

Podcast #091 Discovering the DEAF Culture

Host: Tania Anderson, CEO ARISE

Guest: Kate Pollack, Disability Rights Activist

TRANSCRIPTION:

Tania Anderson 0:00

Welcome to the ARISE Podcast. I'm Tanya Anderson, CEO at ARISE. It's my pleasure to have with me today Kate Pollack. And Kate is a disability rights activist, I would say, and we're going to talk today about a lecture she is giving in connection with the Syracuse Peacemaking Project. So welcome, Kate.

Kate Pollack 0:22

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Tania Anderson 0:24

So, before we get into the talk, you're going to be giving at ARISE in September 2024 I would ask you to please talk a little bit about your experience as a person with a disability.

Kate Pollack 0:37

Yeah, I'd love to, well, I am DEAF, and I have some other disabilities too, but I identify as DEAF growing up. It was not discovered until I was in nursery school, so I had a routine hearing test, and it was discovered that I have hearing loss. And I was born very sick, so I think the focus was on other things for a while. And I was born in 1981, so they didn't do testing in the hospital like they do now for hearing, so it was a surprise for everybody, and I got hearing aids. I went into kindergarten, and I was raised oral, like a lot of DEAF people are, and I did not learn sign language until I was 14, actually, and that was just by chance. So, I grew up with the moniker hearing impaired, which we don't like to say in the DEAF community, because that's kind of pejorative. And I had to learn when I turned 14 that I had a DEAF teacher, just by chance at my school who offered a sign language class. And I thought, I have to take that, you know, and I picked it up very quickly, and it was very liberating for me that I did not have to talk or hear to communicate. And I remember that feeling. And the first day of class, my teacher and I were talking in the hall, and I told her, I wear hearing aids. And she said, "oh, you're DEAF", and no one had ever referred to me as DEAF before. It was always hearing impaired. And I started to say, No, I'm not. But then she gave me a big hug, and she said, "Welcome to the DEAF community." And that's when it really hit me that there was more to the experience of being DEAF than I had known. And then as an adult, I got into the Disability Studies program at Syracuse University for my master's. And that's when I met a community of people and started to learn about disability rights, disability history, DEAF culture and picking up sign language again after falling out of youth for many years, which happened, and reconnecting with that part of myself?

Tania Anderson 2:45

Well, that's really fascinating. That's a lot, so I'd like to, I'd like to go back into some detail there. So, you, you said that as a child, you were diagnosed as having hearing loss and given fitting fitted with hearing aids. So, what was the term that you used for how you were raised before you were 14?

Kate Pollack 3:07

Well, we call it being oral

Tania Anderson

Okay, so what does that mean?

Kate Pollack

That means that you're expected to talk and rely on what little hearing you may have as much as possible. So, I would sit up front in the classroom so I could read my teacher's lips, and I have a lot of hearing around the human voice, and I do very well with hearing aids. Some people don't, but I think for that reason, I was kind of kept away from DEAF culture. I don't think anybody meant to do that to me, but we know that there has been a difficult history with disability in the United States, being stigmatized, and I think that the idea was, we want to make her like a hearing person, so she won't be stigmatized, and she won't be segregated. So that was the idea. It's called forced oral, and a lot of DEAF people don't learn sign language and they have to try to talk. I was in speech pathology for many years, and we did not learn sign language when you're raised oral.

Tania Anderson 4:06

And no one in your family is DEAF. Is that right?

Kate Pollack

No, no one in my family.

Tania Anderson

So probably, maybe a piece of it is also your family wants to make sure they know how to communicate you communicate with you. But I guess it's a tension between whether the family members learn sign language, or you learn to rely on voice and what little hearing you have. Is that sort of the choice that families make sometimes,

Kate Pollack 4:34

Yeah, they do. You know, it's very easy for me to hear my mother and father because I've grown up with their voices my whole life, so I don't have any trouble hearing them. And also, they know how to look at me when they talk. They know how to raise the volume of their voice a little bit. They know to put the captions on the TV when we're together. They know all those little things like that. Especially my mother, she really can tell, you know if I can't hear something or if I miss something, she knows right away to repeat herself. So, it's just little things like that.

Tania Anderson 5:03

I see, okay, and then you said that when you were 14, you happened to have a teacher who was DEAF, and that's when you learned American Sign Language, and tell me a little bit more about that introduction to DEAF culture, especially as a teenager, because a lot of times teens are sort of discovering their own identity, separating from their families, a little bit, exploring the world. So, you were going through that normal process, quote, unquote, normal process that all teens go through, but also exploring this new culture, the DEAF culture. What was that like?

Kate Pollack 5:39

Well, we had a student in the school. Her name was Jess, and she had cerebral palsy and was DEAF, and she had been in a group home for a very long time before she was adopted. She was adopted when she was 13, so we were about the same age, and then it was discovered that she was DEAF. That's why we brought in the sign language interpreters for her and also the DEAF teacher. So that was really the first time that I had been around someone else who was DEAF. So, we all wanted to communicate with Jess, and I became friends with Jess sign language interpreter, Madge, and I actually helped Madge teach a class with some local people to learn sign language because I had picked it up so quickly. I think it's easier to pick up a language when you are younger. It was kind of hard later in life, when I was trying to relearn it after falling out of use for many years. So, there's that language deprivation that happens to DEAF and hard of hearing children where you're not really connected to a way to communicate that works for you, and that had caused me to stop caring about school. I didn't really know why, but I was always smart, and I liked school, but I was starting to get depressed, and I was starting to get in trouble, and I think, you know, part of the problem was I just had no access.

Tania Anderson 7:06

So, this part where you where you think you were getting depressed and you weren't interested in school, that was before you learned ASL?

Kate Pollack 7:14

Yeah, that was before. And then, um, I actually that was in Oregon where this happened. I'm from Oregon originally, and Oregon has not historically been the best with Disability Services. So, I moved here to Syracuse, where my mother was living, where I have family to go to West Hill. And West Hill had a DEAF program at that time, so I had interpreters in my classes. I had access to help if I needed a hearing aid battery. I was around other DEAF students that was really good, too, and that for the first time in my life that that had happened, and I got really back into school, and I started excelling again.

Tania Anderson 7:53

That's so interesting that if it hadn't been for your friend, Jess, you may not have ever been exposed to American Sign Language, that whole opportunity to communicate in a different way.

Kate Pollack 8:06

Exactly. I always think of her, and I talk about her a lot, and it's amazing to me that she was left in the corner in a group home for 13 years plus.

Tania Anderson 8:15

That's a whole other podcast. People who are in institutions unnecessarily.

Kate Pollack 8:24

Yeah. So, that was her experience,

Tania Anderson 8:25

Absolutely. I'm also interested in you said that you sort of fell out of use with American Sign Language, and that that was typical. How did that happen for you? And how is it typical?

Kate Pollack 8:38

It's typical because when I graduated high school, I didn't know a lot of my rights. I didn't know that I had the right to request interpreters in college. Back when I started college in 1999 there were not disability services offices like there are today, and I just was back to winging it again, trying to relive trying to get by. And also, after going to community college, I got a retail job, and no one was offering any kind of accessibility in that situation. And I didn't think to ask for it. I didn't know that I had a right to it, and I just stopped using sign language, because nobody around me used sign language, you know, nobody at work used sign language. My friend didn't know sign language. I had fallen out

of contact with other DEAF people. It wasn't offered to me at the college. And you get rusty, you know, you just stop using a language. You forget it.

Tania Anderson

And how did you pick it back up again.

Kate Pollack

I picked it back up. I went to undergrad in New York City, and I, once again, did not have sign language, and I was at that point. By the time I was 24 I was thinking, you know, I'm just going to keep reading lips. I've forgotten sign I don't really know what to do. But for graduate school at Syracuse University, I realized that I had to have interpretation that I could not do that anymore because I had gotten very sick from the stress of trying to get by in undergrad. I had ulcers. I was on a lot of medication. It was not working out for me. It was very, very stressful to strain like that so much, and to try that hard, it was too much for me. And when you get older too. I was getting into my 30s, it's not as easy. You don't have the energy. You don't have the same energy to strain all the time. So, I got connected with the Disability Cultural Center at Syracuse University and talked to the director who knew sign language, and that when I realized I can request interpreters, so I started classes and in my master's program, and I had interpreters, and I had to kind of relearn sign language by watching them. So, I was not only in class learning new information, I was relearning sign language at the same time.

Tania Anderson 11:02

That blows my mind. That sounds very difficult.

Kate Pollack 11:07

It was, yeah, it was, but luckily, you know, I love to learn. I love school. And I also started making some DEAF friends. And I had some DEAF professors who had people to talk to.

Tania Anderson 11:20

So, what I'm hearing is that you're kind of always navigating this cost benefit analysis of whether I try to hear and I and navigate the world that way, or do I use the interpreter and use ASL as my way to and to communicate, because they're depending, I think, on your situation, from what I'm hearing, there are going to be pros and cons to each way. Is that? Is that accurate?

Kate Pollack 11:53

Yeah, like for me, I naturally read lips. Not every DEAF person reads lips. I need to read lips if somebody covers their mouth when they're speaking, or if my sign language interpreter doesn't

move their lips to form silent words I can't understand. So, if I'm like, I'm sitting here with you, I'm reading your lips. You know, interpretation was offered to me today, and I said I don't need it, because it's a one-on-one conversation. If it's a big group, I will definitely need ASL. So, it is navigating that world, sometimes I need it and sometimes I don't.

Tania Anderson 12:34

That's so fascinating, and at this point in your life, you know when to ask for the ASL when it's not necessary, right?

Kate Pollack 12:44

Yeah, it takes me a while, often to get used to someone's voices. So, if I start a new job, it can be difficult to get to know the way people are speaking. People speak differently. They move their lips differently. So sometimes that can be a challenge. So, when I start out in a new situation, I usually have ASL.

Tania Anderson 13:05

And you mentioned before that when you were just trying to read lips in school, really the physical strain it put on you. Because I think some people listening to this podcast, which we also transcribe, is might be thinking, Well, why doesn't she just read lips and voice if she's able to do that? Because then she can communicate with more people, but there's a physical toll on you.

Kate Pollack 13:35

Yes, my ears get sore. I have to take my hearing aids out and have what we call DEAF space, which is a time that I'm just DEAF. And I am very glad, actually, that my hearing lock was not discovered until I was five.

Tania Anderson

Why is that?

Kate Pollack

Well, because I have time to be DEAF, I had time to just be a DEAF person, even though I didn't realize that I was DEAF. You know, I remember being in nursery school and drawing a lot, and it was silent, and it was kind of monastic and it was peaceful. And there's nothing wrong with being DEAF. You know, being DEAF is a good thing, and I had to learn that about myself. And I had to learn that there are benefits to being DEAF, and I've always kind of known that too. I sleep very well. You know,

when I take my hearing aids out, it's very peaceful, and that's something that I need to do also, because my ears will start to hurt if I have to hear too much, and also I will get tinnitus.

Tania Anderson

And that's a ringing,

Kate Pollack

Yeah, a ringing in my ears, or sometimes it sounds like I'm at Yankee Stadium, and there's like a crowd, and, you know, yeah, it's like the roar of the crowd that will happen if I have to hear too much.

Tania Anderson 14:49

And I love your point about there's nothing wrong with being DEAF, because, you know, ARISE is an independent living center. We work with people, all ages, all disabilities, and there's nothing wrong with any of us that identify as having a disability, just, it's just a part of the human experience. And there are advantages and disadvantages to whatever that experience is, just like we all have strengths and weaknesses no matter what.

Kate Pollack 15:17

Right, it's a natural part of human biodiversity. For being disabled.

Tania Anderson 15:22

Absolutely. This has been really fascinating. And you know, we haven't even talked about the work that you're going to be doing with the Syracuse Peacemaking Project, which is you're going to be coming here to ARISE and giving a talk about disability rights. So just in a really brief nutshell, because we want everyone to come on September 12, to ARISE. Visit the website, ARISEinc.org, to hear your talk and to see the slides. What are you going to tell us about?

Kate Pollack 15:53

I'm going to talk about disability in United States history, starting from the Puritan era and going up through the ADA. And I talk about eugenics, asylums and institutions, what it was like in the Puritan era and the pre asylum era, going through World War Two, the United Nations, the civil rights movement, and how that influenced the disability rights movement of the 70s and 80s, laws that changed education and allowed children to school and have access at school, disability rights law, and then what we want for the future?

Tania Anderson 16:27

That's a lot. How long? How long is your talk?

Kate Pollack 16:30

Half an hour. 45 minutes?

Tania Anderson 16:31

I can't believe you're going to cover all that.

Kate Pollack 16:33

Yeah, it'll be great. There's lots of cool pictures.

Tania Anderson 16:36

Absolutely. So, I'm really looking forward to learning more, because I think, like many marginalized communities, people with disabilities are just that they're marginalized, are not part of the history. They're not thought of directly, and it's important for us to know those stories.

Kate Pollack 16:58

Yes, we have a history, we have a culture, we have a community, and it took me a long time to figure that out, and I don't want that for other people. I want other people to know that we have disability history, we have disability culture, and we have a community.

Tania Anderson 17:13

Absolutely. Thank you so much, Kate, for your time. I really appreciate this.

Kate Pollack 17:18

Thanks for having me.

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