

Interviewee: Anne Marie Smith
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Abstract: Anne-Marie Smith was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. At the age of 1 ½ years old, she was struck with spinal meningitis, ultimately causing her to become deaf. Anne-Marie Smith now resides in Worcester, Massachusetts and has worked at The Learning Center for fourteen years. She shares the struggles of growing up in a hearing, purely oral family and having to find herself on her own. She also discusses frustrations in her mainstreamed education until her enrollment at a high school residing on Gallaudet's campus. Here she was introduced to a new language as well as various deaf role models. Anne-Marie Smith also reflects upon the shrinking Deaf community within Worcester as well as cochlear implantation influence both in Worcester and TLC.

Catherine Zopf: Hi, my name is Catherine Zopf. This is the Worcester Woman's Oral History Project. And it takes stories from women who live in Worcester about growing up, moving here, about their work here. A lot of different stories. Now, I have – what is your name?

Ann Marie Smith: My name is Ann Marie and my last name is Smith.

CZ: Nice to meet you.

AMS: It's very nice to meet you too.

CZ: Where were you born?

AMS: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

CZ: Tell me about your parents.

AMS: My parents?

CZ: Yup.

AMS: They can hear. My whole family can hear, but I'm not really sure what you want to know about my parents.

CZ: Well maybe about, like, their work.

AMS: Both of my parents are now retired. During winter my mom lived in Arizona and in the summer moved to Chicago. She worked for a blood lab where people would send their blood tests and my mom would analyze it and send the results back. My dad was a business man and he sold life insurance.

CZ: Nice. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

AMS: I have two brothers and two sisters and they can all hear.

CZ: So you're the only deaf one?

AMS: Yes, I'm the only one that's deaf. They also all live in Chicago. I'm the only one that lives outside of the city.

CZ: At home, did you use sign?

AMS: Nope, we talked.

CZ: OK

AMS: We also used gestures sometimes, but recently my sister started to learn how to finger spell.

CZ: Right, right. Growing up, do you remember all funny stories?

AMS: What kind of stories?

CZ: Any funny stories?

AMS: Oh, oh. Well I remember growing up, my family used to speak to me – they didn't sign. Um, and it was really frustrating for me to try and keep up with them. Sometimes I couldn't follow what they were saying so it became really frustrating. But I used to like going to my neighbor's house, and I would go in the house and open the refrigerator and eat all their food as if it were mine. I'd just help myself. This one day, though, I saw a dead bird outside of their house, so I figured it was theirs and I knocked on their door and I said "you're bird died" and I left it for them.

CZ: That's a good one. Are you married?

AMS: I was before.

CZ: So you're divorced now?

AMS: Yes.

CZ: Was your husband hearing or deaf?

AMS: My husband was deaf.

CZ: Do you have any children?

AMS: No, I don't.

CZ: Growing up, where did you live?

AMS: I was born in Wisconsin and when I was around ten, I moved to Michigan. I think about four years later I went to a high school, it was a deaf high school on the campus of Gallaudet University. So I went to high school there, and I graduated, and then I attended Gallaudet University and decided I wanted to stay in Maryland. So I stayed there until I decided to move to Massachusetts.

CZ: Wow, you moved around a lot.

AMS: Yeah, but I'm going to stay in Massachusetts now.

CZ: Yeah, it's nice here. What year did you move to Worcester?

AMS: 1995.

CZ: And then you stayed here.

AMS: Yup.

CZ: Did you move here for work?

AMS: I moved here for school, but I did work to support myself while I was taking classes.

CZ: OK. Do you have any other family that lives near by?

AMS: Nope, nobody.

CZ: Nobody close?

AMS: My whole family – my brothers and sisters – all live in Chicago.

CZ: Oh, that's far.

AMS: Yeah.

CZ: Do you think Worcester has any challenges and what are they?

AMS: Well our deaf community has become a lot smaller over the years and the number of deaf clubs have decreased as well. Not as many people go to the clubs. I feel that if a lot of people did go and socialize in settings where were all together, we'd have a much stronger deaf community and we could establish more deaf clubs but instead, everybody stays home and uses the video phones to communicate and socialize.

CZ: Have you seen any change in Worcester over the past years?

AMS: I've seen a lot more cochlear implants than I have in the past. Children are being implanted younger and younger which is causing for fewer deaf adults. We accept people that have cochlear implants and we want them to be involved, but it's different because they don't – the deaf community signs and people with cochlear implants don't. We just have different ways of communicating.

CZ: Doctors are trying to change them.

AMS: Yes. They've become more reliant on speech and we use signing more.

CZ: Right, right. When did you lose your hearing?

AMS: I lost my hearing when I was about one and a half.

CZ: How'd you lose it?

AMS: I had spinal meningitis.

CZ: When your parents found out you were deaf, when was it?

AMS: When I came home from the hospital from being sick. It was about one or two weeks later, and my parents realized that when people would make loud noises or scream, I didn't react.

CZ: There was nothing.

AMS: Nope. Somebody would drop something or make a loud noise and I wouldn't even look. So one day when I was taking a nap, my parents took pots and pans and banged them together and I stayed asleep. So they decided to have me tested and they found out that I was deaf.

CZ: That you were deaf, right. Do you have to communicate with sign?

AMS: Yes, I like ASL.

CZ: But your family doesn't use sign?

AMS: That's correct.

CZ: Growing up, was it hard?

AMS: It was, communicating was very hard. It was also very frustrating. I was always being punished and I didn't know why. And I couldn't communicate to explain what had happened so it was very frustrating to deal with. But later as I got older and my parents started to learn how to sign, I'd explain what had happened and they felt really bad. They had wished that they had signed back then so they could have understood. Now that my parents live in a different state, I don't see them very often so they don't use their signs as much so they're starting to forget more and more sign language.

CZ: Did you use home signs at all?

AMS: Just a few, we didn't have many.

CZ: Did you finger spell?

AMS: Now we finger spell, but back then we just – they spoke to me or gestured.

CZ: It's very hard.

AMS: Yes. My sister that I'm closest with learned how to sign. You see, I'm the fourth born out of five and I'm closest with my middle brother and sister. And my sister learned how to sign and she used to help explain things to my family and help me communicate with them.

CZ: So you're closest to the middle two because they sign?

AMS: Yes.

CZ: Do you identify yourself as deaf?

AMS: Yes, I'm deaf.

CZ: Did you learn to sign at school?

AMS: I think I learned how to sign when I was around ten years old, but at that time I was at a public school where everybody spoke and the teachers didn't understand signs. Later when I went to the deaf high school, I was around fourteen I think, that's when I really started to pick up sign language.

CZ: When you were in mainstream, did you interact with any students?

AMS: Just a few, there was some other deaf students that went to public school with me.

CZ: So you weren't the only deaf one?

AMS: Nope, I think there was maybe ten other deaf students.

CZ: OK. Do you have a deaf role model? What's the name?

AMS: Yes I do have a deaf role model. I actually have a few.

CZ: Why are they your deaf role models?

AMS: There's one woman in particular that stands out. She understands that growing up – people used to speak to me, so she was always very patient with me and helped me become who I am and helped me learn how to sign and communicate. She also taught me a lot about deaf culture. There's also several other women that worked at the deaf high school that I attended, and they helped me a lot as well.

CZ: So that's a good person to meet.

AMS: They were wonderful people.

CZ: Growing up, did you interact with any deaf adults?

AMS: Well, actually I don't really think I did until high school. Growing up, I didn't really know anybody else that was deaf. I never thought of that though.

CZ: Where'd you go to school.

AMS: First, I went to an elementary school, and then when we moved to Michigan, I went to a public school. And then for high school I went to the Model Secondary School for the deaf on the campus of Gallaudet.

CZ: What year did you graduate Gallaudet?

AMS: 1988.

CZ: What was your major?

AMS: My major was psychology.

CZ: Ah, psychology, same as me. Did you know what you wanted to do before graduation?

AMS: Well, after I graduated from Gallaudet, I decided to work at a group home. And I worked there for about ten years but I knew that really wasn't what I wanted to do. What I really wanted to do was teach. I enjoyed counseling people but my real passion was in

teaching. So I decided to go back to school. I went Boston University and took courses in teaching and then became a teacher. But that's the last time I'm going to change my profession.

CZ: Good, tell me about a normal day here.

AMS: What do you mean by a normal day?

CZ: A normal day, like, what do you do here?

AMS: Oh, well everyday, in the morning I teach English, reading and writing. I have about four students in that class. And then I teach math – three other students in that class. And they're all at the normal level. Then we have social science and then in the afternoon more science and then they go to gym and art classes and the students have library and health. I mean I don't teach all those classes, I just teach the morning – the English and the math and then the science.

CZ: Is that your favorite age group here?

AMS: Yes, absolutely, second – first and second grade.

CZ: Same with me. I help Mary, the art teacher. That's my favorite age group, they're so funny they have great ideas.

AMS: They're so very smart.

CZ: Very smart.

CZ: Are there any challenges that you faced working here at school?

AMS: Yeah, there have been some challenges. For instance, if I have a class of three or four students, they're all different, they're all at different levels so it's really a challenge to teach to them, each individually. If I teach one issue, I have to have different activities for each student so that's definitely a challenge. There may be one student who is very smart but then you have another student who is kinda behind so you – it's difficult to level the playing field for all of the students. Also language is a bit of an issue. There's some students who don't sign at home so their language skills are a little bit behind the others, so it takes time for me to explain things to them, but once we get over the language barrier, then they can start learning but that's a challenge.

CZ: Is there anything you want to change about the educational system, or anything here?

AMS: You mean at this school, or education in general?

CZ: Both.

AMS: Well, this school, I'm very satisfied with.

CZ: Yeah, I love it here.

AMS: But I am worried about how the communication policy will change at the learning center. Outside of class the children are able to talk, but in class they are required to sign. But I'm worried that later the policy will change and that they'll be able to speak in the classroom, but right now I'm very satisfied with education here. It would be nice if other schools were like this school. Really I look at this school and these students and I see how great it is and I know that growing up I really wished to be in a school like this.

CZ: Yeah.

AMS: The kids are so lucky to go here.

CZ: They're really lucky.

AMS: It's a perfect classes, perfect school, the students are great and I really wish I had gone here when I was younger. And if other schools were like this, the education for deaf students would be great.

CZ: Right, right. What do you want to do here?

AMS: What do you mean?

CZ: Like, do you want to be a teacher?

AMS: Yeah, I'm a teacher, first and second grade.

CZ: Did you always want to teach?

AMS: Oh yeah, absolutely.

CZ: Really?

AMS: I mean, understand, my brothers and my sisters – they're all, they work in the business world and I'm the only one who works in the people world, per se. You know, the educational world. And as I said, there's not a lot of communication with my family, so growing up, I didn't really know what anyone did and then later I found out that one of my aunts is a teacher and I didn't know that so I picked her brain for information on the profession and she helped me out a lot with information. But all my brothers and sisters, they work in the business world, you know, investing or you know, it's boring, accounting, marketing – I, I don't really know what it is.

CZ: The kids here are fun.

AMS: Absolutely.

CZ: How long have you worked at the learning center?

AMS: Well, I started out as a teacher's aide and then I became a teacher. So all together, fourteen years.

CZ: Wow, that's a long time.

AMS: Mhmm, I love it.

CZ: Have you had an impact on any of your students, or do you have any stories about that?

AMS: Well, I don't know what the kids say about me. But I know that there's one student in particular and she transferred here from public school, she's very shy. Just incredibly introverted, very quiet and nervous. But with me, she instantly connected.

CZ: That's cute.

AMS: She's good, she's improving as a student and she knows that I'm strict and that I have high hopes. But then later she moved to another class and she really struggled. When she was in my class, it was for one area which was English and she was great, she was excited and she did very well in that. With me, she could learn so much but with in the other classes she really struggled.

CZ: Right, you made an impact on her.

AMS: Exactly.

CZ: You're a woman, so how do you balance like housework, and your job, and everything else you have to do?

AMS: Well, yes, I'm single and I'm not married so I live alone and time management is definitely something that I have to deal with. I have a lot of planning to do. Everyday life I have to plan and then when I come to work I have to plan the school day and when I'm home – more planning. So sometimes I get very fed up with the planning but I have to do it. And if I didn't plan, my life would just fall apart.

CZ: Right.

AMS: I'd wear dirty clothes. Wouldn't have anything to teach.

CZ: Right.

CZ: How would you describe success?

AMS: As a teacher, when I see a student developing and learning, and I see that they have goals and ambitions, academics, social, and their behavior – everything together is improving. That's what I see as success. I don't look at myself, I look at them and see their individual successes. If their English is improving, their behavior is improving. That's what I see as success. If they are excited about school and they're passionate about learning, that's what I see as success.

CZ: Right. You gotta keep them focused.

AMS: Exactly.

CZ: Are you politically active?

AMS: Oh no, I'm pretty politically inept.

CZ: Me too.

AMS: People try to explain politics to me and I pay attention and then the next day I completely forget.

CZ: Yup, I'm the same way.

CZ: Were there any political events that impacted you?

AMS: Well, Obama being elected. That was great. That did impact me.

CZ: That was a big change.

AMS: I've always been a Democrat. My family is very Republican but I've always been a Democrat. And I just think that Obama as our president was – it's great – I think he's going to be a great leader and do great things for this country. That's one event that I can remember.

CZ: Yeah, we need it.

CZ: Do you do any volunteer work in the community?

AMS: No, not really.

CZ: Oh, that's fine.

CZ: Does religious education play over your life at all?

AMS: I try to be involved in religion. Before it played a bigger part in my life but now I'm very busy so I kind of lost track of religion, but I'm trying to get back to it. Before

you asked about involvement in the community and I was involved with a religious group but it wasn't just deaf – hearing people could join too, but no, really I'm not involved but religion, yes. I want to be more involved and I'm trying to get more involved.

CZ: Growing up, did you have any religion classes you went to?

AMS: Mhmm.

CZ: We're they hearing?

AMS: Nope, they were boring, didn't really know what was going on.

CZ: Yup, boring.

CZ: What's your connection to Worcester here?

AMS: Well, I've recently joined the club here. I went to the Christmas party so I'm a new member. And I want to go to more events. I'm excited about joining.

CZ: When you go to doctors, do you have any problems communicating?

AMS: Oh, I always go to the doctor that has an interpreter. I mean suppose if I have sore throat or something simple like that. That's fine, I don't need an interpreter because I can just write back and forth with the doctor. But a physical or a check-up or an eye exam or something bigger then I definitely bring an interpreter.

CZ: Do you have any problems trying to get an interpreter from the doctor?

AMS: Oh no, it's very easy. You just request one and one comes.

CZ: Wow, that's good.

CZ: Is there anything you want to share?

AMS: Um, not really.

CZ: Well thank you very, very much. It was so nice to meet you.

AMS: It was great meeting you too. I really enjoyed talking with you.

CZ: Thank you.