

ALDACon 2010
SEPTEMBER 3, 2010
PORTRAIT OF A CONFIDENT DEAF WOMAN
PRESENTED BY: SALLY SKYER

SALLY SKYER: I gave this workshop last year, and this is the kind of workshop that I enjoy giving. I have done this many times for college students, and different audiences. This topic is so important to me because of the work that I do with students coming to college. Many of them don't have the confidence that they need both in adjusting as a deaf adult and in adjusting to the college environment. Also, my deaf brother and I, born deaf, grew up in a very oppressive time—in the 1950s--and there was not a lot of hope for people like us.

I was told that I would be lucky if I graduated from 9th grade—and that I would never be expected to continue to high school. So put-downs were a very familiar experience for me growing up. That had a huge impact on my self-esteem. Deafness was not something to be proud of. It was looked down upon. I was not allowed to use Sign Language with my brother, so we did not communicate with each other. He learned Sign when he went to a deaf school, but I didn't see him because he lived in a dorm.

A lot of shame was connected with deafness; I always felt I was not good enough. Not worthy enough. That was a feeling that I had for 30 years. It took years of work, self-analysis, and one-on-one therapy to break through that negative mind-set. I know how important it is to try to change that attitude because life's too short not to feel confident, not to feel like you can handle life. Life is not easy. Sometimes the students tell me life is not fair. I say, yeah, you're right, life is not fair. But we have to make the best of it. We have to get through things. So that's why this workshop means a lot to me.

Coming to this workshop is a lot cheaper because you don't have to go for a face-lift, (Laughter) or breast increase. You don't need that. That's only superficial. This kind of workshop is free and it's all internal; internal change is what adds to the beauty of a person.

When I look at people, I see the beauty of the personality. That's what I notice. That's what I recognize, not you as a blonde or a red head. Blonds or red hair is nice to have, but I look at the personality. That's what counts.

I want to do an opening activity. What that means is you have to pair up, two of you together. Pair up, and I will give you 10-15 minute discussion time to talk about three questions. Afterwards I am going to ask for volunteers to talk about the experience from the discussion and what they learned from the interview.

First, I want you to describe what a confident woman looks like or acts like. How would you describe one?

Next, I want you to name a person that you look up to. Hearing or deaf doesn't matter. What is the characteristic that you really admire about that person? Why did you pick that person? What does that person mean to you? What do you wish you had from that person that you look up to?

The last question I want each pair to ask and discuss is: are you a confident woman or not?

Those are the three questions; I would like you now to start discussing. Just chat with each other. If you would prefer to talk with Sign, that's fine. If you prefer to do it with each other, mom, daughter, it doesn't matter. So go ahead right now and discuss these questions.

(Group activity) One more minute. One more minute. Okay, are you ready? Are you ready? Ready?

Before I ask for volunteers to talk about the discussion, I would like to share my personal experience relating to a confident woman that I met. Remember when I mentioned growing up with very low self-esteem, and people that I grew up with could not predict the future for me? I was expected to work in the factory where my parents worked. My parents are blue-collar people working in factories. My father said, "You are going to work in the factory when you are done with high school." I said, "No."

I went to college; I graduated from college; I worked hard with no support, which was very frustrating. I then decided to go to Gallaudet for my master's degree. That was my first experience in a deaf environment even though I have a deaf brother. So I went to Gallaudet and I took five classes. One of the classes was taught by a deaf woman, a late-deafened woman. She was black. My jaw just dropped. I am looking at her, and thinking: "Wow, this is a deaf person. First, she's deaf. Second, she's a woman. Third, she's black. Fourth, she's teaching a college environment. Wow! That's what I want."

I got so much inspiration from her, watching her teach and watching her interact. I didn't know Sign Language at the time. I just learned to sign at the same time that I was a graduate student. When I get to thinking about that, I still get goose bumps. It was just an inspiring experience. Wow! If she can do it, I can, too.

After graduation, I ended up teaching in a college environment exactly like her. Because of my experience with that deaf teacher, she became my first role model, someone I really looked up to. She had so much enthusiasm for teaching; she really cared about the students and about people. I learned that from her.

Unfortunately she was the only teacher in my two-year graduate program that gave me a "B." (Laughter) Everybody else gave me "A."

The second person I looked up to was an older deaf woman, oral just like me. She was the mother of three hearing children. I looked up to her because she was so open, so inclusive. She included me; she talked with me. She talked about the challenges of raising hearing children. "I want to be a mother, too," I thought. "I want to be like her too."

Now we're best friends. We are very close friends and it doesn't matter that there is a 12-year age difference between us. She showed confidence by her humor and by her actions. Sometimes she acts silly. She is 70! But she acts like she is 40. She has so much life in her. I learned from that experience. Knowing these two women became the kick-start to building my confidence as a woman. What you see today is not what I was like 30 years ago. Then, I was very shy. I would not ask for help; I would not talk with people. I could not present to an audience like this. Changes can happen when we meet certain people. Look up to them, and develop confidence.

Now, I want to hear your comments. Who is the person that you looked up to, hearing or deaf, it doesn't matter? Who would like to volunteer?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It's interesting because the woman that I look up to is a young woman. She's 25 years old, and I met her when she was 16. She was my patient. She had cancer and was in the hospital while getting treatment for her cancer. She had become paralyzed from the chest down. She was in the hospital for 10 months and she is a survivor. She struggled with college, and struggled with her parents for her independence. She is now a confident woman with self-esteem. Really, I look up to her. I am really happy that I was able to play a part in her life.

SALLY SKYER: Correction: not a small part, a big part of her life.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Maybe.

SALLY SKYER: No, no maybes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I feel like I am the lucky one. I learn from every patient that I care for. My patients are the best teachers.

SALLY SKYER: They are. Let me tell you my husband and three of his sisters--they're all passed on--had NF2. They all struggled with that illness. It was very difficult to deal with. My two children also have NF2. I learned a lot from them especially from my husband when he was having a lot of struggles near the end of his life. He has persistence; he had courage; he never gave up. Despite the fact that he was not able to eat for seven years, he always sat down with us at the dinner table because it was important for him to be involved and part of the family. Even during the holidays, Thanksgiving and Christmas, he would sit with us. Sometimes people would ask, "Why don't you eat?" He would say, "I am on a special diet. I need to lose weight." He had that humor. I really looked up to him. I look up to my two children, too, how they plow through life, living the best life they can. I get my confidence and courage from them. You get that from watching people go through the illness experience. That's life. That's very precious. We always learn from each other. Always. We're not isolated.

Other volunteers?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: First, we described what a confident woman looks or acts like. I thought happy, likes to help people, not shy, doesn't care what other people think. Just does her own thing. Very brave. Will try new things just because she thinks it is will be fun, or just getting a new hobby just because. Just tries everything just because. No matter what's wrong with her. She doesn't give up easily. That was her. They are hard workers.

On Question 2 who I look up to is a woman. She was a real woman who was deaf. Her name is Sue Thomas. She became an actress -- not an actress, but a TV show was based on her life. She worked for the FBI. When she started she worked in the filing room, or counting paperclips. She got mad and said to herself, I am better than this. I can do more. I want more." She told her boss, You need to give me a job." They found out that she could read lips really, really well. They hired her to the read lips of people on surveillance videos, which helped the FBI know what the bad guys were saying. I just thought, Wow, I want to be able to do that. I want to read lips. She was just someone, a real person whose life was made into TV show. It was awesome for me to see her move up in the FBI from paper clipping or filing to surveillance. She became a kind of role model for me.

As to the characteristics, I would like to lip read and be able to communicate better with people, especially my family because we have a lot of problems. I try to be confident, but being not born deaf I grew up hearing, and nobody in my family knows sign or lip-reads. I don't have any other way to communicate. My family has a lot of problems. My husband gets frustrated with me. He knows he should do things to help me, but he forgets. I think they call it the invisible disability. You look at me and I look normal, kind of. (Laughter)

If people look at you, nobody knows. So it's hard for me because I don't know sign or lip reading. I get scared to talk to people, or even tell them that I am deaf because they change. So I have a hard time meeting new people. I have a small comfort zone. So I want to move out of it eventually, but that's why I came here to try to learn.

SALLY SKYER: I am so thrilled you spoke up because my experience as a born deaf person is completely different from your experience of becoming late deafened. I'm not in your shoes, so I cannot 100% know exactly what it's like, but I've heard enough from my husband and my daughter. I can remember going to a theater with my daughter two years ago. She made reservations and she told me that they had the interpreter ready for us at the theater. We went. There was not an interpreter for us. Somebody goofed up and she became very upset. I said, "Let me talk with the manager."

"No, no, no," she said.

"Let me talk with the manager. I will take care of it." I said. I talked to the manager and asked, "What happened? There was supposed to be an interpreter at the performance.

You said there would be an interpreter, they're not there." My daughter is like, "Mom!!" I told her to let me take care of it. "There is no interpreter. I want free tickets for the next interpreted performance and free parking. This is what we want."

My daughter started to cry. I asked what was wrong. She said, "I hate this. I hate being deaf, and I can't do anything. I have to deal with this frustration, frustration, frustration."

But it's something that I am used to. It's new for her. So I understand her frustration and how difficult it is emotionally.

Now, the other thing is people made assumptions about her because she grew up signing. She is a very proficient signer. People assumed after she became deaf overnight that she would be fine. They thought she knew Deaf Culture. If she knows Sign Language, she would be fine.

No, not true. Not true at all. She had to go through the emotional adjustment. People knew her as a hearing person. All of a sudden they had to communicate differently with her. Some people backed away. That's hard for her to deal with, so as a mom I had to see her go through that struggle. At the same time trying to support, support, support, saying, "You can do it, try it, go, push. Don't let anyone or anything stop you."

She is meeting new people. She is doing very well right now, but ask her today, she has been deaf five years, she would prefer to hear again. Of course, I understand that. She loved music, the easy communication. She is an extrovert. So it was a big step back.

So I understand from your perspective. And you struggle with learning to be confident with who you are, even though you are not who you were. You have changed. It's like you've lost all of that confidence you used to have. It's hard to lip read. It's hard to understand people. You feel dumb because you answer the question off the point. People look at you as not being smart anymore. That's tough. Sometimes my daughter will say that all these people have attitudes. I say, "I know. That's life. You have to educate people. Teach them." She answers, "But, Mom, I don't want to have to do that the rest of my life."

I say, "That's the way it is, Babe." We have to teach people and be advocates for people, be role models for people. It takes a lot of work. But at the same time you develop pride. She gave a lecture. Go! So I understand from her from your perspective. It feels like your confidence is destroyed overnight. You need to rebuild. It's like when your house is damaged by a tornado. You need to rebuild the house with a strong foundation to be able to withstand the next storm. And you will be a lot stronger because of what you've learned.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a comment about the invisible disability part. I think it's true, and it's something that we live with that makes us kind of a split person. There is the person that people see, and then there is the person that we know we are.

I think this invisibility also has an opportunity for us that people can't see. I met a confident deaf woman that I really respect when she was 25. At 19 she was a hearing person and got on an airplane. When she got off the airplane, she had lost some hearing. It took her a few more months to lose the rest of her hearing, but something happened with her ears popping on that plane. She was in college at the time. She told this story about how she went back to college and for a year after she became deaf, she tried to continue with her classes, of course with trouble. Then she took a year off, and went to Gallaudet. When she told me that story, I thought, "you went to college for a year when you were deaf and you wouldn't hear anything in the class?" And I said, "That is so brave it's bordering on stupidity. How you can just go to class and expect that it's going to be okay? I could just never do that."

She said, "I've heard about you. You like to kayak, right? You kayaked in the Grand Canyon. I can't believe you are brave enough to do that. I went to college. That was easy. I just sat in the classroom. But you, my God you could have died."

I realized that everybody has a hidden strength. I have a hidden disability, but I also have a hidden strength. I've used that kayaking experience for years. When my boss is beating up on me, I think, I kayaked in the Grand Canyon and I lived through it. Nobody can take that away from me. I am going to wait out this conflict that we're having, but I am strong, and you just don't know how strong I am. So that, to me, is the flip side of the hidden disability. I have a hidden strength for coping with this for all of these years. Instead of saying, "Oh, I am not good at this, and I am not good at that," I can say, "I'm good at being deaf. That's a strength that I've built because I didn't used to be as good at being deaf. Now I am really good at being deaf. I think that when I think about that invisible disability, the thing that I am hiding. Also to me, a confident woman is someone who knows that she has a hidden strength that nobody can see, and she is willing to understand that other people have a hidden strength that they can't see. She is not feeling threatened by other people because they have strengths and they have struggles.

SALLY SKYER: You don't allow yourself to be threatened or intimidated by other people. I had an experience two months ago. I went to Home Depot to order a new carpet for the bedroom. As I was talking to the woman, and I said, "I am deaf. I lip read." She followed me around as we were talking; I ordered carpet, I finished. Finally she asked me, "How did you get here?" I asked her what she meant. She repeated, "How did you get here to the store?" I told her I drove. "How?" I said, "I use my eyes."

Some people don't know who they are dealing with, that we have inner strength. You've got to stand up and say, "Look, this is me! I have my strengths, and it's an adjustment, yes." You have to build slowly, little by little. While you are here, meet other deaf women. Who do you look up to? Why? Observe that woman? What makes her unique? What makes her attractive to you? Why does she appear confident to you? Internalize that. Analyze that. Write about that. Think about that. Rebuild your confidence step by step. Sometimes, you will have to step back. Move up three, go back two. That's how it is. My daughter has been deaf five years and she still

struggles. Even at the workplace where she works with all men in an engineering company, she is a red-haired female and the only deaf person. She hears nothing. She said, "Mom why do I have to work so hard to prove myself?" That's the way it is. Go forth and make the best of it. Be an example. You are examples of your strength.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: There was a woman that I looked up to, and it was my mom. She always encouraged us to try new experiences and do new things and to have confidence in ourselves. When I started losing my hearing, she told me that I needed to look for new experiences. I needed to go out and meet other people, meet other deaf people. Right now my life includes other people, not always hearing people, and it sometimes becomes very frustrating. You need to be able to communicate with them. I thought and not in a good way, "Oh, I don't believe her!" I didn't like that. I was lucky. I met another deaf woman, who encouraged me to improve my signing. She sent me to a deaf man who was a retired teacher to learn sign.

When I was ready to go to the theater with other deaf people, I met other deaf people, and one woman in particular who was my age. I refused to let my hearing loss control me. I have hearing friends, and I joined the Red Hat Group, which is for women, 50 and older. But they were hearing, and it was frustrating for me. There were so many hearing women talking at the same time, it was hard to follow what they were saying." I asked my deaf friend if she wanted to be part of a Red Hat Group? There wasn't one in Denver so we started one. We started with seven women in our first year. We grew to 39 deaf and hard-of-hearing women in the group. Today we've expanded to three different groups in Denver. I think that if you refuse to let your deaf or hard-of-hearing life get in the way, you can overcome the problems.

SALLY SKYER: Thank you very much. The thing to keep in mind about the people that you look up to is to feel free to ask them to be your mentor. If you are having adjustment difficulties with being deaf because you have only been deaf two or three years, ask your mentor to help and guide you. You cannot go through it alone. We do not exist in isolation.

I want to move on to strategies to build confidence.

- Act confident. Even if sometimes you don't feel confident inside, act it. Because when you act it, then you start to feel it.
- Be aware of your self-talk. You know the expression you are what you eat? You are also what you think all day. If you think you are a person who is very capable, very loving, then you have this positive thought about yourself. You feel that all day. But if you say I am not worth it. I can't do it. This struggle is too much for me. That negativity starts to be with you all day, and it impacts your mood. The mind is a very powerful instrument. The mind has an impact on the body. Be an example! That's what I always tell the students. Be an example. Be the role model.
- Focus on what you can do and not you what can't. Show people what you can do. I can't hear, but I can talk, I can sign, I can write, I can do everything but hear.

●Be with people who show this positive attitude and positive inspiration. I try to avoid or limit my contact with people who have negative attitude. Five minutes, 10 minutes, that's okay. But I try to hangout with people who have positive attitudes because it helps me to stay positive.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What if you live with people who are negative every day?

SALLY SKYER: I try to allow myself some space and get away for a half hour or an hour. I say to myself, "This person is dealing with issues. It's not about me. It's not about me. This person is going through issues. Don't take it personally." For example, my daughter was upset with her boss two months ago. She said, "Mom, I don't think my boss likes me. She has a really nasty attitude. She prefers the other hearing people instead of me." I said, "It's not about you. It's not about your deafness. No, you don't know what she is going through." She said, "Mom, I am worried about my job." Well, couple of weeks later she sat down with the boss and the conversation came up and my daughter asked if everything was okay? Was the boss happy with my daughter's job? The boss said she was, she was just going through a very frustrating time. She said to my daughter, "You are wonderful. I like you a lot. "My daughter told me that and I said, "See, it's not about you. Don't take it personally. Distance yourself. You don't know what the other person is going through."

- Do daily affirmations. And pursue what empowers you.
- Get involved with hobbies, things that make you feel good. I am very involved with painting, art, quilting, and I have a group that meets every month. Oh, I love it. I am teaching hearing people those skills. I love it. How many of you look in the mirror and compliment yourself. I do that every morning. Excuse me; sometimes I look at myself naked before I get dressed and I say, yeah, lady! Here we go! (Laughter) I am not the same size because I have gone through breast cancer surgery, I don't care. I have scars. I am proud of them. I am not perfect. I look and I say, yeah, lady. Let's go! (Laughter)
- Compliment yourself and smile. People here in this room have fantastic personalities. I really admire a lot of you here.
- Use a gratitude journal. At the end of the day write down three things that you are thankful for that happened that day. Be specific.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I read somewhere that you should wake up in the morning thinking positive. When you retire at nighttime say you're grateful for what you went through during the day.

SALLY SKYER: Yes. How you wake up in the morning make as difference for the rest of the day. In the morning you wake up, yes! Sunshine is here. Yes! Rain? Yes! Snow? Yes! Life, again. Another day to share the life, another day to share happiness with other people; another day to be the example for other people. It's difficult to feel bad and have good thoughts. If you have good thoughts, you will feel good. So it's important what you what think.

Now, back to affirmations. Last year I gave this workshop, and one person asked, "What's an affirmation? I have never done an affirmation before." An affirmation is a positive statement that you repeat to yourself and maybe tape it on your mirror or on your desk. My daughter was going through a difficulty and I said to write an affirmation down. She wrote it down. I told her, "Now, repeat those things to yourself everyday five to six times a day." "All right, Mom."

Examples of affirmations are: I can do it. I am capable. I am strong. I am a devoted mother, wife, and daughter. I am doing the best I can. You are learning sign. You are doing the best you can. I am so worthy. I choose to live with joy and love. I am an incredible woman. I survived and I'm thriving. I am open to new experiences. New experiences involve taking a risk. Life is full of risks. Maybe you can learn from that. I know becoming a late-deafened person, doesn't usually happen overnight. It takes time. Even though I was born deaf it took me 30 years to say, "I am proud and am a deaf person." It takes time to develop that feeling.

More affirmations: "I am filled with love and abundance." "This is a beautiful life." "We live in a free country." "We have plenty of food, places to live, people here, support groups." "I am a phenomenal woman." "There is no one like me or you." No one! Here are some activities you can do when you go home. We have 15 minutes left, so I am going to give you some homework now.

Write a letter to yourself.

" Dear Sally, what a phenomenal woman you are. I look up to you. You have changed so much in the last 30 years. You are incredible. I have seen you struggle when you were small growing up with all of these people with negative attitudes. Now, look at you today!" Or: "Dear Karen, You are astounding. You grew up as a hearing person, and became deaf overnight. You are surviving. Surviving! You are trying and can do it, taking small steps, and being gentle with yourself as you go through this journey of a newly deaf experience."

Write the letter. Read it. Keep it. When you are feeling down, take that letter out, read it again, affirm yourself. The letter has to be positive. That's not saying that you are denying reality. No. Talk about how you are getting through the struggles.

I want to read part of a poem by Maya Angelou. The name of the poem is *Phenomenal woman*.

*Pretty woman wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model size.
But when I start to tell them, they think I am telling lies.
I say it's the reach of my arms.
The span of my hips.
The stride of my steps.
The curl of my lips.*

*I am a woman.
Phenomenal woman.
That's me.
I walk into a room just as cool as you please.
And to a man the fellows stand or fall on their knees.
They swarm around me,
A hive of honeybees.
I say it's the fire in my eyes.
And the flash of my teeth.
The swing in my waist,
The joy in my feet.
I am a woman, phenomenal woman.
That's me.*

*Men have wondered what they see in me.
They try so much, but they can't touch my inner mystery.
When I try to show them, they say they still cannot see.
I say
It's the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The rise of my breast,
The grace of my style,
I am a woman,
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.*

Now, I want you to write down three things that you are proud of about yourself, the last one being your affirmation. Do that right now. We are running out of time. I want one or two people to talk about their affirmation.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "Let go and let God."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I am enjoying this. I first say it and then I start paying attention to it and I'm surprised how often I enjoy myself. So an affirmation is, "Hey, I like this. This is fun. I am enjoying this."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I try to be positive even though there are negative people around always having drama in their life.

SALLY SKYER: I have a positive approach to life.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: People can kill your spirit.

SALLY SKYER: You have to let it bounce off.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It's hard for me.

SALLY SKYER: I know it's hard. It's easy to take it personally. I have learned the hard way. You have to let it bounce off you. It's not about you. It's about them.

Here, I have a nice bowl. I'm going to pass around the bowl. You each pick three affirmations from it but don't look. Pick three pieces of paper from it and read what it says. Read it to yourself. I picked mine this morning, and it says, "I love myself and others love me." That's going to be my affirmation for today. I am going to keep this affirmation with me in my pocket and read it again and again. What does yours say?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "I have faith in my ability."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "I am a strong person."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "My life is full of possibility."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "I stand strong in my personal power."

SALLY SKYER: Yes!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "I have an open heart."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "My life is rich and abundant."

SALLY SKYER: Fantastic!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "I have an open heart."

SALLY SKYER: Yes, you do! Yes, do you! Others?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "My desires create my reality."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "My life is full of possibilities."

SALLY SKYER: That's true!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "I respect myself and others respect me."

SALLY SKYER: Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "I create joy everywhere I go."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "I am grateful."

SALLY SKYER: You honor yourself. Keep those affirmations. If you want more, there are plenty more in this bowl. If you want to take two more, three more, four more, go with it. Bless you all!

Sally Skyer was born deaf. A counselor/professor for over 32 years, she is currently at NTID in Rochester, NY. She enjoys presenting workshops and has received numerous awards recognizing her contribution to the Rochester deaf community. She is a mother of two grown children, Melisa and Michael. Her husband, Rick, and his sisters (all deceased) were members of ALDA for several years.