

Interviewee: Deborah Sinkis
Interviewer: Stefan Swiadadas
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Abstract: Deborah Mary Sinkis was born in Worcester, MA and has an Irish and Russian heritage. Her father was a roofer and her mother was a hairdresser. She is a grandmother of two and a Worcester public school teacher and principal. Deborah attended St. Paul's School, Notre Dame Academy, Worcester State College, and was a Hiatt Fellow at Harvard University. She earned her doctorate from University of Massachusetts Amherst. In this interview she discusses what it was like to start losing her hearing at the age of 21 and how it affected her chosen career. Deborah learned American Sign Language and underwent experimental cochlear implant surgery in 1985.

Stefan Swiadadas: What is your full maiden name and married last name?

Deborah Mary Sinkis: My full name is Deborah Mary Sheneck, my married name Sinkis.

SS: Where were you born?

DMS: Worcester Massachusetts.

SS: How many children?

DMS: I have one son, Russell, who is 36 years old.

SS: And where does he live?

DMS: He lives in Auburn with us.

SS: Do you have any grandchildren?

DMS: Two grandchildren. I have a granddaughter, Leanne, who is 5 years old and a grandson, Tyler, who is 3.

SS: What culture or ethnicity do you identify with yourself?

DMS: My mother was Irish and my father is Russian. A combination of Irish/Russian.

SS: Have you ever been married?

DMS: Yes. My husband is dead.after 36 years.

SS: Now can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

DMS: My father was born here in Meriden, Connecticut. Son of Russian immigrants, and he lived in Meriden until his probably early teens and then came to Worcester and he worked his whole life as a roofer, the DHin Worcester and he retired from that. My mother owned her own business, she was a hairdresser, and she had a beauty shop for 27 years on Cambridge Street, very close to Holy Cross College. My mother passed away in 1986.

SS: So you have lived in Worcester your life about what area in the city, what neighborhood did you grow in?

DMS: I grew up in South Worcester, St John's Road, beside the cemetery off of Cambridge Street. I lived there until I was about 11 years old, and then my parents bought a house in Auburn but it's like the second house across the Auburn Worcester line, so it's still very closely connected to Worcester.

SS: So you live in Auburn currently. Do you have other family members in the area, beside yourself and your family?

DMS: Yes. I'm an only child. My mother, however, had 10 brothers and 2 sisters. Sorry 10 brothers and 1 sister. There were 2 girls and 10 boys, and most of them lived in the area for most of their lives. My father only has 1 sister now, who lives in Maine and a brother who lives in Milano.

SS: Wow big family. What challenges does the city still face and what would you change about the city?

DMS: Right now, of course being an educator, the biggest challenge that we see is the, probably education, to the extent that we need to provide a good solid education for all of the children in the city, so that they can be prepared to take on their own lives in the future.

SS: Now what distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is today?

DMS: I think the basic thing that makes Worcester the place that it is, is the numerous colleges in the area. You have a multitude of educational institutions, and they really add a great deal of character to the city.

SS: On my way here I must have passed half of them. Now growing up, what schools did you attend here in Worcester?

DMS: I attended St. Paul's School, a Catholic school in the community, the Cathedral,

from first grade until eighth grade. Then I attended Notre Dame Academy, an all girl's college preparatory school.

SS: Now is St. Paul's School still open here in Worcester?

DMS: No it is not, it is closed.

SS: How about the Notre Dame?

DMS: Yes it is still open and it is still an all girl's college prep school.

SS: And you continued after high school? And where did you go?

DMS: Yes, I went to Worcester State. And I completed a Bachelor's Degree there in 1970 and then I completed a Master's Degree there, in 1977 and then I completed a CAGS there in 1981. Those were my schools in the city. Then I went out of the city for the rest of my education.

SS: Where did you go?

DMS: Then I attended Harvard; I was a Harvard Hiatt fellow. James Hiatt had an endowment with the city of Worcester to send one school administrator to Harvard for an advanced degree, and the time I was computer coordinator for the City of Worcester Public Schools, and I went to Harvard for a year to get a degree in technology and education, and after that I finished my doctorate at University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

SS: That is a very impressive resume. What were your challenges while you were being educated in the higher levels? Did you have any challenges?

DMS: Basically I began losing my hearing at the age of 21, which meant, immediately after I finished college and I had prepared -- as a young kindergarten teacher I began to lose my hearing -- so the career which I was prepared was not going to be appropriate for me in the long run. So that is probably why I collected all those degrees. The next degree, I was in the middle of getting my degree for my Master's in Early Childhood Education. My senior year from Worcester State was in Curriculum Instruction, which is a bit more removed from day to day teaching. My feeling being that I could cling to text book review or something like that, but it would be less interacting with students. During that time, in the early 80's, computers came into the Board of Education, and at that time in the 1980's, computers had no speech capabilities, so I thought that would be a good match for me. I became more proficient in computer learning materials, and in addition to the formal degrees that I had, I also went to Worcester Tech and some took some courses in Computer Programming and Nichols College and then moved into a computer area where I was computer assistant instructor, so I used computers with students to tutor them in subjects that they were having difficulty, but getting back to what the difficulty was, the difficulty for me in graduate school was understanding my professor, so as my

hearing began deteriorating, that's when I began to learn sign language so I could still go into a class and understand what was happening with the interpreter, so from my degree from Harvard and my degree at the University of Mass then I used sign language interpreters exclusively in my classes, because by that time, I was completely deaf, and could not understand what was happening in the classroom. So I think that was the biggest challenge.

SS: And you have overcome that challenge and what support networks in mentoring have been.....to you while you were being educated, did you have a particular support network with anyone while being educated?

DMS: Yes to a certain extent. I tried to search out in the community in various resources that would be helpful to me. There were not that many that were specifically geared towards late-deafened adults. Most services were particular to someone who had been deaf from birth. Like the Center for Living and Working, or the Mass Rehab, those types of things. So it was difficult in finding my own way. The other interesting thing is that my mother's family the same hereditary deafness, struck other members of the family, so my grandmother was deaf, my mother was deaf, her 10 brothers were deaf. The other one sister was not. However, all of them were late deafening so they did not identify it as being culturally deaf. None of them sign, none use any assisted devices basically depended upon their spouse for interpretation for what was happening around them. The result being, many of them ended up divorced, because the lack of good communication, a lot of it was lack of communication, so, unfortunately, a lot of what I learned or reacted to was a reaction against the poor role models rather than a good role models, so I would look at people and say that's not what I want for myself, so I would go in another direction.

SS: When did you actually learn ASL, how long did it take you to acquire it?

DMS: I'm sorry what.....?

SS: When you took sign, like, how long did it take you to really have a good understanding about it?

DMS: When I went to the Center for Living and Working, my initial sign language classes, my husband went with me, my son went with me, and that gave me the basic, but I actually learned by doing. When the interpreters would come to my class, and it was an immersion into sign language, so you would have to follow along and being deaf to me is like doing this gigantic puzzle quickly, a little bit of this and a little bit of that and you try to make the whole picture come together. So I had a little bit of auditory, and some of the sign, and I had an idea of what the subject was and I quickly put it together and make sense of the whole thing, so every bit of information that I got, no matter how I got it, was helpful to me.

SS: When did you decide to have the cochlear implant, implanted in you?

CMS: I was a student at Harvard in graduate school, this is in 1987, and if you go to Harvard by the T, the red line takes you there, and if you look out the window on the red line, you go right by Mass Eye and Ear, so everyday back and forth I would go by Mass Eye and Ear, and my mother had asked before she died, which was in 1986, that I have her temporal bone removed and sent to Mass Eye and Ear to study because she was very concerned about the reason for the family deafness. So I did that, and going back and forth, I decided I would go in and talk to those people and find out exactly what they had found in actually looking into temporal bones and their structures, and when I did, what they found was that the nerve was intact. My deafness had always been referred to as a nerve deafness when it was not, in fact, a nerve deafness at all. The cochlear being filled with a very clear fluid, over time, the family had a tendency for this fluid to thicken and thicken until it actually hardened and the hearing cells could no longer move or transmit information to the auditory nerve. So the doctors at Mass Eye and Ear explained this all to me, and here my question was: "OK, so now what? What do you have to help this?" and they said: "You know we are just doing some research now on the cochlea implant, which in theory should bypass that and stimulate directly the auditory nerve. Since it was a research project I had to spend six months in preliminary testing, great deal of testing. I had to do personality testing, a whole IQ gathering, and physical testing, etcetera. But I was accepted as who what they thought would be an appropriate candidate. So I made arrangements to finish my degree at Harvard, and then I passed in my last paper at 8:30, and I brought myself to Mass Eye and Ear at 9:00 and went in for the surgery, and they put this first experimental device in and two weeks later I graduated from Harvard and about six weeks later after that then the processor was attached. That's why I came to get [inaudible]

SS: Then you got a second one later on?

CMS: Right, this processor from Mass Eye and Ear was an external device. It was a prototype, it was never accepted by the Government as being a good model, because it went through you skin and it was too much of a chance of being infected. The other models made by Nucleus, which were underneath the skin, were more acceptable. Since this was never accepted by the FDA, then it was not taken over by a company as being something that would be continued over time. It's supported by Mass Eye and Ear and they have done a wonderful job of supporting it. But in some point in time it will be obsolete. I did not want to wake up one morning and find myself totally deaf again. So I made this decision that I would have this ear implanted and wear two. If this is still working why take it out, and then I added this one and the people in the research lab at Mass Eye and Ear working with it for 20 years helped synchronize the two and it works very well for me.

SS: Now are there any difficulties with having the cochlear implant in your daily life, in the morning, or on the telephone?

CMS: There was no difficulty with the surgery or anything like that, everything went very smoothly. The.....situations do very well. On the telephone I can understand people that I know well and I can probably understand other people, however, I've

developed such an animosity to the telephone over number of years that I nearly don't want to use it, because it's been something I haven't been successful with. So I don't quite put myself in a situation where I might not understand something. So if my husband calls, I will talk to him, I have my own cell phone so if I'm someplace I can call my husband or call for help, or what ever I need. I remember being at Harvard one day and the bus back to Worcester was cancelled, and I had no way of contacting my husband. It's a very bizarre feeling not to be able to do something so simple to pick up the phone and call someone. You would have to go to someone and say: "Would you make a phone call for me?" Because I don't present as being deaf, because I was adult deafend, people have no idea why I would be having difficulty. Basically the telephone is the only thing, music I can hear, and understand music, but I prefer the music that I remember because I have a connection to it. I don't particularly like listening to music I haven't heard before because it demands more intense listening and more effort and usually when I want to listen to music I want to relax. I don't want to work hard.

SS: What would you say your favorite musician or group is?

CMS: Simon & Garfunkel. As a matter of fact, after....about three years ago, my son knew the stage manager for Simon & Garfunkel and when they were in the area and he brought me there, back stage, we met with them and I told Art Garfunkel when I was meeting with him, his was the last music I remembered in the 70's before I became deaf, and after I was implanted his was the first music I wanted to listen to, and he was to taken by that. He took his hands and put them on my face, he leaned down and started to sing Scarborough Fair in my ear. It was the neatest experience.

SS: I'm sure you'll never forget that.

CMS: When we go back to my office I'll show you the picture.

SS: Now what brought you hear to the [] School? How long have you been working here?

CMS: I've been working for the Worcester Public School for 36 years, I started as a kindergarten teacher, and then when I lost my hearing, I moved to the computer systems instructor and then computers became more and more important, in the educational field, so I became a computer teacher trainer, I taught other teacher to use computers, expanded even more, I became the computer coordinator for the school system, in charge of the teacher trainers and the technicians, and then I went to Harvard, and got a degree in Technology and Education and when I came back there had been a big budgetary appeal and my job was cut, so that's when I became a principal, and then I was first principal of the Millbury Street School, also very close to Holy Cross. So it seems my whole life revolves around St. James School. I was there for one year. And the principal from this school retired and they had the deaf and hard of hearing program here. So the superintendent specifically [asked me] to move here and be principal at this school. Now that was a very unique experience because the children had never experienced

interacting directly with the principal not through an interpreter. So I was able to understand their sign and make them understand me, and it was wonderful.

SS: So this must have looked up to you as a role model so they could.....

CMS: Yes they did, and I think it also worked to sensitize the staff because all of the strategies they needed to use on a daily basis with their students they also had to use with me, and to look at me, and to speak slowly they had to modulate their voice, they needed to be sensitive to my needs, they were sensitive to my needs because I was their boss, but that sensitivity also overflowed and to the other students as well, so we never had an experience while I was here -- or very little -- of the deaf students being teased or students not accepting a sign language. As a matter of fact, my interpreter, when I didn't need my interpreter directly, that person became a sign language instructor, who was the hearing [inaudible]. So all of the children wanted to sign from kindergarten on up, so that they had at least the basics in sign and they could communicate with the deaf students in the lunch room and outside, it was great.

SS: That was very nice; it must help their self esteem that everyone is in a very supportive environment. Now is the deaf and hard of hearing program still here at this school?

CMS: No, it was moved about six years ago. They built a new school, The Accelerated Learning Academy, that school was going to go from Kindergarten to through grade 12, and it was alsoto an extended day, so big decision was made to move the deaf program there so that the students would have continuity and they would have a larger peer group and the older school could work with younger students, services would be able to be shared so that if an interpreter was absent you didn't have to have someone to go across the city from another school you were right in that same school and they....

SS: I'm doing an internship there right now, and I've seen that when one person if you have a different interpreter so it's not like their left out. It's a nice experience. Do you have anything else to share with us about your involvement in the education field before we wrap up?

CMS: No, I am getting close to my retirement, within the next few years and I hope to teach at the college level. Which I've done in the past as an intern person, and I enjoy very much. So I guess the next stage of my life will be giving some of this information to other people.

SS: Wow that's very nice. Do you have any particular college you might be looking at to stay in the area, or would you move away from here?

CMS: No stay here. My grandchildren are here, my son is here. I'll pretty much stay here. We travel a lot in the summer, my husband was going to Germany, we thought we would go back there to visit his relatives and, but as in living and working full time I'll stay in this area here.

SS: Very nice, well we thank you for taking the time to interview with us and be part of the Worcester Women's History Oral Project and the Holy Cross ASL program so we can better understand how the women were involved here in Worcester. We thank you very much Dr. Sinkss