

Interviewee: Jessica Perley
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Date of Interview: February 18, 2008
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Abstract: Jessica Perley was born March 28, 1986 in Worcester, MA to Eugenia Maria Sylvia Bandilla-Perley-Jackson and Jeffrey Lee Perley, Sr. Jessica is the younger of two children born to the couple who later divorced. Jessica's older brother, Jeffrey, is four years older than she is. Jessica's father remarried and she now has two half siblings, Sheldon and Sassie, to whom she is very close. Jessica has spent her whole life in Worcester and as a child she attended two mainstream schools, McGrath Elementary School and Accelerated Learning Lab, before transferring to The Learning Center for the Deaf at age sixteen. She is currently taking time off from Quinsigamond Community College but hopes to complete her education soon with a degree in either nursing, certified deaf interpreting, or teaching. Her love of helping others, apparent in her choice of majors, can also be seen in her job. Jessica currently works for Advocates Inc. that is dedicated to assisting people with disabilities to overcome challenges in obtaining homes, meaningful work, and satisfying relationships. In the interview Jessica stressed the difficulty she feels in finding her identity. She was raised in the hearing world, as her entire family is hearing, and she was placed in mainstream education programs for the majority of her childhood. However, after experiencing Deaf culture at The Learning Center, Jessica feels that she identifies with the Deaf community.

Katie Corrigan: Hi. My name is Katie Corrigan.

Jessica Perley: Hi. My name is Jessica. This is my name sign.

KC: Jessica, welcome.

JP: Thank you.

KC: You were born when?

JP: I was born here in Worcester. Do you mean the specific date?

KC: Yes.

JP: Okay. March 28, 1986. So, I was born here.

KC: 1986.

JP: That's 86, yes.

KC: Yeah, same as me.

JP: Cool.

KC: Were you born deaf?

JP: Yes, I was born deaf. My mother has symptoms of...hold on let me just check the name...Waardenberg's syndrome. For example, she has a white streak of hair in the center of her head. She's young, but she does have a white streak. Also, she has very distinctive green eyes. We have no idea if she's passed this on to me, but if I'm a carrier and I have children, I could give it to my children.

KC: I see. It's interesting.

JP: Yep.

KC: Tell me about your family—your parents, brothers, and sisters. Tell me some stories.

JP: Okay. My parents were married when I was born. But, when I was about two they decided to separate. And, ever since then I've lived with my mother. I also have one older brother. His name is Jeffrey.

KC: How old is he?

JP: Let me see, I'm 21, so he's 25 now. He's four years older than I am. And, my mom has taken care of me my entire life with no support. I never had a father figure in the home. And, my father actually remarried to a woman named Jennifer. She's my stepmom. And, they have two children together, my brother and my sister. And, I love them. My mom's a very strong person. She likes to do things on her own without any help. And, when I was born she was shocked that I was deaf because everyone in my family is hearing. I'm the only deaf person.

KC: Wow, the only one.

JP: Yep. So, she's taken care of me. She's been a great role model for me.

KC: I see. Were you raised orally or manually?

JP: Yes, I was raised orally. My mother preferred that I speak so that I could communicate with her. And, growing up she had heard that if you raise a deaf child orally, they'll have more opportunities, more exposure to the hearing world. So, my mom taught me to speak so that I could communicate with her and my family. However, if I'm out talking to a person that I've never met before it's tough to communicate with them because I don't know their voice and they don't know mine. My family knows my limits though, so it's easier for me to communicate with them; although, it is still tough. I

realized, about 16 or 17, that I had been raised oral all my life and I didn't know sign. So, I knew part of me was deaf, but I just wanted more exposure to the culture and to meet deaf people, meet people like me. I thought it would be nice for me to be involved in the deaf school. My junior year I transferred to the Learning Center.

KC: Oh, yeah.

JP: Two years. It was the best time.

KC: Wow, I didn't know that.

JP: Yeah.

KC: Did your family learn sign?

JP: Well, it's a bit complicated. My mother only knows how to fingerspell. She refuses to sign.

KC: Really?

JP: Well, she struggles to understand sign language, so it's really tough for her. I've always encouraged her to learn. She's not comfortable with it though. I respect that. And, I'm willing to communicate with her speaking, but sometimes I don't want to talk. I hate talking. Growing up, my brother never signed. But, then after he graduated he wanted to learn. It was a bit overwhelming at first. He knows basic sign language. My dad, who lives in Canada, he signs. It's kind of strange to see like my dad really signs well. And, sometimes he asks me how to sign things and I'll tell him and we go back and forth like that. He's really motivated to learn. We communicate really well. I actually communicate with him better than I communicate with my mom. We speak and I sign with him, so it's changed.

KC: Where did you go to school before transferring to the Learning Center?

JP: I actually went to McGrath School, elementary school. That's in Worcester. I don't know the specific place. And that's up to sixth grade.

KC: Oh, you were in mainstream?

JP: Yep, I was mainstream. And then after sixth grade, I transferred to the A.L.L School.

KC: Oh, yeah. I know that school.

JP: I was there about four years, five years. But, I was, besides another student, we were the only two deaf students there. There was no community, no peers for us. Sometimes we wanted to kill each other, but actually that student ended up being my best friend. So, I was mainstreamed all my life growing up and I wasn't happy. I was just suffering through it. And, then one of my teachers finally encouraged me to transfer to the

Learning Center. And, I thought, “Why not?” So, I did and I loved it. There was so much sign going on. It was overwhelming.

KC: Oh, yeah. I know.

JP: But, I start learning. So, I transferred to the Learning Center my junior year and I picked it up. It was overwhelming, but...

KC: I know. I’m an intern at the Learning Center.

JP: Really, cool.

KC: In a high school English class. Do you know Rich?

JP: Yep, I know him.

KC: And, Casey? She’s a new teacher there.

JP: Cool.

KC: It’s completely overwhelming.

JP: Yeah, I know how that feels.

KC: I just sit there and stare. So now where do you go to school?

JP: Right now I go to community college. I’ve been there for about two years. Well, actually right now I’m taking a break. I have some home issues that I need to work out. I really do want to go back again, but I’m not sure if I want to be in a mainstream program. I’ve been mainstreamed all my life, so it’s really hard to find a place that I fit in—my niche. It’s tough for me because I’ve been raised in a hearing world and I’m deaf. I did enjoy it though, but I really would like to go to Gallaudet.

KC: Really?

JP: Yeah, maybe next year. I do have to go back to college. I really want more exposure to the deaf community, deaf culture.

KC: What’s your major?

JP: Well, right now I have three things I’d like to pursue: teaching, certified deaf interpreting, or nursing.

KC: Wow.

JP: Yeah. Well, when I went to community college I was taking all these classes, and I just realized a lot of things that I didn't want to do. I kept on changing my mind time after time. But, I did learn that I really would like to help people. You know, like people with mental retardation or other disabilities. I love taking care of people.

KC: Oh, that's nice. Growing up, did you always live in Worcester?

JP: All my life, never moved.

KC: Does your family still live here?

JP: Yes, my family does still live here. Before, when I was growing up we all lived together. We were a really close-knit family. Then, when I was about 12 or 13, we started to spread out and move to other places. My aunts and uncles moved to Auburn and Brockton and I don't even know the places, but they're far. We're all far from each other now. And, I really miss the time when I could just walk over to my aunt or my uncle's house. It was nice. Everyone's spread out now. I have to travel an hour just to see them. It's tough.

KC: Do you still live with your family?

JP: Yes, I do live with my family.

KC: Is it hard?

JP: Yeah, it's tough. For example, sometimes I want to be independent and on my own, but I have to have patience because I'm still a college student. I recently got a new car. It's hard for me sometimes. But, I did ask my parents to respect what I want, to respect that I'm going to be on my own soon. They need to realize that. But, I do have a lot of learning to do, like how to pay the bills and the rent.

KC: That's true. I know.

JP: Yeah.

KC: Do you volunteer or work?

JP: I used to volunteer when I was in middle school—in high school, not so much. I got involved in a program where I would teach hearing students how to sign, so I was involved in different activities doing that. I also babysat some of my teachers' children on a voluntary basis.

KC: I babysat too.

JP: And, I'm also involved in a program in which I babysit deaf children of hearing parents. When their parents take the sign language class I babysit their kids. I do a lot of volunteer work, mostly babysitting.

KC: Do you work now?

JP: I do work now. I was working at McDonald's before, but it really wasn't good communication access for me. It was tough. So then, I transferred to Target. That's another sign for Target.

KC: Oh, Target.

JP: And, there's four other deaf employees there.

KC: Oh, really.

JP: Yeah, so it's really great. Actually, my boss has a deaf daughter. She went to the Learning Center. She was a student there. So, my boss knows sign. And, it's great working there. It gives me communication access. I've been working there about one year, and it's been a great experience.

KC: What do you like to do?

JP: What do I like to do? Hmm, well like what? Can you give me an example?

KC: What are your hobbies? Reading? Writing? I don't know, whatever.

JP: I really like to write poems. Poetry is something that I love. I write love poems and funny stories about my parents. Like for every year for Valentine's Day and Mother's Day, I love writing poems. I like to express my feelings. So, I like to write. I also like to read.

KC: Yeah, so do I.

JP: And, I've been playing basketball for most of my life. I think I started when I was in fourth grade, and ever since I've been playing basketball.

KC: Me too. What position?

JP: Center forward.

KC: Oh, me too because we're so tall.

JP: Yep, we're tall. My first basketball team was a hearing team. I was always on a hearing team. It was tough to communicate, but we got around it. Sometimes I would feel like the girls were afraid to come approach me and talk to me. But, I taught them some

basketball signs and we got by. And, then I transferred to the Learning Center to an all deaf team and wow. It was just...before I felt I fit in with the hearing girls and now I had to fit in with this new deaf world. It was so tough for me. I really did try to pick up signs, but I was really far behind. And I always identified myself with the hearing world and I felt alone, like I didn't know any other deaf people. So when I got to the deaf world it was really hard for me to find a balance between the hearing world I always knew and this new deaf world. Because I always thought that deaf people had hard times getting jobs because they couldn't speak and I can talk. So, I thought, "Hey, I'll get a job." It's really frustrating for people who are completely deaf because they don't have easy access to employment. So, I try to respect deaf culture and also at the same time I have to respect hearing culture. I feel like I'm stuck in the middle between my hearing family and all my deaf friends. It's really tough for me to find a balance. For example, sometimes I have a hard time identifying myself. I can talk. Am I hard-of-hearing? Am I deaf? I don't know who I am. I recently found out that as I get older I can start losing my hearing even more. I can become completely deaf without being able to hear anything. So, I'm really trying to figure out who I am. Am I hearing? Am I hard-of-hearing? Am I deaf? I really struggle with that question.

KC: Wow.

JP: Yeah. Sometimes people look at me and say, "Oh, that's Jessica. She's hearing." And I have to tell them, "No, I'm deaf. I can still talk, but I'm deaf." A lot of people don't understand that. It's really tough.

KC: Yeah. Were you friends with mostly hearing kids growing up?

JP: Well, my best friend, Leo, is deaf. We were mainstreamed together and we've been friends ever since. I also have some low-functioning deaf friends, and they're still my friends. It's good. I do like meeting people, but I've met a few bad eggs in my life that I try to avoid. I've met a lot of girls on my hearing basketball team and in my mainstream classes. I realize that people are so fascinated by sign language. They always want to learn, so I would make friends that way. Then, when I transferred to the Learning Center, I have a lot of friends there, of course.

KC: Tell me about Worcester.

JP: Worcester.

KC: Do you like it? Not like it? What do you think?

JP: I do not like Worcester. Well, my mom told me that when I was born Worcester was a bad area, a dangerous place to live. And, I grew up in that dangerous place. A lot of people were killed. There was gun violence. People's houses were being burned down, people were being raped, a lot of crime, yeah. I feel like the people just don't care about their environment. They destroy things and they leave their houses burned down. They don't take care of anything. All they think about is money.

KC: Yeah, that's true. So, in the future you want to move?

JP: Yes, I would love to move. My goal is to get out of Massachusetts.

KC: Exactly.

JP: I am fed up with Massachusetts, all the problems, the drama. I'm done.

KC: Well, we're finished. Thank you so much.

JP: Thank you.