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Look at a Life

Oliva and toddler (right)

As an adult, when the author met a deaf toddler, she was astounded by the child's facility with sign language.

Oliva as toddler (opposite page)

As a small girl, the author had an easier time when language was presented visually, in this case as print on pages.

Oliva in high school (page 16)

As a high school student, the author felt a longing for participation in conversations of more than two people

Oliva with class (page 17)

As an adult, the author found that using sign language opened up close friendships and community—and a chance to teach a class using signs.

Oliva today (page 18)

As an author and professor of physical education and recreation, Gina Oliva tries to reach out to other young deaf and hard of hearing students, who find themselves “alone in the mainstream.”

FIRST PERSON

LOOKING BACK...

longing for a group of friends

By Gina Oliva

In junior high, there was Diane and Sue. In senior high, it was Chris and Elaine. Finally, in college, Kathy and Judy. “You always had a friend, Gina,” my sister Nina remarked after she read my first book, *Alone in the Mainstream: A Deaf Woman Remembers Public School*, because I think she felt

the need to remind me that my life was not always and only a bowl of cherry pits. Six years older than me, she must have felt some relief to see that I had a friend to help make my daily struggles less burdensome.

But count those friends. Two in each school. I didn't have acquaintances or casual friends. I

wasn't part of a group, couldn't be part of a group, even a group of three. How I longed for that! My efforts to be involved in what seemed to be ubiquitous conversation during my adolescent years were greatly impeded by my hearing loss, even though that loss was not profound. I could speak clearly, and I could function well in one-on-one situations that were devoid of background noise. But I could only participate in conversation with a single other person, and meaningful interactions with even a single friend were limited to visits to each other's homes where there was no background noise.

My experience mirrors that of other deaf and hard of hearing students, of whom many more struggle alone through public school classes today than when I was young. Keating and Mirus, in their 2003 report, spent 50 hours observing several elementary school classrooms that included a handful of deaf and



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hard of hearing children. They compared interactions between hearing classmates, between deaf and hearing classmates, and between deaf and hard of hearing classmates. Their report includes the following statement about lunchroom conversations:

While conversational interactions between hearing children most often involved more than two children, deaf-hearing and deaf-deaf interactions were most often dyadic [one-on-one]. We observed that dyadic interactions among hearing children are relatively short, and often build quickly to a multiparty interaction involving as many as six children. However, if a third (hearing) student joins a dyadic deaf-hearing interaction, the deaf participant often drops out as the interaction becomes less visually oriented. (Keating & Mirus, p. 123)

I would dare to say that any hard of hearing or deaf adult who was mainstreamed with primarily hearing peers will relate to what Keating and Mirus describe—just when we would start to have a conversation with a hearing peer, another hearing peer

would show up, and often yet another. Once that happened, we receded into the woodwork. Kaput. We might as well have been invisible. We shudder when we look back on those experiences.

When I was growing up, no one was able to help me understand that this phenomenon was not my own fault; rather, it was simply a reflection of how natural human social interaction happens. When children interact in a school environment, rarely are there just two children involved. It may start as an exchange between two children, but within seconds, there are several other children milling around, chattering, and learning important life lessons in the process.

For hard of hearing and deaf children in mainstreamed programs, adolescence has traditionally been the beginning of years of trying to fit into groups without the benefit of access to conversation. One of my most difficult memories is from sixth grade, the very beginning of my adolescence. There was a group of girls that I longed to be a part of. Rachael Higgins, Angela Straitz, and Wendy Glines always seemed to be having the best time. There were a few other girls, Suzanne Cudmore, Susan Bishop, and Emily Benham. It is amazing that I remember their full names even as I change them slightly to relate this story. Rachael was the ring leader. She would sit with the others in the cafeteria talking and laughing. They would talk and talk and talk, but I couldn't follow a single thing they said. I would sit at the end of their table, eating my lunch and feeling sadly constrained. I had about a 60 db loss, and I could hear the sound of their voices, but I could not make out the words—lipreading was of no help in this kind of situation, where the banter unfolded quickly and from several people at once.

I had loved school from kindergarten through the fifth grade. During those years, I believe that my love for learning and the teacher-centered focus of the classrooms enabled me to have positive experiences. I could always hear/lipread my teachers, though I never knew what my classmates were saying.

In sixth grade, however, my enjoyment of school eroded quickly as peer relations took on importance and I felt more and more apart from my classmates. One day as I sat eating my lunch and watching Rachael, Angela, and Wendy having so much fun, I had this idea for how to make them accept me. I would invite them to a slumber party for my birthday. I remember going up to the three of them and asking, "Would you like to come to my slumber party?" I will never forget how they laughed! I was so embarrassed. "They are laughing because they know I am really not a part of their group and yet I am inviting them to a party—How stupid!" I thought. But somehow they said yes, and my next memory is of being in our family room with four or five girls, all with their sleeping bags. It was dark and I kept my hearing aid on so I could hear their voices, garbled as voices always were when unaccompanied by lipreading. I listened to those garbled voices for most of the night.

So at my own slumber party, I was left out. I already knew, though I could not articulate this, that there was no solution to this problem. I knew that there was no way that people would abandon their natural banter and talk one at a time, very clearly, in a quiet and well-lit environment, on an ongoing basis, so that I, Gina, might be able to follow their conversation.

"I hear you, but I can't understand you." Those were the only words I knew to explain my dilemma. Since those words did not produce results in my favor, early in my school years I accepted that this was going to be my life; that I would always have this struggle. This acceptance was my coping mechanism. It was many more years, many more



books, and many more conversations before I was able to understand that this coping mechanism was typical of people like myself.

My father had a hearing loss that he dealt with by acceptance, and by “putting up and shutting up” as well. He did not believe that camaraderie with other adults who had hearing loss would be fun or helpful. He never considered becoming friends with the numerous deaf men who worked alongside him at the New York Daily News. He was not open to the idea that sign language would be a good thing for our family—even though there were several of us with hearing loss, including his brother and nephews. His mind was closed to this way of being deaf.

I found our different ways of dealing with hearing loss fascinating and also painful. I wrote *Alone in the Mainstream* because I know how very difficult it is for parents, teachers, neighbors, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters who can hear to fathom what it is like to not hear. I felt compelled to write this book for the many children who are today “alone,” being educated in “inclusive” settings. I call these children “solitaires” (see sidebar) because they experience

their education in a unique and especially challenging fashion, and they are separated in important ways from their hearing peers.

I was concerned especially for the adolescents; those students in middle and high school. Often the aloneness of these young people is not recognized, and as solitaires, they themselves may deny their aloneness. Perhaps they are not alone or solitaire in all ways; but if they are the only deaf or hard of hearing children in their schools or if they are one of a handful of deaf children where varying ages and abilities leave

them with no deaf or hard of hearing peers, they are alone in an important way.

Alone in the Mainstream includes comments by over 60 deaf and hard of hearing adults who reflected on their years as single deaf or hard of hearing individuals in school environments where social relationships were based overwhelmingly on sound. By far the most prevalent thing that these individuals said was that hard of hearing and deaf children and their families need to meet each other when the children are young, no later than the middle school years and earlier if at all possible.

Over the last few years, I have received a number of letters from people who have read my book who have yet to find friends who are deaf or hard of hearing. From one such letter:

I am almost 34 years old and I still do not know sign language. For as long as I can remember I have always felt that something was missing. All I could do was just put on a brave face and move forward the best way that I knew how. It wasn't easy, though. I have heard over the years that the deaf community probably would not accept me

as one of their own because I do have some hearing. This made me feel even more isolated! I wasn't fitting in with the hearing world and now it didn't look like I would fit in with the deaf world either. As a result, my desire to learn sign went out the window for a long time but now your book has changed that. I am willing to give it a shot and find out what happens. I sorely need a positive change in my life and this might be it!

Of particular note is this young woman's additional comment, “I have heard over the years that the deaf community probably would not accept me as one of their own because I do have some hearing.” The deaf community is quite diverse. Every oral student who ventures into some venue where the interchange is in sign language will find a group of individuals like him- or herself. There are many of us who work and socialize primarily in the deaf community who come from oral and solitary settings and who learned sign language later in life.

Some may argue that things are different today for most hard of hearing and/or deaf children. Today children have itinerant teachers and counselors who pay attention to their needs. Some have sign language interpreters and notetakers; most have some kind of auditory support such as cochlear implants and/or FM systems.

While these features for accessing classroom spoken language may provide access to academic information, they apparently do not significantly change the feeling that many deaf and hard of hearing students have of being “alone in the mainstream.” For the last three years, freshmen in the honors program at Gallaudet University have read *Alone in the Mainstream* in their First Year Seminar class. One of their assignments is to write me a letter as the book's author and share their thoughts. In general, those who have been “solitaires” tell me they relate closely to my experience:

I was always the only deaf student in

the class and they might as well have put a neon sign above me flashing DEAF because I was always with an interpreter. . . . Still I wasn't too happy because the only time I could really engage in a conversation was during lunch with other deaf students. I craved interaction but it was limited.

I could not believe what I was reading. I felt like you were writing a story about my own mainstream experiences throughout kindergarten to high school. I went through so many similar experiences—pretending I understood what my classmates were talking about, pretending I did not feel hurt when they said, "It's nothing" or "I'll tell you later," and laughing when everyone else started to laugh.

Hard of hearing and deaf students educated in the 1990s and in the early years of the 21st century identify with those who were in school in the '50s, '60s, '70s, and '80s, despite legislation, despite the greater acceptance of diversity, and despite increased support services. Human nature—specifically the nature of social interaction—remains the same. One honors freshman who I teach eloquently put it this way: "It's really nice to know I wasn't the only one (alone) in the mainstream, even if we solitaires are thousands of miles and years apart."

The Fourth Environment

Kleiber (1999), a psychologist specializing in leisure studies, elaborates on the concept of a "fourth environment" as places where people go to hang out and chat—away from home, school, and work. The conversations that take place within these environments are critical to our sense of social support. Adults congregate in coffee shops or bars on some regular basis "just to talk." Adolescents, Kleiber notes, crave these environments and this kind of interaction. In fact, the propensity to gather together begins during the pre-teen years when youths can be seen in malls and on street corners and other uniquely designated venues. For

adolescents in particular, an important element of these environments is the absence of adults. The cafeteria, school bus, and locker room serve as fourth environments in middle and high schools:

The social tasks of adolescence and early adulthood may benefit more from unstructured leisure contexts since there is more influence over communication and interaction patterns in those situations than when adults are in control. Adolescents in search of companionship and/or romance seek out such fourth-environment contexts as shopping malls, house parties, coffee shops, and swimming pools. And even when activities are organized and structured for children by adults, informal child-centered interaction is likely to persist as part of the experience. (Kleiber, 1999, p.76)

pitfalls and inherent limitations:

An interpreter is all well and good for the "formal" kind of classroom communication that happens, but an interpreter is an adult and an artificial third party in the communication between deaf kids and their peers in the mainstream. Deaf kids miss out on informal chatter between their classmates because 1) the interpreter can't or doesn't want to interpret it all; and 2) because the interpreter's very presence creates a psychological barrier between a deaf student and his or her classmates that precludes the informal chitchat. (Oliva, p. 83)

Tatum, in her book, *Why are All the Black Children Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, describes how black adolescents need to share stories about their daily lives with other black adolescents whom they have reason to believe will genuinely empathize. By the



The very few solitaires who participated in my research who had sign language interpreters commented on how the presence of these adults impacted on social engagement. While sign language interpreters in social and/or extracurricular activities may provide information that normally would be missed, there are distinct

time they are in middle school, they generally have had experiences that demonstrate that confiding situations of racism to a white classmate results in comments that invalidate the black child's experiences. They generally learn that other black students are much more likely to understand, affirm, empathize, and offer comfort if not solutions.



It is the very same for deaf and hard of hearing adolescents. Even the best and most supportive of hearing friends cannot possibly understand the day-to-day life of his or her deaf or hard of hearing classmate. Even the hearing parents cannot fully understand. How can we expect a hearing teenager to understand that when it's "just me and my friend Janie, who has a cochlear implant, we can have a blast talking, but when Sophie and/or Jenna and/or Devyn join us, Janie becomes totally out of it."

It will be very hard for the hearing girls to really understand why Janie can communicate just fine one on one, but becomes a completely different person conversation-wise when there is more than one person present to interact with her. Janie and all hard of hearing adolescents need easy access to peers who share similar struggles and thereby can truly understand her situation, so that when difficult issues arise (and they will), she will feel confident that this person(s) will affirm and empathize with her feelings.

In spite of adults' best efforts to normalize the school experiences of hard of hearing and deaf children, there will be days, weeks, months, and even years where children who are deaf and hard of hearing feel they have no one who really understands their challenges. There seems to be ample evidence that once these individuals reach adulthood, if they then experience the fullness of engagement with others like themselves, they express regret that they did not have this connection when they were adolescents.

Deaf and hard of hearing children, like all other children and solitaires, need a critical mass of peers, friends, and companions to whom they can reach out

to year round. Thanks to the technology of today, this is practical. Deaf and hard of hearing peers will likely remain an invaluable resource for each other for the remainder of their lives. Your children will be forever grateful that you—parents, teachers, and other significant adults in their lives—saw the value of this engagement.

References

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Summer Camps

Hard of hearing and deaf children who attend public schools for most if not all of their K-12 years may have limited opportunities to meet their deaf and hard of hearing peers. Summer and weekend programs geared to the special needs of these children and youth can and do provide such opportunities. The Clerc Center maintains a list of summer camps for deaf and hard of hearing children and youth around the United States.

I am conducting a three-year research project to investigate the goals and activities of these programs, supported by the Priority Research and the Small Grants programs of the Gallaudet Research Institute. Perhaps one of the most interesting findings has been that more than half of these summer programs have been founded in the last 10 years. A great majority of the weekend programs have been started in the last five years and appear to be on the verge of a boom. Why? Because deaf and hard of hearing adults, as well as some hearing adults, recognize this great need and are rolling up their sleeves and taking the proverbial bull by the horns. They are forming committees, raising funds, and making great effort to get programs up and running. The Youth Leadership Retreat described in this publication is one of the best known of these programs.

Mainstreamed hard of hearing and deaf students, and perhaps especially solitaires, will benefit greatly from attending these weekends and summer programs. Families should attempt to learn as much as they can, and plan to send their child to several of these programs during their adolescent years. Doing so will work wonders for their children's self-esteem and their sense of options for fitting in. —Gina Oliva