



*ALDAcon 2007—Rochester, New York*

**LATE-DEAFENED WOMEN WHO BEAT THE ODDS:**

**IF ONLY I KNEW!**

**Presenter: Vicki t. Hurwitz**

VICKI HURWITZ: You may wonder why I'm focusing on only late-deafened women and not men. The reason is I used to teach a deaf heritage course at NTID and at that time, there was not enough information about the history of deaf women.

When I say "deaf women," I am talking about late-deafened women. When I started doing research about deaf women, I met with many female NTID students who didn't know where they were going in life. They had no plans or goals other than to get married and start a family. Many had no career or professional aspirations beyond marriage and having children. I knew right then and there that there was a need for deaf women's history to show them that anything was possible and that they can aspire to meaningful goals.

I felt that young women, who apparently had no deaf women role models, needed to know that there have been successful, deaf women in our history. They felt, "I can't do this. I can't do that. I've never seen anyone else do something like that before."

While in school, a social studies course was required for every student, and unfortunately it was very boring to me because it was mostly about men. I'm not intending to insult or offend men, but I learned more about the accomplishments of men than of women. I had to remember the dates when these men did all these things and it was not interesting to me. I learned about Florence Nightingale, Martha Washington and a few other women, but none about deaf women!

That bothered me. When I taught deaf history at NTID, the book *Deaf Heritage* by Jack Gannon, had very few deaf women included, but really not enough at all. I decided to establish a pilot course about the history of deaf women and teach it to both female and male students at NTID.

As I was growing up, there were no deaf women for me to look up to. There weren't any deaf men, either. I could say my mother was a role model, though she is hearing. It wasn't until I started dating my husband who actually became my first deaf role model. Yes, he's a man but I looked up to him because he impressed me into believing that I could go far in life. At that time, he was going to college, and I was in high school. I didn't even think it was possible for a deaf person to go to college. At the time, I didn't know sign language either. His parents were deaf so he was already familiar with the Deaf culture.

I went to a school for the deaf, and then was mainstreamed in public school without support services. There were no note takers and, interpreters were unheard of. I had to do it all on my own or ask classmates to write carbon copies for me. It was quite a challenge.

*Deaf Women: A Parade through the Decades* by Sharon Kay Wood and Mabs Holcomb was the first book that came out about deaf women... finally. When it came out in 1989, I was thrilled because I could look there to find more information. It became a very good starting reference book for me. However, it needs to be updated. It is out of print now, but I feel fortunate to have the original copy autographed by the authors, one of them who has since passed away.

I'm going to be talking about 13 to 15 late-deafened women. I have to start with Laura Bridgman because I need to know how many of you know who she is. You all know about Helen Keller? Growing up, I knew about Helen Keller, but I had never heard of Laura Bridgman. Laura was the very first deaf-blind woman to receive an education in America, 50 years prior to Helen Keller. I learned about Laura from a very old book titled, *Deaf and Dumb and Blind Girl*. So why do you think Helen Keller still gets all the press and Laura Bridgman doesn't?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: From her autobiography?

VICKI HURWITZ: Right. That's one. What other reasons? Anyone else? All right, I'll tell you. It's money. Helen Keller's family was wealthy. It was financially convenient for her to get a private education and become successful. She traveled widely.

Finally, in the past few years, more books have been written about Laura. Two books about her were written at the same time and published right around the same time. Neither author knew about the other writing about Laura. They wrote two interesting and different books. You may want to buy them and read them for the variety of information they both include. However, I still prefer the original *Life and Education of Laura Dewey Bridgman, the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Girl* by Mary Swift Lamson because it's the oldest, having been published in 1878. There is also a book *Child of the Silent Night* by Edith Fisher Hunter for children about Laura who was friends with a janitor at her school.

Laura was born in 1829 in Hanover, New Hampshire where her parents farmed. When she was two, she became deaf and blind from scarlet fever. She also lost her sense of smell and taste from the fever. Her two older sisters and a brother died of the same illness. She had no human contact outside her family for seven years.

At the age of eight, she went to Perkins School for the Blind. Dr. Samuel Howe used her as a research project and as an example to legislators to fund his research. Laura learned the alphabet in three days and fingerspelled in two months. After 16 months, she learned to read and write. She wrote letters, poetry, and her own autobiography. Charles Dickens, a well-known author at the time, visited her at the school and wrote about her in one of his books.

A few years after she left Perkins, she felt very isolated. She wasn't happy at home so she returned to the school and became a sewing instructor.

Do you remember the movie *Miracle Worker* about Helen Keller? Do you remember the scene in the movie with the doll that Helen Keller waved and hit around? Anne Sullivan was a teacher at the school where Laura taught sewing. Anne Sullivan asked her class to get a doll to give to Laura, so that Laura could make a dress for the doll. When Anne met with Helen the first time, she brought and gave the

dressed doll to her.

At the 50th anniversary of the Perkins school, Laura met nine-year old Helen Keller. Laura Bridgman died two years later at age 60. On the site of her home which is no longer there, there is a plaque that says, "The first blind-deaf-mute to be taught the use of language."

Laura Redden Searing was a unique and assertive woman author. I love to write, so I identified with Lauren Redden Searing. She was born in 1840 in Maryland and then moved to St. Louis, Missouri which was my hometown. When she was 11, she became deaf from spinal meningitis. When she was 15, she went to the Missouri School for the Deaf until she graduated. She was the valedictorian speaker for her graduating class, and then went to Clarke School for the Deaf in Massachusetts where she was a student of Alexander Graham Bell. He taught her how to lip-read and use speech but she didn't do well.

She became a professional writer during the Civil War. She depended on paper and pencil to interview the soldiers. She interviewed Lincoln, General Lee Grant and other famous men at the time. She was a correspondent and a reporter for a newspaper. While she was in Europe, she studied four languages.

She was called the first deaf woman's "libber". She wrote for magazines such as "Harper's Bazaar" and "The Atlantic Monthly." She wrote under a pen name because at the time women's written work were not accepted for publication. She used a man's name, Howard Glyndon. She met and fell in love with a man from Italy. She was engaged to him, but her fiancé died from a brain tumor. She later married an attorney and had a daughter. She wrote many poems. One of those poems was used to dedicate Alice Cogswell's statue at Gallaudet College and she also wrote "The Battle of Gettysburg"!

A small railroad town in Minnesota called Glyndon which is on the border of North Dakota and Minnesota was named after Lauren, using her male pseudonym. When the folks found out the author was really a woman; they built a statue in her honor with her birth name. She died when she was 83 years old.

New topic: Girl Scouts. How many of you were Girl Scouts? When I was growing up, I had no idea that Juliette Gordon Low had a hearing loss. I remember there was sign language and finger spelling in the Girl Scout's Handbook, which I thought was kind of odd and interesting. Since I was a Scout at a private

school for oral deaf children, we were not allowed to learn sign language.

Juliette was born in Savannah, Georgia on Halloween, 1860. When she was 20 she became deaf in one ear from an infection. She was a very free spirited, a rebel, if you will. It was not her style to be a “Victorian” lady. When she was 26 years old, she married a wealthy man. She lost the hearing in her other ear from rice that was thrown during the wedding.

They moved to and lived in Scotland and England. Her husband was a philanthropist. He was a heavy drinker and he had an affair. After Juliette arrived home from one of her travels, she found her things moved to the carriage house in the back of their home. Her husband had moved his mistress into the house! She tried to divorce him, but he died unexpectedly. He willed all of the money and the entire estate to the mistress. Yet, Juliette persevered long enough to fight for what was owed to her. She won \$500,000 from the estate.

She then traveled back and forth between her homes in Georgia and in England. She did not have any children, and felt like a failure. She had a passion for art, sewing, woodworking, and blacksmithing. She then met Agnes Bader, who was the founder of Girl Guides in England and was inspired by her to set up the Girl Scouts of America, using the \$500,000.

In 1913, she established the Girl Scouts at the Illinois School for the Deaf. At that time, there were 18 deaf girls. She developed the badge idea for the girls to learn different skills. People were shocked with the development of these badges which included accomplishments like camping, electrical work, farming, and surviving in the wilderness. Nowadays we think that's nothing, but imagine what it was like back then. Society thought she was nuts. She also dared to wear bloomers. People really thought she was crazy. So what?

During the 1916 election, she encouraged the Girl Scouts to take care of children so their mothers could vote. It was a very significant endeavor. Juliette was on an early issue three-cent stamp. At the same time, people established a center in her honor in Savannah, Georgia. She died when she was only 67 years old and was buried with her Girl Scout uniform. A telegram buried with her in her pocket says, “You’re not only the first Girl Scout but the best Girl Scout of all.” In 1937, the organization had 168,000 Girl Scouts.

Now there are five million Girl Scouts in the world.

How many of you have ever used the Fitzgerald Key? I used a Fitzgerald Key in the school for the deaf. Edith Mansfield Fitzgerald believed every deaf child should have the opportunity to learn English.

One of my goals growing up was to become an English teacher but I wasn't encouraged to be one. I was told that I had to hear to understand speech to be able to teach English. I believed it back then. Nowadays, I know better. If I had known late-deafened Edith Mansfield Fitzgerald taught English, maybe I would've persevered to become one.

She was born hard of hearing in Memphis, Tennessee. She went to public schools and attended the Illinois School for the Deaf for her last four years. Then she went on to Gallaudet where she graduated as the valedictorian. She taught at the Wisconsin School for the Deaf for 17 years, and then taught in Louisiana, Arkansas, and in Virginia where she became a principal.

She wrote and published a book, *Straight Language for the Deaf*. When I was at the school for the deaf, I learned to write the English way. Any of you remember these horizontal yellow sheets? As a student, I had to write on the board and write words within the columns that were on these papers. It was not an interesting thing to do, but it was helpful in the long run. I had no idea this entire system was developed by a deaf woman. It was called "the Fitzgerald Key" which was taught in three-fourths of the deaf schools all across the country. It's not taught as much now. She died at 63.

Regina Olson Hughes is a fascinating woman. She was born in Herman, Nebraska, in 1895. When she was 10 years old, she lost some hearing and then became suddenly deaf when she was 14. She maintained her attendance at public school.

Before she could read and write, she very much enjoyed drawing, and she tended to draw plants, specifically orchids. She liked drawing classes and took some private lessons. She had quite a passion for drawing plants and flowers. She also had private tutoring, which helped her sell some of her watercolor paintings. She also studied French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese and got her bachelor's and master's from Gallaudet College.

She expected to have a career in politics, but instead, became a translator for the Department of War and the Department of Commerce. This was during World War II. She married a deaf professor from Gallaudet College. She continued to paint and draw and exhibited her work in many museums. She was the only deaf artist to have a solo exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute.

She received the honor of having a plant named for her. She was also very skilled at poetry. Another interesting thing about her is she continued to work until she was 90. Although she retired, she kept working as a volunteer five days a week. She said, "I hope to die with a brush in my hand." She died when she was 98 years old.

Helen Brooke Taussig played an important part of my life. When I went to the National Women's Hall of Fame, I noticed large glass display with a picture of Helen Brooke Taussig. She was using a black box with a stethoscope. I knew who she was but didn't know she had a hearing loss. When I went home, I asked a researcher at NTID to find out more about her.

Helen Brooke Taussig lost her hearing through the years. She was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1898 where her father taught economics at Harvard. Her grandfather was a doctor during the Civil War. Her mother worked with children who had vision problems. Helen overcame dyslexia. 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 accepted. So she went to Boston University Medical School instead and studied the disease of the heart. She was finally accepted to Harvard as special student and was able to prove that she could become a doctor. She persevered through all of that. Her M.D. came from Johns Hopkins Medical School, and at that point in time, her hearing loss progressed.

She was interested in disease of the heart that caused infant deaths. She listened to hearts with her hands. She invented the word, "blue baby syndrome" to describe the cause of infant death from not enough oxygen in the bloodstream. She developed a surgical procedure that would help these babies to thrive. It's called Blalock-Taussig surgery, a procedure that inserts a vessel into the artery between the heart and the lungs. Dr. Blalock himself did the surgery while Dr. Taussig observed it. Dr. Taussig was

not a surgeon, but she had to find a surgeon who would be willing to try this operation.

And at first, Blalock didn't want to do that because he kept thinking, this *woman* developed an operation to help babies? However, Vivien Thomas, a black man, hadn't gone for a medical degree but worked as Dr. Blalock's assistant and knew Dr. Taussig. He encouraged Dr. Blalock to give her a chance. Although the first time the surgery was done on an infant, it failed, but Dr. Taussig refined it so afterwards many babies survived. The surgery was very successful.

I had that surgery. If I hadn't had that surgery, I wouldn't have lived past the age of 17. I have asked my parents if they knew that Dr. Taussig had a hearing loss. They said, "Yes, come to think of it." They noticed that she had a hearing aid on, but they never really thought of her as being deaf. She could speak, she could hear some and she didn't know sign language. It was an interesting experience for all of us to find out that the inventor of the technique that prolonged my life was late-deafened.

Helen Taussig became the first woman president of the American Heart Association. She died at 87 years old when she was hit by a car. A movie, "Something the Lord Made", was made about the success of the surgical procedure.

I found an interesting book through the Internet. Helen Heckman, who was a deaf dancer, wrote it. She was born in Manito, Illinois, in 1898, and became deaf from spinal meningitis when she was 11 months old. Her parents did not know she was deaf until she was three -- just like me. The doctors told her parents that she would never learn to talk. She went to a school for the deaf but didn't mention its name in her book. She learned sign language, and she wanted to learn to lip-read and speech, but learned dance instead. That became her way of expressing herself. I love to dance, too.

She danced in the 20's. She made her own costumes. A book on her life, *My Life Transformed*, takes her up to age 30. Dance was her voice. She used her body to communicate, to express herself to people. I've tried to find more information about her later life, but I have not been able to. At the end of the book, she is wrote, "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." Yes, I was in several dance shows. At the age of 14, I

stopped because people told me that I couldn't become a professional dancer because I was deaf. Why I believed it back then, I didn't know.

This is Gertrude "Trudy" Ederle who was a swimmer. She was born in New York City in 1906 and one of six children of immigrants from Germany. She was born "hearing impaired," the book said. Her mother used to tie a rope around Trudy's waist and throw her in the water and made her swim for her life! As a result, she learned to swim in three days.

She dropped out of school early. Her sister encouraged her to swim for the women's swim team for Women's Swimming Association of NY. She had some early training, and went on with competitive swimming. When she was 14, she beat 51 women in an international swimming race. She was a dedicated swimmer. She felt like she wasn't physically inferior to anyone, certainly not to men. So between the ages of 15-19, she set 29 different national and international records. At 18, she became a member of the U.S. Olympic team and won a gold medal and two bronze medals for the 400-meter relay.

When she was 19, she swam the English Channel. That's 35 miles between England and France and a nine-hour trip. When she was swimming, her trainer thought she was drowning and touched her. For that she was disqualified from having her time recognized in the record books. The following year, she tried again. Set off from England and swam to France through the channel in 14 hours, 31 minutes, two hours faster than anyone else. She broke the world records that men had set. She was the first woman to swim across the English Channel.

When she was 27, she fell off the stairs and broke her back. She had surgery and ended up being in a cast for four years. Certainly couldn't swim. Nineteen doctors said, "You will never work again," but she recovered. At 33, she swam at the New York world's fair. After World War II, she taught swimming at the Lexington School for the Deaf. .

When she was 55, she gave her last interview. She said that when she became deaf, she became shy, and she wanted to avoid people. She was honored at the National Women's Hall of Fame about two

years ago. Her sister received the award for her since she had passed away a few months before at age 97.

I don't know if Marie Hays Heiner is alive or not since she would be 100 years old today. I'm still trying to find out more information about her. She was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1907. When she was a sophomore at Boston's Simmons College, she woke up deaf one morning. She refused to admit to people she was deaf. She told people, "Oh, I'm hard of hearing" and bluffed her way through. She went to an otolaryngologist in Vienna, Austria, because she thought maybe the doctors there could help her hear again. Instead she ended up marrying to a man named Henry who didn't care about her hearing loss. They settled in Cleveland, and they had a son during her sixth year of marriage.

She wrote a book about what it was like to lose her hearing. She wrote that sometimes I heard some, and I heard nothing at night. She wrote about the trials and tribulations of her experience and gave advice as well as an introduction to using hearing aids. When she was talking with someone, she would say, "I don't understand what you said," and the other person would say to her, "Never mind. It's not important." When that happened, Marie did not like it one little bit and realized that she had to admit she was really deaf, and get hearing aids. A reviewer wrote that the book was written more as a propaganda piece for people to buy the book, in other words to buy hearing aids from Zenith.

Here is a really important quote for us. "Not for ourselves alone, but we must teach others." When I am present, I try to share information with others so that they can learn about others and themselves. I hope you can share with others and not keep them inside yourselves.

Here's a comic strip from the 1999 Minneapolis Star-Tribune showing a mom and her daughter visiting different museums. Towards the end of the day, the daughter says, "I want to see the rest of the statues." Her mother asks, "What do you mean 'the rest of the statues?'" The daughter says, "Where are the female statues?"

Here's my own quote I'd like to share with you, "Let's enhance the path to a bright, barrier-free future for young, Deaf women so that they can leap to new heights!"

Here's a website where you can find out more information about what I shared with you today.

<http://wally.rit.edu/pubs/guides/Deafwomen.html>.

I'll take questions now. I have much more to share with you, but unfortunately we're pressed for time now. Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Julia Brace lived before Laura Bridgman, or about the same time. I'm wondering why she was not mentioned. She was a deaf-blind woman who was educated at the American School of Hartford. She signed.

VICKI HURWITZ: Yes, I've been focusing on Laura because there's more information about her, but you are correct, yes. There's not enough information about Julia. Thank you for bringing her up.

*Vicki T. Hurwitz retired from the position of Director of RSD Outreach Center in Rochester, New York last year. She developed a curriculum for a deaf women's studies course for NTID/RIT students, the first of a 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 is President of Advocacy Services for Abused Deaf Victims which she co-founded 9 years ago. She received her B.S. in Social Work and M.S. in Career and Human Resource Development from RIT. She is married to T. Alan and they have 2 children and 2 grandchildren.*