

Introduction

Learning about the deaf and hard of hearing community is one of the most important aspects of learning American Sign Language. However, learning about the deaf and truly understanding them are two completely different tasks. Who are the people that identify with this community? How do their lives and experiences differ from our own? What have they had to overcome?

The experiences of Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, and late-deafened people today vary widely. With the advent of new technology and the rising mainstream popularity of American Sign Language, the deaf and hard of hearing community seems to be more diverse today than at any other time. This large community can include those from Deaf families, those from hearing families, those who attended deaf schools, those who attended hearing schools, those who primarily use sign language, those who mostly speak or lipread, those who have been deaf since birth, those who became deaf later in life, those who have been gradually losing their hearing over time, those who have received a cochlear implant, those who wear hearing aids, those who don't, and even those who try not to identify with the community at all.

While the many fascinating experiences and stories of the deaf and hard of hearing community are notably diverse—they are all part of the deaf experience. Regardless of how each deaf or hard of hearing person identifies or “categorizes” themselves, they have all had similar experiences related to their hearing loss—similar highs, similar lows, and similar obstacles to overcome.

It is these similar experiences that unite the deaf and hard of hearing community. As an ASL student, throughout your journey, you will encounter a wide group of inspirational people willing to share their story, like those found in the pages of this book. As you engage in their humor, sorrow, and triumph, with hope, you will begin to appreciate the respect and humility these men and women deserve.

The stories in this book, written informally to preserve the natural character of the authors, will give you a glimpse into the lives of the deaf and hard of hearing. This book will not teach you what the deaf community is and how to fit in. Instead, it will give you a chance to get to know real, genuine members of this vast group so you can approach ASL with a better understanding of what the deaf experience means to them.

'D'eaf and 'd'eaf

As you become involved in the deaf and hard of hearing community, you will meet both people who are Deaf and people who are deaf. The difference between these two identities is very important. They are known as “big D” and “little d.”

“Little d” deaf is a term that refers to all people who have a profound hearing loss. The people who identify themselves as “little d” deaf are those who do not use sign language as a primary language or consider themselves to be a part of Deaf Culture. They normally identify with and live as a part of hearing culture.

“Big D” Deaf people are those who mainly communicate using sign language (for example, ASL); identify themselves as members of Deaf Culture; and share the values, behaviors, and language of that culture. These people are very proud to be Deaf, associate primarily with Deaf people, and do not see hearing loss as a negative thing or as a handicap.

The stories in this section are written by both Deaf and deaf people. All of these truly enlightening stories are a wonderful example of the variety that exists in the deaf community.

I Have Seen and Touched the Sound...

By Evelyn Glennie

As I walk a gravel pathway or across a wooden bridge, the crunching sound of stones and boots on the wooden planks vibrate up through my body. It makes me wonder if you are feeling and touching sound, or are you in too much of a hurry?

Feeling and touching sound is my domain. Because of my profound deafness, my other senses are heightened. Very often, I see sounds being drowned out for others by a cacophony of noise. I see headphones, mobile phones, and earmuffs bar traditional channels of sound, and I also see a great deal of haste around me today. I see people rushing, pushing, and pacing quickly to arrive on time, early, or just to get there!

I have deliberately extracted myself from the hubbub of city life; I have taken a step back to enjoy the sounds of the countryside where I live. However, even in the city, there are places to stop, withdraw, and just take in the environment. Where and when did you last stop and really listen?

March winds seem to be upon us now, and I remember from my childhood how they sounded. The memory of the wind lashing against my face is my way of feeling that sound now. When I recently arrived back to the UK, to a deluge of snow, I stood at the open door to feel the snowflakes gently resting on my skin. As I did so, I was reminded of being asked to create the sound of snow on the snare drum by my music teacher at school.

My school gave every child the chance to be part of the school orchestra. My music teacher, Ron Forbes, encouraged me to explore every avenue of sound creation. He would say to me, “Evelyn, create the sound of the sun radiating on your face,” and I wondered—how was I to do that?

What he was really asking me to do was to express the feeling of sound. He was asking me to *address* the environment, and in doing so, he was encouraging me to develop a healthy curiosity towards our own surroundings.

As spring arrives, why not have a go. Stop what you are doing for one minute. Look up and down, look around, and breathe in the air. Listen carefully to each sound, and then take it one step further—touch that sound.

What on earth do I mean? Let me explain: If I see a bird flying way above me, I use my memory of what a bird in flight sounded like to imagine what sound it might be making now. As I grew up, I felt sounds on different parts of my body. As a bird soared above me or swooped for its prey, it might have disturbed the air as it flew by, and that sounded like a whoosh. Birds are also quite noisy as they gather on wires or in trees; they whistle and sing, squawk and chatter. I soon learned to recognize those sounds. They would be felt on my high cheek bones where high sounds might still sit today.

A tractor passing by created a low sound that could be felt in the tummy. Sitting on an airplane, I can feel the vibration of the engines through the floor and up through the seat. The rumble of the wheels on the tarmac vibrates up through a bottle of water close to me. If I hold that bottle, I can feel the movement.

I performed my piece “A Little Prayer” with guitarist Fred Frith. People tell me it opens the body in preparation for slowing down and relaxing. It is performed in an old sugar factory that was dusty and dirty, but the feeling of peace and being close to the sound was immense.



Awarded Dame Commander of the British Empire in 2007, Evelyn Glennie is the first person in musical history to successfully create and sustain a full-time career as a solo percussionist. Evelyn is the leading commissioner of around 170 new works for solo percussion from many of the world's most eminent composers. As a double Grammy Award winner and BAFTA nominee, Evelyn is in demand as a composer and records high quality music for film, television, and music library companies. With over 86 international awards to date, Evelyn continues to feed the next generation through advice and guidance. As a consultant, she offers prestigious and much sought-after master classes and lecture demonstrations to all types of instrumentalists. Evelyn has been profoundly deaf since the age of 12 and is currently based in the beautiful countryside of Cambridgeshire, United Kingdom.