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Labor History

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From Negativity Blossoms Strength

My name is Carol Murray and I am deaf.

I wasn't always deaf, although I cannot seem to remember a time that I was not. I do, however, remember the transition of losing my hearing from what people have told me as I grew up. I laid in a bed for weeks on end, suffering from spinal meningitis at the age of two. I was irritable, had rashes everywhere, and had this nasty pain in my back and neck. I was bedridden. The hospital did not have enough penicillin because it was all shipped out to the war. I wonder how different life would be if I was able to take the penicillin. I wonder what it would be like to hear again.

While I was in the hospital, three other girls, who were also suffering from spinal meningitis, joined me in our bedridden state. The forced companionship was nice, but the result was not: one became blind, one developed MS, the other died, and I became deaf. I guess I would consider myself lucky; at least I survived. At least deafness is not as bothersome or as much of a disability as everyone makes it out to be. I would not consider myself disabled at all. I can do everything that any hearing person can do. I can drive. I can cook. I can speak. *I can work.*

I can work. While many employers think I can't, *I can*. I've had many jobs throughout my life, and also many periods where I was not able to get a job. Here is my list of jobs:

1. A papercraft factory at 16 years old.

2. A printing company at 27 years old.
3. McDonalds at 33 years old.
4. Hallmark card factory at 44 years old.
5. A different printing company at 47 years old.
6. Phoenix Insurance Company at 52 years old.
7. Kohl's at 63 years old until now. I am currently 80 years old.

While I have an extensive work resume, McDonald's was the company that treated me the worst. I was treated like dirt simply because they viewed my deafness as a disability and a bother. Although I am one person meant to do the work for one person, I was forced into doing three peoples' jobs. I made the fish, fries, burgers, and on top of it all, I had to clean everything. At first, I thought it was my responsibility to work this hard because I was instructed to do so, but after a little while, my only friend and coworker at McDonald's (who is hearing) let me know that they were overworking me on purpose.

“Carol, you are not meant to be doing all of this. I overheard the managers laughing, saying ‘the deaf worker is so stupid that we can make her do whatever we want.’”

I felt defeated. *Why?* I asked myself over and over. I just could not believe that they were using my deafness as an excuse to overwork me. *Deaf people are stupid.* That's the common stereotype. I wish it wasn't. *I'm not stupid.*

Other than simply being overworked, they unjustifiably discriminated against me through pay. When raises rolled around, I got a ten-cent raise per hour, while all the hearing workers got a 20 cent raise. Again, I did not know about the raise difference until the same coworker clued

me into the discrimination that was taking place. So, I did the one thing that I learned from experience throughout my life while in these situations: *I stuck up for myself.*

The next day, I confronted my manager. He explained that I just had to wait; they would give me a raise eventually. So, I waited. And waited. And I never got a raise. I quit. After a few weeks, the manager showed up on my doorstep and pleaded with me to come back to work. I would get the raise, he said. They would treat me better, he said. *Yeah, now they need me. What other stupid, deaf person are they going to get to do all the work?*

I eventually decided to go back to work since I had two children to feed and could not find a job elsewhere. Maybe they would finally give me the raise I deserve, I thought. Well, I thought wrong. After three months of working long hours and waiting, I never got the raise that I was promised, so I quit for good. They probably thought I was too dumb to notice that I never got a raise and did not expect me to quit again. After all, where would a deaf person find another job? I found a job at Hallmark though. I found security again with a company that would not discriminate against my deafness.

Apparently, I was not alone in being discriminated against because of my disability at McDonald's. I heard about a case in 2012, where a deaf worker was denied an interview at a McDonald's in Missouri. This man worked as a cook in a McDonald's in a different state, but moved to Missouri and decided to apply to McDonald's again. An interview was scheduled and he was ready to reclaim his cook job at a different location. That is, until the manager learned that he required an interpreter for the interview. Knowing that this would be an issue (*it always is*), his sister volunteered to interpret, just as my daughter has done for me over the years. However, the interview was still canceled and they began hiring more and more hearing

applicants, even after he tried to reschedule the interview. Thus, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) filed a lawsuit, as it was a clear violation of the ADA. The man was able to receive financial compensation, this location was shut down, a new owner was demanded, and McDonald's was then forced to install accommodations for deaf workers ("McDonald's to Pay"). This lawsuit was a win for every deaf employee that has ever worked here. If this man and I both faced discrimination at McDonald's, there are probably countless other deaf people who were treated the same at this company.

While the EEOC was formed in 1965, the ADA was not signed into law until 1990. I worked at McDonald's in 1974, and without the ADA, I felt very alone in my struggles. At this point, it was basically legal to discriminate against me. The Rehabilitation Act passed in 1973, barring the federal government from discriminating against people with disabilities, but it did not cover workplace discrimination. I did not know how to access the EEOC and I did not even know if my case would mean anything to them since the ADA did not exist yet. Do I matter? Do my struggles matter? At that time, I did not think so.

While McDonald's was rightfully incriminated in this specific case, I doubt they learned their lesson. Even today, they dare to include a statement on diversity, equity, and inclusion that states "When we talk about equity in the workplace, we mean fair treatment in access, opportunity and advancement for all" ("Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion"). I noticed that this statement refers to diversity in all senses of the word other than people with disabilities. Throughout this entire page on their website, the word "abilities" is mentioned *one time* and is only mentioned in a statement that says they are committed to offering equal opportunity to all. No other mention. No other statistic next to the rest of their statistics on inclusion. Nothing. *They do not care. They have not learned. Out of sound, out of mind.*

While McDonald's did drag my self-consciousness down to a very low level, it also taught me a lot of valuable lessons about my deafness. There are always going to be people who look at my deafness as a disability, and who think that I am stupid or incapable. However, it also taught me that I do not view my deafness as a disability whatsoever. These are the cards I was dealt at age two, and they are the cards that I will carry my whole life. I will not view myself negatively and I will always stand up for myself. After all, my son, Joey, is deaf as well. I never want him to go through these experiences, but I know he will. I have to lead by example and show him that these rude comments and actions should not break you down, but make you stronger. I am strong. Joey is strong. We do not need anyone's pity. I never have and I never will.

The Impact of Understanding

My name is Stella Balesano and I am hearing.

I was the unique child growing up—the sole hearing person in a family of deaf people. My mother, father, and my brother are all deaf. Each one was not born deaf; it either came from disease or came gradually over time from genetics. I remember when my brother lost his hearing. We used to play and talk loudly, sneaking around our parents because they could not hear what we were saying or doing. Then, that stopped. Joey and I were playing outside when mom called us in for dinner and I immediately ran to the doorstep. I looked back—Joey was not following. My mom and I looked at each other and then looked back at Joey.

“Alright, time to go to the hospital. Your brother is deaf.”

I was the only one left.

At the age of two, I began making calls for my parents since they could not talk on regular phones. It is kind of ironic...my mother lost her hearing at age two, drastically changing her life forever, and I had to grow up at age two, drastically shaping me for the rest of my life. I made phone calls to doctors' offices, businesses, my parents' workplaces when they were sick, really just anywhere they needed. I did not mind though. When I was very young, it felt like an adventure and it was fun to talk to so many people who could hear me. Plus, it was the least I could do for my parents. They had to go through so much more than I could imagine, even though I felt the brunt of it as well. I would constantly notice people in public—cashiers, waiters, doctors—looking to me to always speak for my parents from a very, very young age. *They thought my parents were incapable.* At school, people were not very nice about it either, always staring when one of my parents dropped me off and we were using sign language to

communicate. Then, when my parents left, they laughed to my face about how *my family is different*. They just did not understand and I did not know how to make them understand.

As I grew up, I dealt with similar experiences a lot. However, when I finally landed a job at Phoenix Insurance Company alongside my mother, perceptions changed. This company accommodated my mother very well and we genuinely liked working here together.

They understood. Finally, someone understood. They understood that my mother could not hear the fire alarm go off, so they installed a special light that would flicker to make sure she knew. They understood that when my mother got her password wrong every single day that she was not stupid or incapable, but just requires a little help and patience. They understood that she was a very dependable and hard worker, so they gave her first pick at overtime hours.

Well, they kind of understood. Understanding stopped at the extent that I just described. There were many actions and lack-of-action that highlighted this extent, one of which has to do with the minimal effort in hiring interpreters. They hired interpreters for meetings with HR about new benefits available, but rarely ever hired one during meetings and performance appraisals. She just had to follow along as well as she could. Oftentimes, they called me in to interpret for her, which was not fair to me or her. I had my own work to do and she deserved to have privacy during her meetings with an unaffiliated interpreter. She never really got the *full* story when coworkers would talk about their weekends or in more serious conversations in meetings; no one slowed down their speaking so she could better read their lips.

Mom also had virtually no opportunities for advancement. No one would *tell* my mother this, but Phoenix, as well as companies everywhere, were worried about the abilities of deaf people. Oftentimes, deaf people within the company were stuck in entry-level jobs in the cafeteria, mailroom, and print shop (mom made it into the insurance sector, but moved to the

mailroom a little while after). My then-boyfriend and now-husband also worked at Phoenix in the same department as my mother for a while. He overheard the team gossip a lot and what exactly people would say about my mother and other deaf people who worked with them:

“Yeah, you never know when *they* might mess up. I say you keep *them* where *they* are. *They’re* lucky to have jobs here in the first place.”

No matter how hard my mom worked—and she worked *very* hard—there was always a question about her ability. No matter how dependable she was, people always fought back against that. *Stupid and incapable. Stupid and incapable.*

I still work at this company today (which was acquired by Nassau Re) and I was curious about the policies that they have in place for people with disabilities. However, I could not find anything anywhere when I looked it up. I searched and searched. Nothing. Thus, I resorted to looking at my employee handbook and I found a whole section dedicated to the ADA. Nassau Re’s main tagline in this section is “The ADA prohibits discrimination in all employment matters, based upon a mental or physical disability, against an employee or job applicant with respect to positions for which the individual is qualified.” I laughed. *Yeah the ADA prohibits it; this company sure doesn’t.* The curiosity that I felt in the beginning just turned into regret and astonishment. I cannot believe that I had to look at my employee handbook, which is only accessible to people who already work here, for even one word on this matter. Is there really no diversity and inclusion statement open to the public? And when I finally found it, they stated that Nassau Re does not stop opportunities for advancement for people with disabilities. Words can be written wherever they want; actions really speak to the type of company I am working for.

After searching and reading this statement, I realized that Phoenix *never understood*. They only installed a flashing light for the fire alarm because the ADA mandated

accommodations. They viewed my mother as a bother when she got her password wrong; there was no patience involved as I originally thought. Overtime hours were only offered to her because my husband protected her and advocated for others to see her as the hard worker that she is. *They never understood.* Life is better through rose-colored glasses, but take off these glasses, and reality slams you.

My husband, on the other hand, thought differently. He worked with a few different deaf people within his department and he always raved that each one of the deaf workers were some of the hardest workers he has ever met in his life. Again, *someone finally truly understands.* He ended up doing most of her training on the various machines in the office since he already knew her and knew how to communicate with her, making it easier for everyone else in the company as well. However, no matter how much he stood up for her or the other deaf workers, their disability was always at the forefront of others' minds.

While Phoenix emphasized a level of understanding that no other workplace had offered thus far, my mom still faced discrimination here. She never seemed to mind though. Or rather, she never seemed to let it bother her. She did her work and was always described as dependable and as a fast worker who always turns in accurate work. She was a strong worker. She is a strong person. While understanding helps my mother feel compassion, she does not need pity from anyone. She never has and she never will.

A Deaf Grandmother and a Pandemic: Two Opposing Forces

My name is Megan Balesano and I am hearing.

Ever since I can remember, deafness is *normal* to me. My grandmother, grandfather, uncle, and aunt all view their deafness as a unique trait, not a disability, so why should I? Hell, my Uncle climbed Mount Everest, taught at Gallaudet University, has published multiple books, and even came to my second-grade class to teach us about Norway (where he lives); he is a superhero in my eyes. I do not even remember the first time my mom had to tell me that my Grandmother is deaf, back when I was just able to comprehend words, because she always lived with us. That is just always how things are. Nothing new. Nothing old.

However, my grandmother's deafness started to become more apparent when I entered my teenage years, when a few of my classmates would make comments or gestures. *It's always the fake signing. They always think that it's so funny to do that.* Then, my grad party happened. My grandmother invited a few of her friends from the deaf community and my family all joked that they had to sit at the "deaf table." Unfortunately, my friends table was right behind them and since the tables were so close together, my friends had trouble getting into their chairs.

"Just ask them to move."

"We don't know how to talk to deaf people. Can you just do it?"

This was the story of my life throughout high school and it was really the only touch of ableism that I witnessed, which is lucky considering what my mother and my grandmother went through throughout their lives.

That is, until COVID-19 hit. My grandmother was furloughed from her job at Kohl's, but after a few months, they allowed her to come back to work. Honestly, I think she was better off just staying at home through the pandemic, considering the language barrier between sign

language and any type of spoken language. Even to this day, the masks that are rightfully required in public erase her ability to communicate with anyone. She must read lips; that is how she has always communicated. Now, customers dismiss her as rude and a bad worker, when in reality, she has no idea they are trying to speak to her.

Besides customers, coworkers act in the same way, except they know she is deaf. I'll never forget when my grandmother came home from work one day elated because one coworker "pulled down her mask to have a conversation" with my grandmother. Most days, my grandmother comes home from work, showers, and immediately goes to sleep, with nothing to report about the day's events. *She's lonely*. She works about four hours a day and receives no human interaction, other than the times someone must break Covid guidelines by pulling down a mask to talk to her.

In the early days of the pandemic, my grandmother took matters into her own hands and bought a clear mask. That way, people could read her lips while she talks and she *desperately hoped* that it would encourage others to buy clear masks as well. It didn't work. Her mask fogged up and therefore, did not work. No one else bothered to buy one either. Management did not care. As long as she clocked in, clocked out, and got her work done, they couldn't care less about her happiness and feelings about the atmosphere at Kohl's.

After months and months of these struggles, my family bought her a mask that said "I'M DEAF" in bold lettering for Christmas. It was a beautiful white marble design with pink lettering, my grandmother's favorite color. I will *never* forget her reaction when opening it: "Where did you find this?? Oh my goodness! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" She cried and hugged us all. It is so crazy how a \$10 piece of fabric made my grandmother so happy this

Christmas. I have never seen her happier over a gift. Finally, she can wear a mask that expresses that she is deaf—not rude, not stupid, just deaf.

While Kohl's has proved to be a great job for my grandmother in the past, the pandemic has exposed Kohl's as unprepared and unaccommodating to people with disabilities when a crisis arises, as the pandemic did with many other workplaces as well. Deaf people do notice their lack of care, as much as management might like to think that they don't. In fact, deaf workers everywhere admitted that "73% need different or additional accommodations, with 14% noting the employer did not provide those accommodations" ("Deaf at Work during a Pandemic"). The result of covid-19 on my grandmother is not a single incident, but a repeated result of workplaces *still*, in 2021, not understanding and providing accommodations for people who need them. *Are companies really this ignorant? Or do they just not care?*

I have noticed so many comments and misconceptions about deaf people my entire life, both in the workplace and outside of it. While many people just genuinely do not know that their words are hurtful, many others do. I feel that it is important to *try* to understand what deaf people must go through, especially in a pandemic. Most times, no one even thinks of what deaf people would benefit from or need in the workplace; it is a lost topic that remains out of the minds of employers and managers no matter how many inclusive messages they have in their mission statements. My grandmother's life matters and deserves to have attention paid to it, but sadly, the world circles through a recurring cycle of ignoring her needs. However, my grandmother adapts. My grandmother is strong. While accommodations would make her life easier, she does not *need* pity from others. She never has and she never will.

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