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Portrait of a Confident Deaf/Deafened Person

Solange Skyer

Sally Skyer: Okay. I hope you don't mind if I move around as I'm presenting. I enjoy meeting people and I enjoy giving information to people. I worked as a counselor for 37 years at NTID/RIT. Thirty-seven years helping many, many students through life's challenges. It didn't matter if they were born deaf. I was born deaf and I have a deaf brother. I also married a man who became late deafened. His three sisters became late deafened. My sister in law was involved with the person who started the ALDA organization.

I've presented many, many workshops on diversity, how to get through setbacks, how to get through difficulties, how to help people adjust to life changing. Now many of you have been through life changes? Whether you want it or not, sometimes it happens. When the life changing happens, we learn to adapt. We learn to cope. We need people to help us through the transition. You can't do it alone. You cannot go through the journey alone. We're here to help. And I enjoy helping you navigate through life's experiences.

My philosophy is that life is meant to teach us a lesson. Every experience we go through is a lesson. We might not always understand it the first time we're presented with that lesson, but later we can put the pieces together. The important thing is to be open to what the lessons try to teach. Be open. What is the experience trying to tell me. What can I learn from this? How can I help myself grow from that lesson's experience? And then, how can I help other people through that life's lesson?

Okay, I'm finished with the introduction. What I want to do next is something that involves you interacting and talking with each other. I want you to pick a person to sit next to. I have a paper here with a list of questions. I want you to talk with each other and write your responses to the questions. Then I'm going to ask volunteers to come up and share what they wrote. This will be an experiential activity.

(Group activity for ten minutes)

First person.

Audience Member: Here is my answer to the question "How would you describe a confident person?" She is someone who feels comfortable in their own skin. Who would be an example of a confident person and why is he or she an example? The first person that came to mind was Dave Litman, (ALDA President).

I have another name . I have a friend, her name is Molly. Molly has been my friend since she was 9 and I was 8. When I met Molly I was a hearing little girl and she was a Deaf little girl. Over the course of our 40-year friendship she became hearing and I became deaf. I took her for her first implant. At that point she became better hearing than me. She has never taken the Deaf identity. She has always been active and out there and living life with no restrictions and no fear. So I have a tremendous role model in her.

Sally Skyer: How would you describe your confidence as a deaf person?

AudienceMember: I have no confidence as a deaf person. I have little confidence as a hearing person at this time, too. So, um, for the last 15 or 20 years I've been withdrawn and hidden and I'm here actually searching for confidence, trying to come out. Meeting all of you and seeing all of you and being with you has been a tremendous help. So a little bit of confidence is coming.

Sally Skyer: What characteristic do you want to develop or add?

Audience Member: I just want to be comfortable in my own skin. That is me.

Sally Skyer: Another volunteer?

Audience Member: The first question is how do you describe a confident person? And I was saying self-worth. The next question is who was an example of someone? I would say Gerry Buckley and also Chris Waggoner. The next question about what's supported me, I said looking at other deaf people, seeing how they grow up, comparing myself to them to see how like them I want to be or not. Then I said never be afraid to learn. That's it.

Audience Member: Good morning. My name is Linda. I'm from New Hampshire. My description of a confident person is someone who is open, friendly, communicates well, is happy, gracious and who is a good listener, passionate about what they believe without being overbearing or pushy. I lost my hearing late in life. I got my cochlear implant in 2010. So I've been new to the world of the deaf and hard of hearing and the very first person that I met with who was completely deaf was Carol Menton who is here today. I've been so impressed with her confidence and her friendliness and it's made a huge impact on me. So thank you, Carol.

My confidence level before I lost my hearing was very good. I'm a professional musician, so I perform in front of large groups of people. I'm a flutist. As I started to lose my hearing and I couldn't really perform anymore, my confidence level dropped tremendously and I became very withdrawn. My social life changed, too. It's been a long assent to gain my confidence. I have to say being part of these groups, going to conventions, having new friends who are deaf and hard of hearing, these activities have really helped me recover a lot of my confidence. So I thank them all. The most important thing that I've learned here was listening to

Pat Dobbs at the Newcomer's Breakfast yesterday and her message that really impacted me. "Don't fake it." If you don't hear something, speak up. Tell people they need to communicate better with you.

Sally Skyer: Learn how to advocate for yourself. Advocate for what you need. Be open. You've gone down and you're working your way up.

Audience Member: Question number one, how would I describe a confident person? I think a confident person is doing what you know is best for you and you're not concerned about if anybody else likes it or doesn't like it. You feel good about it and that's what will help you make it work for you. Who would be a good example of a confident person? I think the guy from Project Runway is a very confident person. They have gone places where people who are deaf would not dare to go. They stayed at it and worked at it and they became successful. Did becoming deaf influence my confidence? I basically remained quite confident. I've always been a confident person. As a matter of fact, it might have improved my confidence. I became deaf in 2000 as a result of meningitis. I received a cochlear implant but I'm not a success story. But I keep pressing on because of my confidence. It hasn't been easy. Yet, each and every day I learn something new. Being a working person all my life, I didn't let becoming deaf stop me. I continue to work. I'm still working and hopefully in another four years I'll be able to retire!

What characteristics do I want to develop? I think I would like to become more assertive, not aggressive. Assertive because you know how aggressive especially for a female isn't a good thing. By being more assertive and taking the first steps and doing things to help others and sharing my experiences, I can hopefully help others become more confident.

Sally Skyer: Taking the first step is taking a risk. Being open to experiences. You need to take that risk and that leap of faith. Okay. Last one.

Audience Member: I would describe a confident person as someone who knows they're good at something. Someone who believes in that and builds on it. It comes from recognizing something in yourself that's good and allowing that occasionally to overcome all those feelings about yourself that are bad. A confident deaf person for me is Cheryl Heppner. She's someone I really admire and respect because of the work that she's done and the accomplishments she has had. I look at her and think, "Man, I wish I was as confident and had accomplished as much as she has." Then I think if I had accomplished as much as she has, that would help. She's someone I idolize. I am glad she's done so much for us.

How would I describe my experience as a deaf person and my confidence? Becoming deaf helped my confidence a lot. I had been hard of hearing all of my life. I was one of those clingers to the hearing world as my hearing dropped. When I came to this conference and started learning Sign language and

encountered the deaf community for the first time at age 47, I found all these people who were not able to hear. This is who I am. I didn't get that from hard of hearing people. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I'm such a burden on you and I'm sorry for holding up the conversation," was my attitude. Becoming deaf was really cool. I could say 'I'm deaf'. Here's my line on the audiology chart. It doesn't even matter if I try anymore. It was kind of a relief to kind of give up that struggle and say, "I'm deaf. You deal with it. I've dealt with it all this time." So that feels perverse to me, getting to that bottom level of hearing really helped me feel better because I think with hard of hearing you have fear of becoming deaf. So I hit it. And there it was. And coming to ALDA, though, was what really, really helped put me together because I found all these people that were deaf and doing great stuff and they made me feel important. Everybody welcomed me and hugged me and made me feel like I was the most special person in the room and that's an incredible skill that this group has. That's what keeps me coming back.

The characteristics that I need to develop are I need to learn better with other people what was shared with me at ALDA and how valuable that was. I need to remember and go back to that and remember how that felt and learn how to do the magic things to help my confidence.

Sally Skyer: We all have stories. And we all have experiences. What we learn from our experiences, what we hear from others and what we learn from ourselves builds up our confidence. Sometimes life is not fair. What I tell my students is sometimes life is not fair. Either you avoid it or you face it. Face forward. Learn from the experience and share what you have learned with others.

About my biggest role model when I was growing up--I had no role models. It was hard for me to feel confident about myself as a deaf person even though I was born deaf. My family was hearing; I grew up deaf. I did not interact with them much. I grew up with no role models, and that was a struggle for me. I was good at faking it. "I'm fine. I'm fine." I was not confident in approaching people and talking with people. So then I started reading books. The first book was by Helen Keller. She's deaf and she's blind, hmm ...if she can do it, I can. I went to a hearing school, hearing college, then to Gallaudet University for my master's degree. And guess who my first teacher at Gallaudet was? A black woman who was deaf. She was a single mom. She had raised her daughter alone and she was my professor. I said "Wow. That's who I want to want to become." Before then I had a hard time envisioning what I wanted to be as a deaf person without that role model. But I looked at her and I told myself, "She's teaching at the college level. She's a woman, she's empowering. Ohh ...that's who I want to be." She became my role model.

Her inspiration led me to the career that I have enjoyed for the last 37 years. Diane Brooks, an amazing woman. I love her so much. Then I met a woman who was a mom with three hearing children. She was deaf. Talking with her was an inspiration. And then I met my husband. He was deaf and had a lot of medical challenges. Take one step forward, one step forward. I looked up to him. Wow.

There are two fantastic role models who show courage despite what they know or what they experience; they are my two children. Despite their medical challenges, they keep going, keep going. One step at a time. Life is short. Life is good. We learn to support each other and that's a good thing. Confidence comes from dealing with things and getting through them. By avoiding, it's hard to build confidence. But by facing things, you feel the confidence. I remember one time I had a contractor come to my home. They were working in the basement. A month later I wasn't satisfied, so I went to the company and talked with the manager. He started arguing with me. A week later I'm back and I said I'm not satisfied. You did not do what I asked you to do. Blah, blah, blah. Then I said to him, "Don't you ever take advantage of a deaf woman. I know what my rights are. I need this job done right." I got the job done. I gained confidence from that. Confidence comes from challenging experiences and facing up to them. Face different experiences.

Confidence is a belief in yourself. If you're empowered, then you're capable. You all can do it. Sometimes I hear students say, "I can't. I can't. Can't. Can't." And I say "can't" isn't part of our vocabulary. You need to have faith in yourself. Be able to do it one step at a time. Be sure of yourself. Know what you want.

What are the challenges to one's confidence? Someone mentioned when she was a hearing person, she had confidence. Half of you said when you became deaf, your confidence dropped. That's expected. You've been through a major life change. After that life change, you learn to rebuild and go up again. Adjusting to being deaf is not an overnight thing. It's a life-long experience. Especially for someone who has been involved with music, someone involved with dancing, someone involved with communication, a very social person. When you lose your hearing, when you lose that relationship with people.

The other challenge is advocating for your communication needs. I wasn't good at that growing up. I had to learn to speak up for myself. I had to do it. I had to advocate for what I needed to make communication work.

Coping with communication frustrations always happens. I remember one time with my daughter I was going to a movie -- a performance in Chicago. She had been deaf one year. She ordered the tickets. She requested the interpreter. And we were excited to go and see the play together. Waiting for the interpreter. No interpreter showed up. She got very upset. She said "Mom, I hate being deaf. I hate this. I hate having to go through this."

"Listen, Melissa" -- her name is Melissa -- "we have to deal with this. We'll talk with the manager." She said, "No, I don't want to deal with this." Miscommunication. Forgot to request the interpreter. "No, no, no," I said. "We requested in advance. We bought the tickets. And I can share this experience with the Chicago ALDA Group. It would not be a good reflection on your theater. I want my money back and the money for the parking." My daughter was behind me and she was in tears. She wanted this over with. I said, "No, no. We have to fight for what's part of our rights. I'm deaf. I need an interpreter's support. This is

important to me. " She learned from that experience. And I advocated. Now she does it on her own.

So a learned experience is a life-long experience. It's not going to happen just once or twice, but when you go through that, it builds your confidence. I did. I fought for it. I advocated for myself. And when you go through it again, you know how to do it. Don't let deafness defeat you. Don't. Building confidence, you can learn. Yes. Step by step, you need to learn how to go through hardships, hardships are part of everyday life.

How to help. You have a fantastic group here of deaf persons. You can become buddies. Meet someone here, a late deafened person. Become buddies. Support. Write to each other, meet each other, have someone become your role model. And, it's okay to ask for counseling support. I admit that I get counseling support to help me deal with my own deafness experience growing up and how to deal with family medical challenges. From the counseling support, I learned how to become stronger. We can't go through it alone. You don't have to do this alone. You have people to help and support you.

Every Thursday a while back, every Thursday afternoon a group of deaf professional women and I would get together and we would talk about challenges of communication on the job, raising children, how and what to do. Many women were from different age groups. We would support each other every Thursday afternoon. It was a wonderful inspiration and we would get together for coffee, talk and support. You can learn how to advocate from workshops here and from meeting people here.

How to build confidence. Sometimes you have to fake it to make it. Pretend that you feel confident, then you will start to feel confident. Stand tall. Even if you're nervous inside, you have to do it and go ahead. Be bold. You want to reinforce your confidence image. Life is good. Start with a new day. Start with a positive message to wake up with in the morning. What a wonderful day. I slept like night. Soft pillow. The sun is shining. It's beautiful. It's a new day. Who knows, maybe it's the last day. If it's your last day, enjoy it. Make the best of it. Keep the conversation positive. I am drawn to people who have positive energy. And I have to avoid the gossipers. I don't need that. I don't need people to pull me down. I need people to inspire me to learn to see things as an opportunity. Not as a barrier. Do you see this as a barrier or see this as an opportunity? Okay, I prefer to see this as an opportunity. What can I learn from this? I tell my students we often go through life to learn a lesson. What's the lesson that we are to learn? What is your lesson? What is the lesson that you're learning from here? What's your life lesson? Think about that.

I read a lot and I get inspiration from reading. I'm not always able to meet people, so I read. I just found out this morning in the news Malala Yousafzai, the woman who was shot by the Taliban, just got the Nobel Peace Prize. Advocating for what? For children, for learning. Just found out today that she got the award this

morning. I'm thrilled! That's inspirational. Hearing young person, she's had a bad experience, yet she became the world's inspiration. She was shot in the head. Learn. Ask what am I learning from this? What do I need to do? My struggle is I tend to be a worrier. I worry too much and it's really difficult when you become a mom. Part of your job description is to worry about your children. The struggle is with letting go. It will be okay. My son went into the hospital last night and all night I went, " Let it go, let it go. He'll be okay. Trust that the doctor will help her and that things will work out." Very difficult. Overcoming fear--take risks and overcome the fear.

I have a hard time meeting new people. I have to push myself to meet people. "Hello. How are you?" It's very tough growing up as a deaf person and I not being confident. I'm learning and I'm still learning even though I'm 63.

Keep a journal for what you're thankful for. I'm thankful I'm here and that I'm meeting wonderful people. That builds my confidence. Write three comments a day. What's good about today? What was good about yesterday? Every day you have an opportunity to see something positive.

It doesn't mean you have to hide your pain or frustration. We are human. We're not super people. But you don't want to have a pity party with a box of Kleenex for more than 30 minutes. Get over it and move on. Act confident and then the confidence will come. Use confident, positive affirmations. What's an affirmation? Can anyone tell me?

Audience Member: It's a statement, a belief.

Sally Skyer: Yes. Can you give me an example of that?

Audience: I can do it!

Sally Skyer: I can do it. Another one?

Audience Member: I am confident today.

Audience Member: I am good.

Audience Member: Yes we can.

Audience Member: I know how to do this.

Audience Member: I can do it!

Audience Member: Stay calm and move on.

Sally Skyer: I have a sign at home that says "Keep calm" it helps.

Audience Member: I have a T-shirt that says "Bring it on!"

Sally Skyer: Yes, yes, good! Affirmations. We're running out of time. I'm on an incredible journey. You don't say "I'm on a frustrating journey." Yes, we know it's frustrating but change it to an incredible journey. I am here to learn and grow from my experience. Changes lead to new opportunities and growth.

Audience Member: Oh, no. The third statement is what I've been trying to tell my husband, who I'm divorcing, .That's what I'm trying to tell him. He won't make any changes. So thank you, I love that!

Sally SKyer: It's true. Changes. We all change every day. We have small

changes, big changes. Hesitant about retirement. That's going to be tough for me because I've always been active. I need to learn and move ahead and I'm talking with people. How do you deal with retirement? How do you cope? I'm getting information. I'm getting support to help with it. I empower myself to face challenges. I accept who I am and I stand proud to be where I am now. Some of you said after you became deaf you became more confident. Move on.

What's nice is you can prove to people you still are who you are. You're still intelligent. and you can do it. I survived and I will thrive. I've been through cancer experiences. I've been through a lot of quote "fun" stuff that will either make you or break you. You choose which one. I tell myself I am open to new and challenging experiences. Sometimes it's very hard for people to understand. You have to be open. See what the opportunities lead into.

I am a phenomenal person. There is no other person like me. Now I want you to talk to me right now. Signing or saying. I'm a phenomenal person. There is no other person like me. Louder!

Audience members: I am a phenomenal person. There is no other person like me.

Sally Skyer: Keep that message in your head. Drill it in your head. What are you going to do when you go home? This is your homework. I'm a teacher at heart and I like to give students homework. I love taking classes. I love homework. I tell that to my students. And they go "Yeah right." Yeah, I do. I love it. Put two affirmations on your yellow post-it note. Put it on your sink, put it on your toilet, wherever you will to see it every day. I tell students to do it every day. Say it to yourself or sign it to yourself every day.

You need to write five things that you're grateful for in your life journey.

Audience Member: Is the reason why we want to do that is so that we can look back and see how much improvement there's been. It's important that we write because if we don't write, we have nothing to compare to when we look back.

Sally Skyer: Right and it's hard to remember. You see it. I have done this for years. Last week I said that I was grateful for last year. Nice. It gives me inspiration. Look at yourself in the mirror. How can you do that? Not your makeup. But really look at yourself in the mirror. Who does it? Come on! No one? Pathetic! That is pathetic! Look at yourself in the mirror. "Hello, good morning." Talk to yourself in the mirror. I don't care. I do it.

Audience Member: Today is a wonderful day.

Sally Skyer: Today is a wonderful day. You've been through an incredible journey. Thank you. Say who you are. Look in the mirror. You're going to start tonight. You have a mirror in your hotel room. Look in the mirror. Tell yourself what a phenomenal person you are. I like to call myself a warrior. A warrior. I fight back. I keep going. I fight back. I keep going.

Last night was very difficult. I was a little emotional and concerned about my son. There's nothing I can do. We text each other and I had to let go and hope that things would be okay and become a warrior. Why? You're worth fighting for. Do you agree?

We have five minutes! Instead of writing something down, I want you to tell me one positive impact of your deafness journey.

Audience Member Okay. I'm going to do two real quick. But one was I was hard of hearing all my life. Growing up I had been mainstreamed and I went to college. I decided not to go to a state school. I decided to go to RIT, Rochester Institute of Technology. I was not eligible for NTID. But that was the first time I had been around deaf people. I had been in mainstream schools. RIT was an amazing experience for me, to be not the only one out there. The other one was getting a cochlear implant and taking that leap of faith and just hearing beyond better than I had ever known. So thank you.

Audience Member: I have to be honest. I can't just list one positive thing about deafness.

Sally Skyer: Because you have many?

Audience Member: Oh, so many! So many! It's just impossible to start with one. For me, my life has changed so much since I became deaf. The positives of becoming deaf have so far outweighed the negative experiences. My life is so different since I became deaf. I can't imagine a life as a hearing person now. I'm on this road as a deaf person, everybody I've met. I've met Bill Clinton. I met everyone here. I've shaken hands with everyone. I met Sergeant Shriver. Peace Corps. from JFK.

Sally Skyer: Oh, fantastic.

Audience Member: These experiences I've had as a deaf person I never would have had hearing. So to just list one positive would minimize all these other experiences I've had in my life.

Sally Skyer: One of many, many, many positives. You are my inspiration.

Audience Member: I think my deafness made me branch out and try new things. Having to give up my old hobbies, my old job, I had to find my new self. I developed my creative side to become more artistic. So please have a look at my artwork today and see if you like it.

Sally Skyer: Beautiful. One more!

Audience Member: When you make me think about being deaf, I think yes. I am a lot more confident actually since I became deaf because I had to change who I was, change my world view. Change my priorities and what's important like people, feeling, caring, sharing. As I have met people on my journey, I am always picking up a positive aspect of it. I don't know why I'm not depressed. My body is falling apart. I mean it's just one thing on top of another. But you put one foot in front of another and you just, you just can't help but share it and have this aura about you. I have become involved in state legislation for the hard of hearing and

deaf. I'm on the board of sign language interpreters, even though I don't know sign language. But it's pushed me and I do gain confidence with all these new experiences. I can't say any of them have been a failure. They're all successes of large or small magnitudes. And the leap of faith.

Audience Member: Back from my college days taking psychology classes, we used to ask, what's the worst that could happen?

Sally Skyer: That's right.

Audience Member: So give it a try.

Sally Skyer: That was a beautiful story. I hope you're inspired. Continue to support one another and be inspired by people's stories. Take that leap of faith. Go for it! Thank you for being here!

Solange (Sally) Skyer, counselor/academic advisor at NTID/RIT for 36 years, was born deaf, loves to make people smile and laugh and enjoys giving inspirational speeches. Her late husband, her two adult children and husband's siblings all became deaf from NF2. She understands what living with and coping with deafness/late deafness involves.