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Irene

Irene Tunanidas, M. Ed., M.S. is a teacher of the deaf who writes her own newsletter, the Greek Deaf Communicator. She tells us about the challenges she overcame to become a teacher of the deaf. [Contact us \(http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/contact.jsp\)](http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/contact.jsp) if you want us to respond to Irene or ask her a question.

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Growing up with 2 Languages

My hearing loss was diagnosed at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota in 1951 when I was 3 1/2 years old. I became deaf from a double dose of antibiotics.

Learning the English language was a tedious task because I spoke Greek, my mother tongue, during the first 2 years of my life. My father, a native of Mytilini, Greece, and my American born mother, daughter of Greek immigrants, had no knowledge on Deaf Resources at that time. They taught me to speak and write in English. Dad built a large blackboard for our daily lessons in reading, language and mathematics. The blackboard was in use for 20 years until I graduated from Gallaudet University.

Going to School

My early education began in the preschool program at the Youngstown Hearing and Speech Center, Youngstown, Ohio. I participated in the Oral Program for the Hearing Impaired at Adams School in Youngstown. In 1966 I graduated with honors from Woodrow Wilson High School, Youngstown, Ohio.

In high school, I took part in various activities such as: Latin Club, National Honor Society, and the Teen Tymers Club. I volunteered in the school library and at the American Red Cross for 5 years until graduation. My adolescent life was like a roller coaster. I suffered from identity crisis but I managed to survive in the Regular Program without the benefit of a notetaker or interpreter. My parents and preschool teacher were my supporters. Their faith in my abilities kept me going.

Going to Gallaudet - and Seeing Sign Language for the First Time

I had the option of enrolling in a hearing college, but I chose to attend Gallaudet University, the world's only liberal arts college for the deaf. Why? I was curious to see what Sign Language was like. Oh boy! I never saw so many hands fluttering in many places, and I was completely lost! It took me about 2 years to master my signing skills.

College life was a rewarding experience for me because I learned that I was not the only one with an identity problem. After I received my Bachelor of Arts Degree in Art from Gallaudet University in 1970, I returned home in anticipation of a teaching position in the Deaf Program at a local public school. Public school officials were not willing to hire educators with disabilities. More rejections followed and I decided that the only way to prove my abilities was to volunteer in the Deaf Program at any Ohio school district.

The Challenges of Looking for a Job

One week before the start of a new school year in 1970, I walked into the special education supervisor's office in another school district and inquired about a volunteer position. He asked if I would be interested in a part time teaching position at the 2 high schools in Warren, Ohio. It took me 4 days to give my reply because I did not feel I was ready for a teaching assignment at the high school. I tutored 3 Deaf Students in English, Civics and Government at Warren Harding High School and Western Reserve High School during the 1970-71 school year. This was my first teaching position with a valid temporary teaching certificate!

Overcoming Obstacles to Get a Master's Degree

I took Graduate Studies in Deaf Education at Kent State University in the summer of 1971. More obstacles followed. One prominent professor in the Audiology/Speech Department tried to scare me by saying that the college had a policy against admitting disabled students. He advised me to audit his speechreading class because he was not optimistic about my speechreading skills. (The professor was unaware that I had 8 years of speech/lip reading training!) I asked my advisor from the Deaf Education department for a copy of the university policy concerning admitting handicapped students. She looked me in the eye and asked if I would stay in speechreading class. I took her word, and a friend of mine, a speech therapist from Shaker Heights, Ohio, advised me "to show my guts" by participating actively in speechreading class. The speechreading professor reluctantly accepted me in class. My parents filed a formal complaint with the National Association of the Deaf. We were advised that the NAD would file a lawsuit on my behalf if the Audiology Department at Kent State had gone to another level. However...we did not pursue with a lawsuit because I passed the course with flying colors. Finally, in August of 1972, I graduated with a Master's Degree in Deaf Education.

My First Full-Time Job!

I applied to 5 Ohio school districts for a full time teaching position in the Deaf Program, only to get letters of rejection. This did not dim my hopes of getting a full time teaching position in the Deaf Program. I completed my student teaching at an elementary school in Kent, Ohio and at Stambaugh Elementary School in Youngstown. I decided to try applying for a teaching position with the Youngstown Schools. I was rejected, but my former preschool teacher intervened by speaking to the school board about giving me a chance to teach in the Deaf Program for a year. I was hired on a limited contract, and I was overwhelmed with happiness. My first teaching position was at Stambaugh Elementary School in Youngstown, Ohio. Sixteen Deaf students were in my care; I taught Art, English, Social Studies in the primary and intermediate level. My competency skills were often questioned by my former colleagues and skeptical parents. I kept going with daily prayers and support from my family.

In 1983, I took a sabbatical leave for 2 years to pursue another graduate degree in counseling at California State University, Sacramento. For the first time in my life, I had ASL interpreters in every counseling class. The college experience made me a better person. I learned to appreciate life more, and I slowly became a better listener.

Doing What I Love

After earning my second Master's in 1985, I returned to Youngstown to accept a teaching position in the Deaf Program at Woodrow Wilson High School, my alma mater. I suffered a personal setback when the Deaf Program phased out in 1999. I was transferred to the Regular Program where I taught American Sign Language to the hearing students in 3 district high schools. I enjoyed a new challenge with the hearing students, but commuting to 3 high schools each day was very difficult for me.

In January of 2003, I was offered a part time teaching position at Youngstown State University where I teach ASL and Deaf Studies in the Teacher Training Department at the College of Education.

After 31 years with the Ohio Public Schools, I retired in June of 2003. I was looking forward to retirement until a phone call last August. The Special Education Director of Poland Local Schools offered me a part time teaching position at McKinley Elementary School during the 2003-04 school year. I am teaching a Deaf fifth grader Language, Reading and Writing and I also tutor him in other subjects he is mainstreamed for. At last, I am back to my first love, teaching the Deaf. I feel rejuvenated; my current assignment with a Deaf fifth grader brought back fond memories of my first tutoring assignment at the 2 high schools in 1970.

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