldiers and many colonels. She also rode horses. She worked as a reporter for several newspapers, and she studied four different languages. She went to Europe, and she was called the first deaf women's libber. She wrote for many well-known magazines like the "Harper's Weekly" and the "Atlantic Monthly."

Most of the time if a woman wanted to write, her name was not accepted. So women would have to change to a pseudonym or pen name. Laura Redden's pen name was Howard Glyndon. If you want to find her writings, they will not be under Laura Redden; you would you have to look under the name Howard Glyndon. She wrote many poems.

One was used to dedicate the newly built statue of Alice Cogswell and Laurent Clerc. There's also a small railroad town in Minnesota that's named Glyndon, on the border of North Dakota and Minnesota. This town was named after Glyndon before the town people realized that Glyndon was really a woman, Laura Searing. And then after she died they established a statue in her honor. She died when she was 83 years old.

How many of you were Girl Scouts? One? Two? Good. I was, too. I was a brownie and a girl scout. But I didn't know that Juliette Low Gordon, who founded the girl scouts, was deaf. Did you know that? I remember reading little booklets about girl scouts and there was one page of finger spelling in one book. I was at CID at the time, and I thought, "There's finger spelling in the girl scout book." I thought, "Wait, CID doesn't allow finger spelling." So I wondered why they would have it in this book. But I didn't say anything. I didn't ask anyone. I learned that Juliette was indeed late-deafened thus the reason for including the finger spelling in the booklet. She was born in 1860 in Savannah, Georgia, on Halloween. She was 20 years old when she became deaf in one ear due to an ear infection. She was free spirited. You'd probably classify her more as a rebel. She did not care for the Victorian style of dress. She wanted to be more rugged.

When she was 26 years old she married a wealthy man and became deaf in her other ear. It was from the rice being thrown at the wedding. Now, is that true or not? I don't know. But there are many articles that said so. She had a passion for sewing, art, woodworking, and blacksmithing. Many people would think, why would a woman be interested in that kind of work? At that time that behavior was shocking.

Her husband was a philanderer. He also was a heavy drinker. She decided to divorce him, but unexpectedly he died. He willed everything, including the estate to his mistress. She did not give up. She fought for her rights because she was married to him. She was married to this man, and he gave everything to his mistress. So she fought and won, and got \$500,000. She got everything back. With the \$500,000 she traveled back and forth between Georgia and Europe. She didn't have any children, and she felt like a failure. In Europe she met a woman who was a Girl Guides leader. Juliette wanted to establish something similar in America and founded the Girl Scouts. She felt that all careers should be open to girls. There were fields that were unthinkable for girls to pursue, but Juliette encouraged them to pursue them. One of the groups was established with 18 girls at the Illinois School for the Deaf.

Juliette didn't wear hearing aids. She used a large ear trumpet. She was always in uniform. People thought it was shocking that she was creating all of these badges for the girls. People asked, "What are these badges for?" They were for camping, woodworking, and skills that they weren't what people approved of. This was considered crazy.

During the 1916 elections, the girl scouts got involved with a community service by babysitting children so that women could go out to vote. Do you remember the 3-cent stamp?

She died of breast cancer when she was 67 years old. She was buried with her uniform, and had a telegram in her pocket. It was from the National Board of the Girl Scouts, which read, "You're not the first girl scout, but the best girl scout ever!" In 1927, 168,000 girls were involved. Now there are more than 4 million girls involved in girl scouts.

Henrietta Swan Leavitt. She was born 1868 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on July 4th. She was progressively losing her hearing. For a time she studied at the Oberlin College. Then she attended the Radcliff School. At that time the college was called the Society for the Instruction of Women. When she was a senior in college she lost her hearing and became deaf. She was interested in astronomy, and she decided to take other courses related to astronomy after she graduated. She began as a volunteer at Harvard College at the observatory to help the director there with his work. Unfortunately she had a family crisis and she had to leave that volunteer work. After two years her boss pleaded with her to come back to the observatory. He was willing to pay her way back, but she wasn't able to leave home. Then he offered to let her take the work home with her, and he would pay her while she worked from home. She advanced to head the department that was called photometry. That means the science of measurement of light.

The women at the observatory who worked with their eyes and hands were called computers because of the work that they did. They worked with very complex data with very important data results. They were paid 50 cents per hour. Henrietta Leavitt was the world's expert in classifying stars. Someone from Princeton University called her the Star Finder because they couldn't keep up with her. The men were devastated because they could not keep up with all of her findings. She actually found that the brightest stars, which are found in the Milky Way, have longer periods of existence. She worked with great speed. She would classify 5,000 stars per month for the next four years. Her hard work was recognized and was honored in many different ways during the years. She died of at age 83. Two craters on the moon were named after two deaf women and one of them was named after Henrietta Swan Leavitt.

I'm going to ask how many of you are familiar with or have used the Fitzgerald Key? Anyone? Couple of you I see. Edith Fitzgerald believed that every deaf child could learn good English. She felt that every deaf child should have the opportunity to develop good English. One of my goals when I was growing up was to become an English teacher. I wasn't encouraged at that time to be one because I was told that I should be able to teach speech with English. I gave up on that dream. My mom was an English teacher, a French teacher and a piano teacher. So I learned English and piano, but I didn't learn French, only Spanish. My father was a writer, a newspaper reporter and editor. So I've been around the English language and learned that from my parents.

Edith Fitzgerald was born in 1877 in Memphis, Tennessee, and the research that I found shows that she was hard-of-hearing or deaf. It's not clarified which, but she was late deafened. She went to public schools, and then she went to the Illinois School for

the Deaf for the last four months. Then she went to Gallaudet University and graduated as Valedictorian. She taught at the Wisconsin School for the Deaf for 17 years. She also taught in Louisiana, and then she ended up in Virginia where I was born. She became the principal of the Virginia School for the Deaf.

She wrote and published a book called *Straight Language for the Deaf*. She used sentence structure to teach deaf children the right placement of words in English sentences, such as who, what, when, where. She taught them how to place those words in English sentences. When I was in CID in language arts, that was like an English class, the words, who, what, when, how, where, and why, were painted across the top of the blackboard. Each of us had to go to the blackboard and write under each word to make sure that the sentence structure was correct.

Now, I remember to this day that I hated doing that because I had to write it perfectly over and over again. I had to go to the front of the room, and the teacher would correct it if it was wrong. That was called the Fitzgerald Key. I didn't know that at the time. I remembered the name, Fitzgerald Key, but exactly what it was I didn't know. This woman who created that English structure was actually deaf.

That would have been important to me as a young child to know that she was deaf and she developed this English structure exercise. Maybe I would have continued with my initial goal to become an English teacher. But, I put that goal aside because I didn't know of anyone else who was deaf who was able to teach English during that time.

Edith Fitzgerald's book was used in 3/4ths of the schools throughout the country. She was recognized as one of the lead educators for the deaf. She died when she was 63 years old.

I have the book. It's a thin book. It's really hard to understand. The book was found by one of the workshop participants who happened to hear my presentation about Edith Fitzgerald. She found the book in their attic, actually, and sent it to me. So I was just thrilled to get this book.

Regina Olson Hughes. She was born in 1895 in Herman, 30 miles north of Omaha in Nebraska, in February. That's my birth month. When she was 10, her hearing went down. She lost her hearing. When she was 14 years old she became completely deaf. She attended public schools, and before she could read and write she liked to draw. She drew pictures of plants. Her favorite plant to draw was the orchid. She enjoyed drawing, and she took a lot of art classes. She was very passionate about drawing. She received private tutoring in watercolor painting, and sold her paintings. She also studied four different languages, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish.

She got her Bachelors and Masters of Science from Gallaudet. She expected a career in politics. She worked as a translator for the Department of War and Commerce during World War II. She married a professor who was deaf, and her paintings of plants and her artwork has been exhibited in museums. And she is the only deaf female artist who has a painting in the Smithsonian Museum. There is a plant named after her to honor

her. She was named to Who's Who in America. She was still working when she was 90 years old without pay. She was retired, but she continued to work. She said that she hoped to die with a paintbrush in her hand. She passed away when she was 98 years old.

Helen Brooke Taussig. She played a very important role in my life. I found out that she was deaf when she went to the National Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York. If you haven't visited that museum, you really should. She was born in 1898 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and at that time she was hard-of-hearing. She lost her hearing progressively. Her father taught economics at Harvard. Her mother worked with children who had dyslexia. Helen had dyslexia herself, but she overcame that. Her grandfather was a doctor during the Civil War. She went to Radcliffe College and became a tennis champion. She graduated from the University of California. She wanted to go to Harvard Medical School, but at that time women were not allowed to attend Harvard. Instead she went to Boston University Medical College, and there studied disease of the heart. Then she went to Harvard as a special student to prove that she could become a doctor. She persevered.

She got her medical degree from Johns Hopkins Medical College. She progressively was losing her hearing but she continued to be interested in the diseases of the heart that caused babies to die soon after birth. She was interested in the heart problems that caused the death of infants.

You might wonder how she could hear the heartbeat, but she actually heard with her hands.

She had a special box and I actually saw it in the museum. That's how I found out that she was deaf. She had a big, black box that had a cord on it going into her ear. From that she was able to feel the heartbeats of the babies. She came up with the Blue Baby Syndrome. That means that the blood wasn't receiving enough oxygen to make the heart work properly. She invented an operation that would help babies to survive, which is called the Blalock-Taussig surgery. Blalock did the surgery as she observed. Though she wasn't a surgeon, she created the procedure, and then she had the surgeon come in to do the surgery. They actually had a hard time finding a surgeon who was willing to do the surgery because she was a woman. Dr. Blalock said, "Why should I do a surgery that was invented by a woman?"

Finally his assistant who happened to be a black male with no college degree encouraged the surgeon to give it a try. Dr. Blalock agreed to do it, but after the first surgery, the baby died. They looked at other ideas, and the second baby and all the babies thereafter survived. I had that surgery when I was seven years old. My parents didn't know that she was deaf. She wore the old-fashioned hearing aids, but they were hidden with her hair and clothing. Dr. Blalock was a surgeon who actually did the surgery on me. Then six years later he passed away.

Helen Brooke Taussig became the first female President of the American Heart Association. When she was 87 years old, a car hit her while she was walking and she

passed away. You can rent the movie called, "Something That the Lord Made," all about the surgery.

Helen Heckman. She was one of the first deaf dancers. I didn't realize that until about five years ago. She was born in a town close to Peoria, Illinois, where I was in the self-contained classrooms in the public schools. Had I only known about her, I would have become a professional dancer because that's what I wanted to be when I was growing up. It was one of the many things that I wanted to be. But people said, "You can't be a dancer. You can't hear the music. You can't hear the rhythm." I could feel the vibrations and I had a wonderful sense of rhythm. But people kept telling me that I couldn't become a dancer, and I believed them.

Again, had I known about Helen Heckman, maybe I would have said, "Yes, I can. I can be a dancer." Helen wrote a book about herself and about her life until she was 30. After that we don't know what happened to her. I am trying to find more information about her life after the age of 30. She became deaf when she was 11 months old from spinal meningitis. They didn't know that she was deaf until she was three years old. The doctors told her that she would never be able to learn to talk. But she did eventually. She went to a school for the deaf, but the book didn't say which school for the deaf she attended. She learned to speak and lip read; she learned to dance. She made her own costumes. She participated in many shows. She was a dancer during the 1920s, and used her body more than her voice for communication purposes.

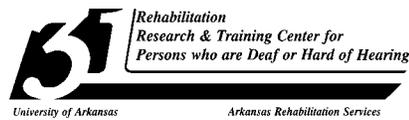
Her last words in the book were, "If I have made myself clear in setting down the facts of the process by which I was lifted from a life of dumbness and ignorance into a world of knowledge and joyful expression, the purpose of this book will have been fulfilled."

This is a website where you can get more information. You may contact me through this website, too. [www.http://wally.rit.edu/pubs/guides/Deafwomen.html](http://wally.rit.edu/pubs/guides/Deafwomen.html) You can find my e-mail through this website.

Closing comments. "Not for ourselves alone, but we must teach others." It is our responsibility to teach young girls and boys, even adults, the history of deaf, hard of hearing and late deafened women so that they can believe in themselves. My personal quote is: "Let's enhance the path to a brighter, barrier-free future for young Deaf women so that they can leap to new heights!"

## Biographical

Vicki T. Hurwitz recently retired from the position of director of RSD Outreach Center in Rochester, N.Y. She developed a curriculum for a deaf woman's studies course for NTID/RIT students, the first of its kind in the nation. She is one of the co-founders of Deaf Women of Rochester and was vice-president of Deaf Women United, Inc. She received her B.S. in social work and MS in Career and Human Resource Development from RIT. She is married to Dr Alan Hurwitz and they have two children and two grandchildren.



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