CLAWS AND WINGS:
AN ORAL HISTORY EXPLORATION OF DISABILITY IN DELAWARE 1917-2017

Transcription of video recorded July 28, 2017
Interviewer: Kim Burdick, MA, MPA (Referred to hereafter as KB)
Interviewee: Loretta Sarro, with interpreter Ruth Fisher (Referred to hereafter as LS), Public Information Officer for Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
Topics included: Sterck School for the Deaf, Sign Language Interpreting, Communication Barriers
Run time: 55:41

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LS: My name is Loretta Sarro [KB: And my job?] I'm a public information officer, Delaware Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing under the Division of Voc Rehabilitation in Wilmington, Delaware.

KB: So tell, tell me about when you were a little girl.

LS: Hmm. First thing, I was not aware of the fact that I was deaf. I didn't, I wasn't identified or labeled as deaf yet, and I struggled to, because I had two older brothers who were hearing and I'm the third child and my sister's the baby. And couldn't figure out, like my mom said she would try to tell me, but I...tell me stuff but I was always so quiet. I went to kindergarten in school, in the hearing school, and at that time par-, my parents were looking for a deaf school, and they found one in Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia there were three at that time, deaf schools. The first one was very strong in deaf culture and signing. The next one was private and spoken language, meaning it was...you learned to speak. Because you weren't allowed to sign at that time. And the third one was signing and speaking. So my mother chose the one that was just speaking.

My mom told me I'm going to a new school, I had no idea. We arrived at the school – it was a very long drive. And the nuns were standing outside, and Mom said, "This is your new school." The words across the thing was "Deaf." You're deaf. And I still didn't understand what she meant. So I went into the...well, we went into the lobby where all the kids got off the bus. We went in and I was...they're allowed to sign before the start of class. So they were signing and I was just looking around and I didn't know what they were doing with their hands.

A week later, two weeks later, I was like, "Oh!" Some have hearing aids. And I started to pick up some signing. I was four years old at the time when I started to sign. Not ASL, it was English sign. And that's how I identified as deaf, how I grew up.

KB: And her father drove her every day?

LS: No, you arrived to school Monday morning, really, really early. At that time, 1962, there were no...there was no I-95 or I-495 at the time. So you had to drive through to get to Philly. Pretty early I had to get up. Drove, I felt like it was a long time, I felt like it was two hours but really it was only an hour drive. And I already memorized the route and how to get there. The University of Pennsylvania, the stadium was there. So I already had the route memorized and then they would come pick me up on a Friday afternoon at two o'clock. My father had off on Fridays from work for five years before I transferred to

Delaware School for the Deaf in Newark.

KB: And tell us about Sterck?

LS: Okay. When I transferred, Sterck School, that's the former name: Margaret S. Sterck for Hearing Impaired, that was the formal name. And they already built it but it wasn't ready to open yet. So we had to use the hearing school, four classrooms that were available in the hearing school, temporarily. So then we went in, I think I started with, at least with one other student. Continued through there and a lot of changes happened. And then communication access changed. But my time period, it was total communication, meaning you spoke language.

My mom was very strict with my speech. She requested me to go to speech class, speech therapy two-three times a week for 10 years.

KB: So were you at Sterck for 10 years? How old were you when you left Sterck?

LS: 19, before my nineteenth birthday.

KB: And then what did you do?

LS: I went to college. National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester. Our IT technological...there wasn't a lot of fit for jobs out there, because I already did some research so I changed to accounting and to office practicing [Editor: practices] – they were combined together. I graduated in 1982.

KB: So what was Sterck like when you started there?

LS: Well, the students were very interesting. They were from various different places, because at that time there was really no deaf school before 1968. And the kids, you know, they were in Maryland School for the Deaf, PSD (Pennsylvania School for the Deaf), and there was a third one that I can't remember the name. Some were here, this regular school without a program, one small program in Wilmington called Lore School.

All the students had various communication needs and, but we still all understood each other. It was really an amazing experience. And I knew some kids weren't signing at all, but they picked it up quickly and I picked it up quickly as well. Then the principal decided to set up signing and all the teachers, some were familiar with deaf background, some weren't, I mean like special ed.

Later, they started hiring four deaf staff and after that the deaf staff became increasingly... it grew increasingly.

KB: Were you in the first graduating class?

LS: No. The first graduating class was 1973. That was the first class to graduate. I'm 1978.

KB: And you grew up near there right? She grew up near there?

LS: Yeah, about three miles, on the school bus. When I became older, like when I was 16, and when I had sport activities I would drive. I wouldn't ride the bus, and I would stay after school with sports.

KB: What sports were you involved in?

LS: Softball, girls' basketball, and cheerleading for the boys' basketball.

KB: That's pretty neat. What about your mother's involvement in PTA?

LS: My mom was wonderful, but she advocated very much. What was the best, not just for me but for students, what's the best? Of course it was a battle. Different parents had different perspectives. Mom did the best she could because, you know, it was just the starting of figuring out how to raise, to order materials, to work very hard until I graduated.

KB: And did your sister want to learn sign?

LS: I have three brothers, two sisters. One of the sisters, I was 14 and she was 4. She heard Mom say during dinnertime, you know, dinnertime discussion, Delaware School for the Deaf offers sign language classes for parents and families. My mom was not happy. But I supported it, but my Mom didn't support it. My sister heard the conversation and she said, "I wanna learn." And Mom was like "Mmmmm..." And she looked at me and I just, you know, she wants to learn. Okay. So she went to the sign classes, only one class. After that she was done. I told my sister, "Don't worry, I can teach you."

So we'd practice with each other all...not full fluently but a little bit, because of the difference of the ages between us. I was soon leaving to go to college and she was just soon going into high school.

KB: And does she sign today? [LS: Yes.] And what about Roy Holcomb?

LS: Roy Holcomb, he was hard of hearing. He was the first deaf director. He was the director and principal that was deaf. And they signed and we just were, like, wow! The principal? You're deaf? I was very impressed. My momma, she was was, "Eh," but I was very happy. To show that, you know, the ability. That impacted me. The ability to do. It was a very good program. They did lots of modifications. It was much better than the first two years. I think it might have been about four or five years, and then the new principal came, a new director came.

KB: And he was able to speak?

LS: Yes, he was a hearing man. He signed, though. He taught at the School for the Deaf. He moved around up the ladder and then he became the director of Delaware School for Deaf. His philosophy, I don't agree entirely. There's some things, "uh huh," but there's other things that, "no." The things that I disagree with is the signing of communication mode. His philosophy is, you're not allowed to sign ASL, you have to sign SEE. That's a little bit different than ASL. ASL and SEE are two different entities. SEE is hard to get the concept of the signs. My mom supported it, but I disagreed. We had different perspectives!

KB: It's like learning a whole new language?

LS: First of all, I never heard of SEE. And then I figured, the teacher explained it – he was an English teacher – and they explained it to me what SEE meant. It's proper words. For example "I. Am. Going. To. The. Movies." ASL is "I'm going to the movies." ASL is already included in the grammar, because my finger "I went," my finger is the verb "I'm going." It's a different structure. SEE has no expression. It's very hard. ASL already

has the facial expressions, the body movement.

Because hearing people can hear the intonation; deaf sign and our bodies, the movements, "I was excited to go to the movies." You can't hear my voice, but deaf people are like, "Ooh! I'm going to the movies." It's the same thing. SEE is very hard.

KB: And what do you speak now?

LS: ASL.

KB: Did it impact your school homework? And understanding in class?

LS: In Philadelphia, I already picked it up. The teacher was very strict there. But they were understanding of deaf language. It was hard to understand English structure, but he explained it very clearly. And when I transferred, that teacher – the background wasn't familiar. I always told Mom, "We need new teachers, the English teacher, we need an English teacher." Because I was just, you know, telling Mom how I felt, expressing all my concerns.

And then they finally changed out, but he had to follow the hearing principal. But Roy, he explained things. And this teacher, he was all right. Middle school was good, then high school was, eh, just okay. But I understood the structure by then, and Mom decided to hire a tutor for reading and English. That tutor had a deaf sister. Her concepts, wow! They were perfect. That's what I was looking for. To write English, and then to read, and then to read with sign. And then I was signing English, and she was like, "No no, just sign normally." And I said, "I don't know how." She was teaching me and then I finally understood the verbs and the just picking up the language with reading, just picking everything up and moving on up, improving. That's the reason why I went, my goal was to go to college.

KB: And you majored in photography first?

LS: Yes, that was my first year, yes. You were required to take different abstracts. Then I researched for the summer – during the wintertime I did this – for the summer jobs. Then I realized, that's not what I'm looking for. So I decided to sit with the college counselor and have a discussion and we both came to an understanding. My math was pretty good so we changed my major to accounting, and I decided to add office practices, because college is technical. So the computer with accounting, you know, doing all that. Practicing typing and with paper and printing. It wasn't just only – accounting's not just one thing. It's a bunch of things together, and I was able to find a job. So it was both.

KB: And what did you do in the summer times?

LS: Not much. No. Went to Grandma's house pretty often, and because of communication barriers, I was struggling with that. I wanted to do something. I was so thankful for my cousin, she was so close, we were so close. She would invite me to go… She would come to us and stay and keep me company. My sister and I, we just – my sister refused to learn to sign, so we weren't really close. But as I got older, when I was 15 years old, I finally decided. I looked at my older brothers, and they both have summer jobs. They were 14 and 15. Hmmm. I asked Mom, I said, " Mommy I want a job, I'm 15, I want a job like my brothers, like the two brothers." Mom said, "Okay."

Mom called DSD, Delaware School for the Deaf, to see if they had any type job programs. They didn't have one, so Mom called my sister's high school, St. Mark's High School, then applied for different things. And that was funny. We got the letter that said "Family Court." I don't know what that meant, so we opened it. I was reading too fast. This says Family Court. What am I gonna do in Family Court? I know what Family Court means, yes, but why would they send this to me? Mom said, "Oh! Read the top to the bottom!" Okay, okay. So I read – ohh, summer jobs, ohh. Wait a minute, I'm gonna work in Family Court?

Okay, I accepted it, we called. Okay. Dad taught me how to ride public bus. I practiced and practiced for a week before I started my job. And that was funny. Dad wouldn't say anything as to where to go. "Pay attention! Pay attention," he would say to me. But I was too busy taking everything in, and my dad said, "No. Pay attention to where you need to go."

And then we passed it, and my dad said, "You were supposed to pull the buzzer." Oh, I didn't know there was a buzzer. "Yes, you pull it. Look at the people. You're not paying attention to what the people are doing." Nope, I'm not. So finally realize I had to pay attention from there on out. So I do the bus and I was right there. You go in and just...that was the first day. The paperwork, filing, and then a judge came, and I looked him up and down, was like, wow. That was interesting.

KB: And how long were you there?

LS: Two summers, 1975 and 1976. And then the following summer I worked with Dad at the dentist's office and his business. And then, that was for two summers with Dad, and then while I was in college I worked one summer at DuPont Company in Wilmington. And then after that, um? Oh, yes! Earlier, after graduation, and there was nothing, I couldn't find a job. Then I asked VR [Editor; Vocational Rehabilitation] to help me. Just for temporary. I was looking for temporary and they... It wasn't a restaurant, it was like a deli, a small deli. A small shop. So okay, fine. Every morning I worked there then they asked me to continue on through, you know, fall and spring and I said, "Okay, so I'll stay."

And then DSD said they needed volunteers but you wouldn't get paid, so I said, "Okay." I went and I helped volunteer. And then I found a job.

KB: And what was it?

LS: Delaware Department of Transportation in Bear, Highway Division. I worked on all the different kinds of contracts, make sure, I was checking everything, everything was perfect, everything jived with the contracts, with the federal government, with the state, related to roads and... And they were from different construction companies who made, who did all the work. And then you'd give it to the supervisor and then they'd approve it and then they would send it to Dover headquarters.

KB: Did you have an interpreter with you the whole time?

LS: No, uh uh. I didn't need an interpreter, I wanted to be challenged to communicate. I wanted to try to break the communication barriers, where the breakdowns were. My team, they were really awesome. They would write to me back and forth; remember there

was no computers back at that time. That wasn't, it's not like today, there was no IMs, no e-mail, so we had to hand-write everything and show the paper. A few other people asked me, "This doesn't match." "That's what the contract says."

We had a deaf man who worked there, as well. And the people would ask me to explain to him. I'm not an interpreter. "No no, it'd only be five minutes." Okay, so I'd go over and I'd say, "What do you want?" "You explain to him this." Okay. I'd go back to my office. That I did for 9 years, 9 months, I did that job, before today's current job.

KB: And you're still at DelDOT? [Interpreter: I'm sorry?] Is she still at DelDOT?

LS: No, no, no.

KB: Where is she now?

LS: Delaware Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

KB: And how long?

LS: Since 1993. It ended with DelDOT, February 1993, and then March 1st, 1993 I started work at my current job today. So a total of 32, 33 years.

KB: Pretty impressive. So were you involved in the beginning of ADA?

LS: How that started was my high school years. The history teacher himself was deaf and he was from Scotland. And he moved here to America. He went to Gallaudet University to become a teacher and he just happened to find a teaching job at Delaware School for the Deaf. "What are you interested in?" he asked us. He had an idea, bring the newspaper in on a Friday, and we were like, "Newspaper? For what? What?" "Well, what do you think? What impacts your lives with this newspaper?" And that's how he said it: what impacts your lives?

Like, huh, as a deaf person, what impacts my life? I didn't know. Then later, the National Junior Society of the...J-R Junior N-A-D, for high school students only. It's on the national level. It wasn't clear what that specific agency was. "Are you interested in wanting to go to the National Junior Conference in Tennessee?" "Yeah, I'm interested." So two of us went with him, with the staff, the deaf person. We had another teacher but she couldn't, they couldn't make it, so we went with this deaf person.

Wow! That's where it all started. The advocacy, is where it started. Not the ADA, but general advocacy. Oh! The trainers there, "What are your rights?" "What do you mean, rights?" "Your school doesn't explain what your rights are to you?" So they explained it and expanded, and made me see a whole different, a whole different light.

The next year was 1976? Oh no, no, no. 1975 was the Hearing Conference, and I was observing everything, called Close-up Conference in Washington, DC. That's where the political…was in Washington, DC. Many, many Senators, legislators from the US. And I was just like, "Wow! How can I approach them?" But the other conference in Tennessee is what helped me connect the two. Then I found out after graduation, DAD – the Association for the Deaf – it's affiliated with NAID. I became a member, and they kept me sending, you know, different papers on rights and it really impacted me a lot.

Where do I fit in here? Where are my needs? Where would I go from there? Then I became president. I happened to receive – and some other people received letters as well

– anyone interested to DAD, the meeting? I was president at that time. Is anyone interested? Wanna go to delegate? Nobody. Nobody. I said, "So I will." Went to American School for the Deaf up in Hartford, Connecticut, for the weekend, a Friday, Saturday, Sunday. And they talked about how leadership, leadership training program.

Then, that was really, 20 participants, four regional. There was four regions. They picked five, five from each region, and I was one of the five that were picked. Because both trainers… Some people weren't paying attention and I was really paying attention. The first day they said: promise, commitment, you'll come on time. Discussions, we're not, we're gonna stick to the bullets of the discussion. And that was for the whole three days. They decided to pick me. One of the five.

It was two weeks later I went to DC, at Gallaudet, and all five delegates from each region were there and we had the trainer there, and there was a list of different trainers, said "American with Disability Act." That's what the Congress at that time, it was on that list. And we were all like, "ADA? What, what? Can you explain what ADA?" So they explained it and we were like, "Oh we're picking that, that subject." For one week, we worked on homework and just everything. There was already a draft from the ADA that they gave to us, and we were reading through. What do you think? Is it missing things? Then it was required to have an appointment with a Senator or the House of Representative. And I did contact the House of Representative. But both of them were not there. So then I finally met the Senator, Tom Carper. I met with him, with a friend from another state, and we discussed about the ADA.

I read it. I explained to him, and I really supported this. It'll expand better, but I really wanna vote on this. It's a benefit for us, for deaf people, as well as other disabilities, or people with disabilities. Okay, it was a very brief, 10-minute meeting. July 25th, I believe it was, July 25th, that day the President Bush signed the bill. Just prior, you know, I met and then, boom, they signed it, and they supported the vote and they passed it and then they gave it to the President and signed it, and that's…

KB: And has it made a difference for the deaf community?

LS: Some. Some improvement. Some we're still working on. Closed captioning's getting a little bit better. Job employment's, we need tons of improvement, that's not, it's slowly. Employment means promotions, as well. Because people already had college degrees, they had their degrees, they had their internship. But some, they hire some, and then some they don't.

People who are deaf and hard of hearing had another disability, like wheelchairs, they needed accessibility. The captioning...oh. Talking about, now, the airlines, I mean like the airports. You know, listening to the PA systems. We can't hear the PA system; that's a rough one. Some improvement, some not. We're still working on some.

KB: What about going to the doctor?

LS: That's a challenge. Some doctors are not, a challenge, 'cause some...it's really a challenge. Some won't provide an interpreter; they want us to write back and forth. And I can understand, because my father was a dentist and my mother was in the medical field. So I'm pretty understandable with that. And I worked, I helped volunteer at my father's business. So that helped me understand better. So it's really a challenge. The other two

doctors, I require an interpreter.

KB: How is it different in other states? What about Rhode Island and Kentucky and Missouri and Hawaii, Arizona?

LS: Oh. Some states are really good with proceeding so far. It depends on their... The Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, they have different names for each. And it depends on their legislation, what their requirements for their offices to do. Delaware doesn't have legislation for this office, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. If it's a deaf community and it's strong, there's advocacy there, that's strong, then Delaware.

Some are successful in passing, to do, you know, like movie theaters with captioning. Communication access, museums, improving the interpreting services. Some are doing really well, and some not so much. It just depends on what type of deaf community involvement they have. I can't do, I can't do everything myself, I need to have the involvement of the deaf community. And if I retire from the state, I would stay involved to work very hard to improve it yet.

KB: What are your job duties in your current position?

LS: Okay. I'm a public information officer. It's pretty limited. Information, referrals, advocacy. The information is: not many deaf services here in Delaware, so I have to look up and do research, give information, educate them on how to make, on how to even request for an interpreter. Some doctors resist and they won't provide an interpreter. Some lawyers... Referrals, where the appropriate services are needed, like we can refer them to whatever appropriate service they need. There's not many deaf services here; you have to request for an interpreter.

Advocacy. That means it's the person, to get, to get their rights. I educate them, and I empower them. You're responsible to notify, to explain. Not what the ADA says. Interpreter says provide interpreter, but you have to notify them that you need an interpreter. I emphasize that, I try to teach them that.

The caption for the telephone, the CapTel® program. Recently, a few, few years ago, they passed. So that you can add to the relay services, one of the parts. And they add CapTel® for the hard of hearing or for the person who can speak; they just might not hear well, but they can speak well.

The visor communication cards. To be able, if you get pulled over by the police, you can show them this card, instructions on how to communicate. And educate training. I provide trainings to different areas. Five years in New Castle County, training the police there and the students. The City of Wilmington police, recently. Several times elementary schools, two or three, the bank companies. Oh non no, no. Not bank companies. Credit card companies. That's pretty much... [KB: That's pretty impressive] That's my responsibility, it's a small, but...

KB: It's important. And do you do mostly on computer?

LS: Yeah, research, do a lot of analyzing, and reading update, what's going on on our level, the NAD, what's their perspective, deaf issues, Congress related to closed captionings or whatever. You have to make sure. I'm making sure I'm updated and current. What's going on with, like, what's available in assisted devices, you know, if

that place is closed, if another place is open for assisted devices?

KB: And do you go over to Legislative Hall and to Congress to talk? [LS: No.] KB: Not allowed to with your job?

LS: I don't have the authority. [KB: That's too bad.] If they ask me, I can answer them, but I'm not allowed to go there first.

KB: That's too bad. What about Partners in Public Policy?

LS: 1994 or '95, from January to June, once a month, on a Saturday...Saturday-Sunday... No, no, no. Friday, Saturday – I'm sorry. I learned a lot. The funny thing is, when I started working at the Department of Transportation, the state government, agency. But I didn't understand the system, the system for the state. I didn't get it, but, okay, I worked, you know, in transportation. Paperwork. Then I went into that program, the Partnership of Policy Making. They had different presenters. I was like, "Oh! Huh!"

They were almost like me, for the deaf leadership training prior to that. It was almost the same, but they were very intense, related to the state level here, what happens here. What's available for people with disabilities? People with hearing, deaf, whatever. And I just took it all in, huh. VR, Department of Labor, Department of Health Services... Getting a better idea on how it opened.

When the program was finished, I went back to my supervisor and I said, "You know, this Department of Transportation, what is its protocol? What (is) its formal protocol?" So she explained and I said, "Oh. Oh, that's why I give you the paperwork. Oh." It was a little bit different. The Department of Transportation didn't work with people; it worked with companies. When I transferred over to the Delaware Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing, you work with people. And I was required to orient the Department of Labor – DVR – what I had to do for them, I remember the partnership. And now I joined State Council for Persons with Disabilities. More than 20 years. I've learned so much, and I'm happy that I joined Partners with Policy Training. Oh, wow! We share all the information. We have similar experiences, what we face, the same issues.

KB: So if you, if somebody was going to write your biography, what would you want people to know about you in the future? What kind of...like an epitaph?

LS: How I became an advocate. What leadership is to deaf communities. Not overlook, wake up. Will advise. It will affect my life. Break the barriers. Break audism. Get rid of the oppression. Show that I'm able.

KB: And capable. [LS: Yes.] KB: So, if you were going to wave a magic wand, how would you change the current situation?

LS: Wow! That's a tough one. It doesn't solve right away. It's takes a, it's a long way to go yet. I've been watching people with disabilities protest and just everything and I just hmmm. I look, I compare to other states. Other states, the deaf communities, they have a strong deaf community. But right now, recently, grass roots organization just, just popped up about two, three years ago. Other states are involved and they're pulling up their sleeves and getting to work. Hire me. It's…not deaf, I have skills. Here, in Delaware, only four or five people showed up. I was working, I'm a state employee, so I couldn't do it. I have to be very careful and stay neutral.

So, it's not gonna be solved right away. It depends what's the most important thing. I encourage the deaf community, I mean the deaf people, to register to vote. It's important. If you register they will listen to you. If you're not registered, they're not gonna listen to you. So…

KB: So, what else? Anything else you wanna say for the good of the cause?

LS: I want the deaf community, the people who are deaf, to use sign. And hard-of-hearing as well. Get involved together. Don't be separated. Be united together, to work together. Be on the same page. And what are the issues that you really want to take care of, to show the legislation? Both Delaware and United States Congress, both. Not just only here. But more work closely with the legislation. We need to have improvement here for the deaf community.

KB: If someone was to take a message to Legislative Hall, what legislation would you like to see?

LS: Two things. If I wasn't a state employee – if I wasn't – I would tell them increase employment. Hire deaf people. Gallaudet graduates, NITD – National Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York. They graduated, they're looking for jobs. They have a degree. Hire them! And people from high school, hire them! Increase employment training, to help them, to keep them into jobs. That needs to increase.

And doctors, private doctors. North to south. I respect the person, please respect the person, when they request for communication. It's life and death with these people. They need communication, they need to understand what their health issues are. And so many, they're just overlooked. I just had a chat… Well, in the deaf community, the Beef and Beer party, I was chatting with one person, and they never asked for an interpreter, but they struggle with their health issues. And I said "Hey, you need to ask for an interpreter so they can explain better to you. Then you will understand and then you will follow the doctor's orders. Did you understand writing back and forth?" "No." "Well, you're missing a lot of information."

I explained to them, ask for an interpreter. And they're afraid, they're afraid to ask. No, no. ADA says. My cousin who is deaf: you need to ask for an interpreter. Those are the two things that I would tell the legislative. Increase jobs, hiring deaf people. Hire interpreters, don't block the interpreters. Bring an interpreter in. Those are the two top things here in Delaware.