

# Visible Minorities: Deaf, Blind, and Special Needs Adult Native Literacy Access

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*This article is the result of a presentation at the Aboriginal Literacy Symposium on May 3-5, 2002, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. My good friend Ernestine LaCroix and I begin with a demonstration of using American Sign Language (ASL), which is a way of communicating in the Deaf culture. I also talk about my early experience in the school system before I realized I had hearing and vision disabilities. Eventually I was able to enter a training program in residential school at the Ontario School for the Deaf (OSD) in Belleville. I was just turning 16. I am culturally diverse and am able to bridge the gap for our Aboriginal people who need access to our traditional way of life. I know how to move between communities, I have become productive, and I continue traveling the healing path of the Sweet Grass Trail. You cannot have a hearing person lead a Deaf Native literacy program any more than you can put a second-language speaker of any tongue to teach the language and culture. Such a person will not have the cultural grounding.*

As Ernestine and I walked up and down the length of the conference room at the Aboriginal Literacy and Learning Ontario Symposium, the audience saw two deaf or hearing-impaired individuals communicating, speaking with gestures. When people see this kind of communication they are often astounded and keep looking or staring at the talkers. It is an awesome experience for first-time onlookers. Often they are consumed with wondering what is being said. We started our presentation at this Aboriginal Literacy Symposium using American Sign Language (ASL) as well as voice. But ordinarily when two people are signing they do not use their voices. That is why ASL is called a visual language. When a deaf person learns ASL or gets a cochlear implant, the world is reopened, whereas seeing ASL being spoken or signed may cause someone with normal hearing to feel shut out. Although this language is known as *American Sign Language*, it is also distinct to Deaf Native culture. It is a known language just like any other Aboriginal sign language before First Contact. The only difference is that ASL is not distinct to Aboriginal people, but to Deaf people in general and to those whose tongue is English. Deaf Natives in French-speaking communities speak French Sign Language (FSL), and there is also a distinct British Sign Language (BSL); ASL, however, is the predominant language used in English-speaking Canadian communities.

From my earliest recollection I was neither aware nor made aware by my parents that I was different from other children. However, by the time I reached adolescence, I noticed that my disability made me different from

others. In other words, my parents did not single me out due to my handicap, but my disability slowed my academic education. My challenges became more and more apparent on a daily as well as yearly basis due to my limitations and the competitive nature of education. I did not want anyone to know I had disabilities, and my education suffered severely.

Eventually, I was able to enter a training program in residential school, the Ontario School for the Deaf (OSD) in Belleville. I was just turning 16. Unlike children and youth who were forcibly "drafted" into residential schools, going there was my personal choice. I knew that on a reserve there really was not much help for people with my dual disabilities. I know this to be a fact although I did not live on a formal reserve; the city is like an "urban rez." Social acceptance among my deaf peers at OSD was difficult partly because I was not classified as deaf, only partially impaired, and always because I was Aboriginal. Although I was isolated from my Aboriginal culture, I did have the opportunity to meet others who were hearing-impaired and became part of Deaf culture as a whole. I felt accepted on one hand, but isolated on the other due to their lack of cultural awareness of Aboriginal wholistic perspectives.

Many people in the hearing community try to dismiss the idea that Aboriginal language is the basis of our culture, but if they could understand that ASL is the basis of Deaf culture in ASL-speaking communities, they might begin to understand what traditional Aboriginal knowledge teaches: that language is the basis of culture. We are not talking about anything specific, but we are looking at a Deaf cultural language itself. This was one of the major comments that students in the deaf residential schools at the time made: Yes, we were allowed to learn and use our language, but only during our free time. We were not able to actually practice and utilize the language ourselves while in class. We were told to refrain from signing during class. This method of withholding our ability to speak hindered the process of our education.

The college almost had an uprising in terms of students wanting to have the language in the classroom. They taught us, yes, but always with oral speech. They imposed that rather than allowing students to speak their own deaf language. I suppose it was too much to be able to train the teachers to use sign language. Back then there was special training for the teachers on how to work with deaf students so that they could help the students in the use of speech and lip-reading from the spoken word. Nonetheless, those kids learned as they grew, learned ASL from the other kids. That is how they learned and developed a deaf culture as children and youth, the same way I learned it—from my own personal experience. In other words, I first learned ASL as a child would normally learn to speak a language, not from being taught from a book as some people learn it today. Over the years residential schools for the deaf have been phased out. The fact that there were some abusive situations helped in the move to

having deaf children live at home as hearing children did. Parents started wanting their children to be at home with them.

Regardless of this, my ability to adapt was strong, and I graduated in 1971. However, I was still isolated because no services were offered with any elements of my Aboriginal heritage. This resulted in my following a path of alcoholism for 27 years. Fortunately, I eventually met a group of Aboriginal people like myself in Alcoholics Anonymous, and this helped me to make a change in my life's direction. Meanwhile, I was pleased to leave residential school behind me when I came to Toronto, yet the experience could not be left behind. Isolation and an unerring feeling of doom and despair followed me; this feeling is known today as *residential school syndrome*. It has continued within me although I have been traveling the healing path for many years.

I finally got my act together when I started working in the printing industry, as well as marrying my girlfriend, who is also culturally deaf. Our home communication consists of ASL, English, and Native languages. ASL was my daughter's first language and English her second. English is my first language, ASL my second, Native my third. However, my wife uses only ASL. My daughter and I are not fluent in ASL or our Native tongue because we began learning it only six years ago. My daughter and I are fascinated by our Aboriginal culture, which we never dreamed of ever experiencing. We entered it by way of a challenge: an Aboriginal Elder urged my family not to isolate ourselves, but to come forward into the Toronto Native community. However, Karen, my wife of 29 years, has fallen into isolation—meaning she has no access to her deaf peers—over the past 10 years. However, this was her choice. As for me, I broadened my world with these three languages.

Although I have left the Deaf culture in the sense that I am culturally diverse, I continue to enhance my ASL signing skills. Because I am culturally diverse, I am able to bridge the gap for our Aboriginal people who need access to our traditional way of life. This bridging ability is why I am currently on the Translators Committee at Anishnabe Health in Toronto. It is also why I act as a liaison person who not only does outreach with other Native organizations, but who also works as a translator in the private sector. This includes such organizations as hospitals, shelters, courts, correctional services, sweats, doctors' appointments, housing, and so forth. The Translator Program has opened a large window of opportunity for me. I continue to enhance my career as a deaf/hearing translator across the greater Toronto area, and in addition to act as an advocate for urban Aboriginal people with disabilities who are in urgent need of culturally appropriate services.

Native deaf, blind, and deaf-blind persons, both on reserves and in urban centers, generally feel isolated, unaccepted, and unacceptable and often lack education. However, their voice and presence as a visible minority group is growing and becoming increasingly apparent. The bar-

riers to the Sweet Grass Trail and living life to its fullest are numerous, but not impossible to overcome. Neither fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effects (FAS/FAE), Usher's syndrome, residential school syndrome, nor any other challenges have been able to keep this Indigenous person down. I know how to move between communities, I have become productive, and I continue traveling the healing path of the Sweet Grass Trail.

Some people have asked me what would I propose now for Deaf Native people. This is a difficult question. Native education is regarded from a different perspective than mainstream education. Everything in the mainstream is defined by financial limitations: whether there is enough money for deaf, blind, deaf-blind children's special needs to educate those children. Otherwise, those children have to go elsewhere, generally to an agency that addresses blind/deaf issues. And then again, it is also about money.

If there were to be a program that would reflect Aboriginal ways of learning for deaf, blind, and deaf-blind children, it would have to include all children. The major difficulty would be the language. Deaf children need ASL, FSL, or BSL. Blind children need Braille. Deaf-blind children need an intervening language, which is different again from ASL, FSL, or BSL. However, it is similar in that one uses one's hands to read or speak. There is no single language that could be used by all these children. If such a program existed, to make the program unique it would have to include an Aboriginal language—or Aboriginal languages. There is currently no distinctly Aboriginal sign language because deaf languages are based on spelling out the words, and the spelling changes with the spoken language.

All the same, to go back to my above comment, our ancestors used forms of Native sign languages. The South Dakotas are bringing back their version of sign language when they speak, and so are some others. I bought a book on the subject by William Tompkins; the title is *Indian Sign Language*.

If anything is to be learned from this, it is that learning is a process that happens over time. I must have made a career choice five years ago when I was studying at George Brown College (or even 10 years ago.) Starting in 1993 I began retraining through Aboriginal community training programs with a wholistic perspective and with formal postsecondary education. Today I have a new career working with the special-needs Aboriginal population who have the same disabilities as mine regarding their health issues. Presently I am contracted as a peer worker with Anishnabe Health of Toronto as an ASL interpreter. Finally, I am also a freelance ASL interpreter. The other day I found an essay I had written at George Brown, and even then I was talking about intervening for deaf, blind, and deaf-blind individuals. The questions I addressed were those that arose in the course of preparing for this symposium.

I wish to thank my friend Ernestine, who was my helper at the symposium. In a spirit of thanksgiving and in a prayer on behalf of all deaf, blind, and deaf-blind children, Ernestine and I wish to offer this prayer titled "The Native's Prayer."

*Grandfather, Grandmother, hear me.  
I am standing on Sacred Ground  
Hear the drums beat forever.  
I am holding the feather in my hand  
And will never let go.  
Here I am, carrying with me  
The pains, griefs and isolation  
Give me the strength and courage to go on.  
I will be strong like the buffalos  
Roaming the earth.  
My spirit will fly with the eagles  
To be free.  
My heart will beat  
Strong like the drum.  
The Sacred Fire will never diminish in the distance.*

### *Epilogue*

After the Symposium I entered an Aboriginal literacy program at Council Fire Native Cultural Centre. It was a basic computer literacy program integrated with language literacy skills, and it enhanced my keyboarding skills. Now I can type without trying to see the keys, and this helps with my visual disability. Also, in the program I was learning the Oneida language. It did not matter which language I was learning. It did not matter if it was not my own. I learned things about the longhouse and other customs and cultural symbols of Hodenesonee peoples that added to my cultural diversity.

Dawn Antone, the Coordinator, was invited to participate in the Canadian Hearing Society Learning and Literacy Deaf Workshop. She and I participated in their conference—it was a way of putting the word out about Deaf Native literacy. I went with her, and at the conference they asked her, "Do you think that you could help Deaf people who are Native in the Literacy program?" Her answer was, "Only if Charlie was there." The point is that you cannot have a hearing person lead a Deaf Native literacy program any more than you can put a second-language speaker of any tongue to teach the language and culture. Such a person will not have the cultural grounding.