

Interviewer: Samantha Murphy
Interviewee: Amy Szarkowski
Date of Interview: April 8, 2008
ASL Interpreters: Caity Cross-Hansen
Catherine Calender

Salter College student (Transcriber): Victoria Iannazzo
Editor: Nancy Lemerise



Overseen By: Prof. Judy Fask, College of the Holy Cross

Abstract: Amy Szarkowski was born in South Dakota and moved to Oregon when she was ten. She majored in psychology at Southern Oregon State University, earned her master's degree at Eastern Kentucky University, and attended Gallaudet University as a hearing minority. Currently she is a psychology fellow working in a deaf and hard of hearing program at a children's hospital. In this interview, Amy describes her passion for teaching and helping deaf children as a psychologist and a teacher.

Samantha Murphy: All right, first what is your name?

Amy Szarkowski: My name is Amy Szarkowski.

SM: Where are you from?

AS: I'm from Oregon; I was born in North Dakota. Are you familiar with that sign? North Dakota? And then my family moved to Oregon when I was about 10 years old.

SM: Okay, where do you live now?

AS: I'm currently living in Somerville, Massachusetts.

SM: You live near here?

AS: A 25 minute drive.

SM: How about your family; your parents, brothers, sisters, anything?

AS: In my family there is my father, my mother, myself, my younger sister, and my two younger brothers.

SM: Are you the oldest?

AS: Yes, I'm the oldest.

SM: Where did you go to school?

AS: Well, the first college that I went to was South Oregon State College. Then I went to East Kentucky University, and then Gallaudet University.

SM: What was your major in school?

AS: My major was psychology; I'm sorry, clinical psychology.

SM: Did you have a minor?

AS: I minored in health, but really I had two majors, psychology and photography.

SM: How did your education in school lead to you learning ASL and wanting to use ASL?

AS: I'm sorry, could you repeat that?

SM: How did your education in school lead to you working with ASL and wanting to do that?

AS: Well I studied, uh okay well. It was my friend who was 20 years old at the time when her hearing started to decrease and she began learning ASL. Is that what you meant? Is that where you were going with that question? I'm sorry, you asked me about my education in school...

SM: How did you learn ASL? Studying ASL? Was it watching people who were deaf?

AS: It was through experience.

SM: Okay, I understand.

AS: Well, my friend who was 20 at the time, she was adopted. She was raised by her adopted parents. When at 20 years old she went to the doctor and he told her that she would become deaf, well it scared the life out of her. The two of us decided to start taking ASL classes and I just fell in love with the language, with the community, I just loved it right from the beginning. So when I was 22 or 23 I decided that I wanted to work with deaf people.

SM: How did your friend get sick or lose her hearing?

AS: What happened was she had genetic deafness, but because she was adopted, she had no idea. She realized at the age of 20 that her biological parents were actually deaf.

SM: Were you overwhelmed at your experience involved with all of that, being the only hearing person and everyone else around you was deaf?

AS: It was really a great experience, but it was hard at the same time. The first week I worked there, when I was communicating with people I would say it at the same time I was signing and one deaf man approached me and said 'you can't do that here, this is a deaf college, if you wanted to speak you shouldn't have come here.' So that amazed me, but most of my experiences have been positive, it was just that one negative experience early on. Once my signing improved and I became more proficient the community began to accept me.

SM: Is your roommate deaf?

AS: My roommate is also studying psychology, she herself is hard of hearing, but growing up she didn't use sign language. When she did start to learn it, she learned it quickly. But the two of us started Gallaudet but were both a bit nervous since we both were not good signers at the time. I had worked for years at Kentucky Prep School so I thought that my signing was pretty good, but once I entered Gallaudet I realized that were much better signers than I was. When I entered it was a little shaky at first but after I got a little bit better the situation became easier. I went to college for five years, one year I spent abroad though in Italy, so really I only spent four years studying here at Gallaudet.

SM: You're support um, from friends, family, teachers, anyone?

AS: _____

SM: Yes um school.

AS: Well my teachers were wonderful. My family was curious about sign language but they really didn't have any idea about the close rules or like that. My mother said that she was happy that I wanted to help deaf people and that it was great, but they weren't at all involved in the process. My friends were the same way. They didn't know anything about the deaf community or deaf culture, but they were encouraging.

SM: What was your major in school and what was working with deaf children in the hospital different from...

AS: You mean working here at the children's hospital versus other places?

SM: Working here at the hospital different from working with the school?

AS: I've had two experiences working with Gallaudet. I was an advisor for two years to deaf children, and then I was an advisor to other deaf children and adults, and then my current job here at the hospital that I'm dealing with more medical situations now. Such as, children come in who have cancer, and the drugs they are taking to treat it have made

them become deaf, so the reasons that I'm dealing with deaf children here are different than they were before. I deal with more serious medical issues now.

SM: What are your goals here, working with the children?

AS: My goals? Well, I love children, they're just so adorable. I really enjoy working with them. One of my personal goals is to learn more about neurological psychology, I'm currently in training for that now, and it's been a wonderful experience. So to learn more about that is my personal goal. My professional goal is to help the program I am currently in improve. I hope to see more deaf children, currently there are two full time psychologists working here, and I'm a trainee. I hope that by next year I will be a full time psychologist here as well. So really my professional goal is to help this program improve its services for deaf children.

SM: What are your plans after here?

AS: Well I want to work here as a psychologist, but I also love teaching children. Before I came to work here I was a teacher for three years in college, so my hope is that I can handle working maybe part-time as a psychologist and part-time as a teacher.

SM: Cool.

AS: It would be.

SM: Do you feel that learning signs helped you work with the children, community, and parents, families?

AS: Yes. Many families with deaf children don't need ASL. Some have cochlear implants, hearing aids, but I think knowing sign language has helped me a lot. If I meet parents who are wondering what to do with their deaf children; give them cochlear implants, hearing aids, I think that I can give them good information. Maybe if those same parents were to meet another psychologist who didn't have that experience, they wouldn't be able to give them the same kind of help that I can.

SM: Do you feel like you know the culture more since you've learned ASL?

AS: Just a little bit. I'm not yet an expert at sign language, I hope to be, but not yet. I want to continue learning and improve my signing skills. But compared to most psychologists in the Massachusetts area, other places as well, I know a lot about the deaf community, and when other psychologists are dealing with deaf children it can be dangerous not to know anything about the community. Because it's possible that they could refer them to the wrong person, or give them the wrong recommendation, they may blame the deafness for their problems when really it's a totally separate issue.

SM: Do you think its hard working with the parents of deaf children and of hard of hearing who don't understand the language or culture?

AS: I think parents have different levels of accepting their deaf children. When they start out they're really defensive and they may have their child's hearing tested many, many times. They just can't accept that their child is actually going deaf. Then they may begin to accept it more when they begin to learn sign language and when they meet other parents in the same situation as they are. So it really depends on the parents themselves and which level they're at in the process.

SM: How do you feel about cochlear implants? How the culture sometimes doesn't accept them, before it was actually announced, but now?

AS: Well it is regarded that people were very defensive about it. But now the times have changed a bit. Regular deaf people are still pretty defensive, but some, along with other younger deaf people, are realizing that the cochlear implants are occurring more often. They see that if people are inside the deaf community the deaf population has dwindled, but what they need to understand is that when a child has an implant their hearing isn't perfect, they have to go through a lot of training. My personal concern is that implants with children often are mainstream in public school, and they are isolated there and don't have any connections to other students with cochlear implants. That can really be devastating to their self-esteem. The deaf culture is wonderful at boosting a child's self-esteem; it gives them a sense of identity, which I think is important for all children. So my personal hope is that the deaf culture continues to be strong, but at the same time it makes smarter corrections so that deaf children with cochlear implants aren't isolated and that they do feel they have a place where they can connect with each other.

SM: Do you feel it's a hard part of your work?

AS: The hardest thing about working here, well, for example last week I saw a child who had many medical issues. He was deaf, but that was nothing compared to the other problems he had. He was paralyzed from the waist down, he was blind in both eyes.

SM: Blind?

AS: Yeah, he was deaf and blind.

SM: Deaf and blind?

AS: He couldn't control the muscles in his neck, so it wobbled all over. It was hard for me to see that. In my opinion people who are deaf are just fine; there is a lot of educational support that they can do anything. But when someone has so many problems, such as this kid, it's probably the hardest thing for me to see.

SM: Last question. Do you feel like this is a good area to pursue for the future?

AS: Pursue?

SM: Pursue in the future?

AS: You mean besides this interview?

SM: Sure.

AS: Well I really think that in Massachusetts they need psychologists that can work with the deaf. So if you are thinking about, if you're studying psychology and thinking about what to do in the future, working in the deaf community can be a great idea. If you really enjoy working with deaf people it can be very rewarding. If you like to sign and are interested in the deaf community than it's a great option.

SM: Thank you.