

Interviewee: Dennise Scott  
Interviewer: Lauren Spadaro  
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Northeastern University  
Date of Interview: May 8, 2007  
Location: College of the Holy Cross



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**Abstract:** Dennise Scott was born in Washington, D.C. in 1951. She was born deaf and describes growing up within a deaf family. Currently she is married and has two hearing children. In this interview she relates what it was like learning to communicate with sign language, going to a school for deaf children, and then attending Gallaudet. Dennise also explains the difficulties communicating in everyday situations and how she enjoys her job teaching ASL at the College of the Holy Cross.

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Lauren Spadaro: What is your name?

Dennise Scott: My name is Dennise Scott

LS: Where were you born?

DS: I was born in Washington, D.C.

LS: When were you born?

DS: In 1951

LS: Where did you grow up?

DS: I grew up in a town called Rockville in Maryland

LS: Did you move around a lot when you were growing up or did you stay in Maryland?

DS: I stayed in Maryland until I was about twenty-four or twenty-five years old, and then I moved away.

LS: Where did you move?

DS: I moved to California

LS: How long have you lived in California?

DS: I lived in California for about eighteen years.

LS: And then you moved to Worcester, or...?

DS: Yes, well, when I moved here, I moved to Western, Ma in a town called Munson.

LS: I see, tell me about your family growing up, is your family deaf? Do you have any brothers or sisters?

DS: Well my whole family is deaf, my parents are both deaf, their parents are both deaf, and on my father's side I am the fourth generation to be born deaf, on my mother's I'm the third generation to be born deaf. My child, no. Were born with hearing.

LS: You said your children are hearing? How old are they?

DS: Yes, I have two sons, the older which is twenty and the younger is sixteen. Both of them are hearing but ASL is their first language.

LS: What are their names?

DS: The older son's name is Dexter, and the younger is Derek.

LS: When you were growing up, what did your parents do for work?

DS: Well my mother works for the government in Washington, D.C and my father works for the government printing office there.

LS: Well I see, that's cool. Growing up, how did you communicate at home?

DS: Well everyone in my house was deaf so we definitely sign to each other all of the time.

LS: Did you communicate the same way with your whole family?

DS: Yup, my whole family signed, all the time.

LS: How did you communicate with your friends growing up?

DS: Well with my deaf friends, it was definitely easiest for us to sign with each other. When we were interacting with people who weren't deaf, sometime we try to teach them sign language, we finger spell, some people prefer to write back and forth or gesture and it really depends on the person. Everyone learns in different ways, some people are enthusiastic to learn sign and others just prefer to write because it's easier and uninteresting learning to sign.

LS: In your family who do you feel closet with and why?

DS: Well I'm definitely close with both of my parents. They're definitely different people, so I can have great conversation with my father and also great conversations with my mother and when the three of us get together we all get along great.

LS: Tell me about your hearing loss, do you have any use of the hearing or you don't hear nothing at all.

DS: Well I was born deaf, grew up in a family deaf, that's the way I've lived, never used any kind of assisted listening devices, just deaf period.

LS: What is it like deaf in a hearing world?

DS: Well I definitely was born into a deaf world and I grew up in a deaf world, but I do live in a hearing world and I have to deal with hearing people on a regular basis, you know sometimes with my neighbors or when I go to work.

LS: If you could think of one person to be your role model who would that be?

DS: My role model would be my aunt, she was recently divorced, she has three children, but she is a full time mother and after that she decided to go back to school, get her masters and PHD and so I'm trying to follow in her footsteps and I recently finished getting my BA and my MA as well.

LS: That's cool, where did you go to school?

DS: I went to the Maryland School for deaf students.

LS: Is that a residential school?

DS: Yup

LS: How did you communicate at school?

DS: Well I was very lucky. In my school we used sign to communicate in the dorms and in the classrooms. All of my classes did require that we have some oral training, but for the most part all of my other classes we were signing with the teachers and each other.

LS: Were your teachers deaf?

DS: Some of the teachers were deaf, some of them weren't but all of my teachers could sign

LS: Tell me about your experiences in school.

DS: Well in Maryland School for the deaf was like family for me. At home I couldn't play with the other kids, but at school there was so many other deaf students for me to socialize with, it was great, it just felt my brothers and sisters.

LS: Did you have full access at school?

DS: Yes absolutely, a while ago there was no such things TTY's or Pedit Captions, there was no such thing as professional interpreters and so we had to depend on people that we knew that were hard of hearing that could hear of little bit to interpret for us, but there was no formal interpreting.

LS: What is your most positive memory looking back at the school?

DS: When I look back at my time in school, my best memories were socializing with the other kids. Definitely being able to sign with them and being involved in theater, and sports and all different kinds of activities.

LS: And what was your most negative memory in school?

DS: Definitely my worst experiences were having care takers who weren't deaf and couldn't sign and so communication was just awful at that time and as I was older it definitely got better and we had houseparents that were deaf and so communication was great, but between the ages of 5 and 11 there was just no communication and it was horrible, there was no accessibility.

LS: Growing up, did you play any sports?

DS: Yes, I was involved in track, basketball, volleyball

LS: Were your coaches deaf?

DS: My coaches were all hearing and they really couldn't sign.

LS: So how did you communicate?

DS: Uhhh, really, it was horrible. A lot of my coaches thought that they could sign, but they couldn't, they were just so awkward and we really had to depend on each other to figure out what the coaches were trying to say and that's how we got through with what we were doing.

LS: Were you involved in any other activities for example, Girl Scouts or drama?

DS: Yeah, I was involved in a science cam, in theater, cheerleading, and a girl scouts group called Brownies, it's different than regular girl scouts, but the group I was in was Brownies. And I was also involved with a lot of different organizations.

LS: And the directors and teachers involved in your activities were they deaf or were they hearing?

DS: I remember my theater director was deaf, my cheerleading coach was hearing, it really, it depended on the activity.

LS: If your director was hearing how did you communicate?

DS: They could sign

LS: Did you go to college?

DS: Yes, I went to Gallaudet University, I was there for four years.

LS: What was your major?

DS: Sociology

LS: Tell me a little about your experiences at college and how it was different than the Maryland School for Deaf.

DS: Well in my residential school everyone was the same. All grew up together since we were five years until we graduated so we all knew each other, and going to Gallaudet everyone was so different, students came from all over the place. Their styles were different, they had very different backgrounds. Some people were oral, some could sign, some knew English, some didn't, some people were stuck up, it was very different, it was really interesting.

LS: What was your first job?

DS: My first job was at Gallaudet. I worked at a bar. I was a bartender; I also made and served pizza. So that was my first work experience.

LS: How old were you?

DS: I was around nineteen or twenty.

LS: What do you do for work now?

DS: Currently I'm a full time teacher, I teach ASL at Holy Cross and I also work for Sorenson, I go to deaf people's houses and I help them set up the equipment to use the video phones and I teach them how to use them. I'm also a deaf interpreter, so I get calls a lot for medical situations, schools, different jobs like that. I help to facilitate communication between hearing interpreters and deaf people.

LS: In your experience in the work place, what is the communication like?

DS: Back when I worked for the government, communication was terrible. A lot of people didn't understand deafness, they didn't understand deaf culture and at that time there was no interpreters, so we had to write back and forth to each other, it was very difficult, but here at Holy Cross it's great, I have full access, there's always interpreters whenever I need one. If I have a meeting with another teacher or students, I can request an interpreter and get one, it's great, and a lot of the students here learned sign language so I'm able to communicate directly with them.

LS: If you could change one thing about the workplace what would you change?

DS: I would want to change; I would make it so everyone could sign.

LS: Tell me about your experiences with the health care system.

DS: Well my experience with the health care system, if I ever have a doctor's appointment, I need an interpreter. If I show up for the appointment and there is no interpreter I refuse to go on with the visit. I need to know what's going on in that visit and my doctor knows me now; he knows to make sure there is an interpreter. It's important for me know what's going on. If the doctor is examining me and then doesn't tell me anything, I need to know if I'm OK I need to know what he found. I need to make sure I'm in good health, so I need an interpreter to explain all those things.

LS: What kind of communication problems do you find occur if you don't have an interpreter?

DS: Well quite a bit. We have to write back and forth sometimes and it's difficult to understand some people have bad handwriting or I don't understand what they mean and then we have to write even more. It's not easy at all.

LS: How do you feel that an interpreter helps the doctor-patient relationship?

DS: It's great. It's very great. The interpreter just facilitates the communication between me and the doctor and I get all the information, it's great I have a good relationship with the doctors.

LS: If you need to make an appointment for a doctor or doctor appointment, how would you make it both when you were growing up and now?

DS: It's very different. Back when I was growing up, if I need to make an appointment with a doctor or any other appointment, I would have to go to my neighbor's house and ask them if they could call for me to make the appointment. So we would have to write back and forth talking about the date the time and try to find a time that fits, but I felt like they knew too much about my personal life, it wasn't private. But nowadays it's easy. I can use the video phone, the relay system and it's private and it's easier to fit my schedule. It's a lot easier than it was back then growing up.

LS: Great, if you could change one thing about the health care system, what would you change?

DS: I wish the health care system provided interpreters all the time. If there was an emergency and I had to go into the hospital I wish there was an interpreter there already.

LS: Can you describe for me what deaf culture is?

DS: Well deaf culture is a lot of things. It means long goodbyes, people cherish the times together. It is a very close community. You know everyone knows each other; it's very very close community.

LS: What does deaf culture mean to you?

DS: To me deaf culture means signing because ASL. And I have a lot of deaf friends and it's great. The deaf world itself is very small but everyone knows each other, it's wonderful.

LS: Do you go to any deaf clubs?

DS: I used to go back when I was growing up; I'd go to deaf clubs quite often. I was actually president of a deaf club when I was in California. It was the Oakland Club and I went there for many years but now unfortunately a lot of deaf clubs are closing. You don't see as many people meeting because there's a captioned movie, there's different technology, and people are mainstreamed. Residential schools for the deaf are closing so I really don't know where to go now.

LS: When you used to go to the deaf clubs what kind of activities did you do there?

DS: Well we did all sorts of activities. We would have parties; we played games, played cards, theater -- all different things.

LS: What would you recommend to help the hearing community and the deaf communities come together and work together better?

DS: Well they need to work together. It would be great if the hearing community could learn sign language and deaf people could teach them and deaf people need to be patient with hearing people who are learning sign language and having an interpreter helps too.

LS: What are your feelings about cochlear implants?

DS: Well I'm definitely against cochlear implants. Unfortunately with new technology many babies are being implanted and I think they should wait until they grow and decide for themselves if they want to get implanted or not. When babies are born they are not ready to be implanted. It's just not right. I'm very against it. Many people get implanted

and then they're sorry they did and then they wish they were deaf. I think people should make their own decisions. It's just not fair.

LS: This semester of your internship working with Dr. Lee, who was a cochlear implant surgeon here in Worcester, he works at UMass Hospital. Now on my internship, I see a lot of babies who are only twelve months or fifteen months and they're being implanted, what do you feel is an appropriate age for a person to decide if they wanted implants?

DS: I think someone needs to be eighteen years or older.

LS: Great, thanks.

DS: Thank you.