

Interviewee: Rosa Lee Timm  
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College of the Holy Cross students  
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Signed History Project

**Abstract:** Rosa Lee Timm is a Deaf actress who currently lives in Worcester MA. She was born deaf in 1976 in a small country town in California. She grew up in a very close-knit, religious, bi-racial, Deaf family whose first language was American Sign Language. With the constant support of her family and the Deaf community around her, her deafness created no communication or social barriers to her throughout her childhood. Rosa Lee attended a state school for the Deaf for her high school years and she graduated from the Rochester Institute of Technology with a B.S. in Social Work. It was at the Rochester Institute of Technology where she discovered her love for acting. She founded and acted in an acting troupe named *Dangerous Signs*. Currently, she stars in a one-woman show that she produced entitled *The Rosa Lee Show*. She is married to a musician/interpreter named Damon Timm and they have one son.

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BH: Hi my name is Brielle Hart, I am from Rhode Island, and I go to the College of Holy Cross in Worcester Massachusetts. I love to act and I love dogs. I am a senior and a theater major.

TH: Hello my name is Tim Harrington and I also go to Holy Cross. I am an English Major. I am from Sturbridge Massachusetts. I play music, I have two brothers, and I am the middle one. Brielle and I are cousins. So, we are here to interview a deaf woman named Rosa Lee Timm. She is a deaf actress who lives in Worcester now. Her work combines music, sign language, and technology. She makes DVD's and videos for the Internet and on YouTube. She has a one-woman show. Her show travels all over the country in many different cities. She focuses primarily on deaf audiences. She calls her show the Rosa Lee Show. We are interviewing with her for The Worcester Women's Oral History Project.

BH: What is the Worcester Women's Oral History Project? Well it started a while ago in Worcester when the city decided that it needed to save and record the experiences of local women.

Volunteers from Worcester interview everyday women that work at home, famous women, important women -- all types of women. The Deaf Study program at the College of Holy Cross thought that in order to have a full history we need to include deaf women in these interviews. Students in the Deaf Study Program interviewed many deaf women asking them about their education, their childhood, their jobs, their families, and many other things.

Now we are able to save these interviews and have a complete Worcester Women's History. So now you are going to watch our interview with Rosa Lee, please enjoy.

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TH: Hello my name is Tim Harrington. I am a senior and I go to Holy Cross. I am an English Major.

BH: Hi my name is Brielle Hart and I am a Senior Theater Major. The two of us are here with Rosa Lee Timm. She is a Deaf actress. We are interviewing her for the Worcester Women's History Project.

TH: O.K. now we are going to start with some basic questions. First of all, your name?

RL: Hi, my name is Rosa Lee Timm.

TH: So when were you born?

RL: When was I born? A long, long time ago. Now I am 33 years old. I was born in 1976.

TH: Great, where?

RL: I was born in California. In a town called Loma Linda -- it's a small city in California.

TH: So you are married.

RL: Yup,

TH: To who?

RL: My husband's name is Damon.

TH: Is he hearing or deaf?

RL: Well, he can hear. He is an interpreter over at UMass Hospital.

TH: Where and how did you meet?

RL: We met at the Learning Center. Every summer the Learning Center has a theater camp. I act in New York and my husband was studying to be a theater major over at Northeastern University -- it's over in Boston. He likes to juggle and ride his unicycle, all different sorts of things. Mostly likes juggling though. So, he came to teach at the deaf camp he came to teach kids how to juggle and I taught acting and little dancing as well. We met there. We have been together since 2000. Yup, about 10 years now. First we were friends, then we dated, and then we were married.

TH: So I see you're pregnant there and with your first baby?

RL: Yes it's my first child. Now this is week 33 that means seven more weeks to go.

TH: When are you expecting?

RL: His due date is April 10<sup>th</sup>.

TH: So do you hope your baby is deaf or not deaf?

RL: Honestly it doesn't really matter all I want is healthy. My husband wants a deaf baby, but he can hear. He thinks that maybe with a deaf baby it will be easy to communicate all three of us together. If the baby could hear, he would be talking and my husband would have constantly reminding him to sign. But really, it doesn't matter just a healthy baby. My husband has known sign language since he was 16 years old. He learned sign language a long time ago. He's really good.

TH: So tell me about your family growing up were they strict, how was it? Tell me about it.

RL: My family, they were really good. Wonderful family. They were very close knit just the five of us. We were different. My father is white my mother is black. My dad's family doesn't like black people. My mother's family all of them can hear. So, she was the only deaf person in her family. So the five of us kind of separated from our respective families and became our own close-knit family. We had a strong religious upbringing we went to church a lot. It was a very positive experience. My family is a wonderful family.

TH: So where you grew up, so what was the neighborhood like?

RL: My area was country area. My house was far away from all the other houses -- there was a lot of room between them. I had a great childhood. I would play outside; we would eat our own fruits and vegetables. We would be able to pick fruit from trees outside. All different sort of fruit trees. We plant our own food, we ate healthy. It was a very safe environment. I am a country girl.

TH: I bet it was beautiful.

RL: Yes.

TH: So how are you connected to Worcester?

RL: Well my husband works at UMass so when the two of us started dating I was working over in Connecticut. I would have to drive an hour, an hour and a half back and forth, back and forth. I was finally fed up so I just decided to move here. So, that is how I am connected to Worcester.

TH: It's a beautiful city isn't it?

RL: No.

TH: So where is your home now?

RL: It's about 10 minutes away from here. Near Holden, it's not very far.

TH: That's where our parents grew up.

BH: Yeah, our parents grew up in Holden.

RL: It's a very nice area I really like it. You should move.

TH: So now we are going to change our focus on deaf questions. So how did you become deaf?

RL: Oh, I was deaf from birth. My dad he is deaf and his family is deaf so I am from a family of many generations of deaf people. It's hereditary.

TH: So you prefer to use sign language obviously?

RL: Yes always. It's my only way of communication -- ASL.

TH: So here is a harder question. Regarding your life growing up as deaf, would you say it was positive or negative?

RL: My experience as being deaf has been positive up until the point of working in the hearing world. It's very frustrating. Before I worked here in Worcester I worked somewhere else where I focused on deaf children helping them find places to go to school, get hearing aids, what doctors to go to. Helping their parents learn sign language explains the best choices for their deaf children. But it's been a frustrating experience. Interpreters, not having proper interpreters or technology such as videophones, pagers not working, communication has been very frustrating. Having meetings with all hearing people and I am the only deaf person so I will raise my hand wait for my turn and everybody else will be talking finally I have to bang on a table or something for their attention. It's really frustrating and it's really frustrating if I am the

only deaf person. And it's my first time really feeling frustrated in Worcester. But before this it was really positive, there was no problem. Communication was just fine living with a deaf family going to a deaf college but now I am the only deaf person and it's a little negative.

TH: O.K. now we are going to change focus again on questions regarding your education. So first, tell me about your education.

RL: When I was younger I was home schooled. Then I transferred because of my religious background. It's very important. It was very important to go to a private school.

TH: Was it a deaf school?

RL: No, it was a hearing school with other students who could hear. But my mom taught me. In the morning I was with students who could hear in a classroom then in the afternoon I went home to be home schooled by my mother. I was in a group with my brother and his friends and my mother would all teach us. But I really wanted more friends. So, then we moved to a State School for the Deaf and I stayed there until I graduated. I went to Gallaudet University and didn't like it didn't like it at all. Remember my religious background and I am a country girl. So, when I got into Gallaudet I was very closed minded and also very young. I would think, "What are these people? That's bad, it's wrong, don't do that." So I left.

Two years later, I was ready to back to school. I went back to RIT (Rochester Institute of Technology) in New York; they have a Deaf college there, NTID (National Technical Institute for the Deaf). I loved it there I stayed until I graduated. My major was social work. After that, I went to graduate school. I studied to be a rehab counselor. After I graduated with a BS in Social Work, I worked in a vocational school rehab. I helped deaf people look for jobs.

TH: O.K. so after graduation what did you do?

RL: After I graduated I worked in vocational rehab for two and half years, over in Connecticut. I worked in a deaf school over there. It was the same track vocational rehab. Then I came here and concentrated on children. But I quit last fall. Now I am self employed.

TH: So looking back at your life who, would you say is the biggest support to you?

RL: My mother, definitely, my mother. If you search on Google and you type in my mother's name a whole list appears with her name of all the things my mother has done for the deaf community. She travels the world and tries to improve deaf education. She's the first culturally person to get a Ph.D. so I really look up to my mom. My mom never gives up, she struggles, and she continues through everything. She always tells me, "Go ahead you can." She just supports me. When I grew up -- growing up I was very sensitive, very emotional. My mom would always tell me stop get over it come on keep going. She's a really good support system for me. If it wasn't for her I just don't know who I would be, I stayed home and cry but with her help I've really come into my own.

TH: O.K. so we have established you're a woman, you're deaf, you're black, you're white how do you define yourself?

RL: Well my identity -- first thing I would list is being deaf. That is really important to me. Second would be woman. And then last bi-racial. I don't feel white or black I feel like a mix like I am both, equally both. So first, I would list deaf woman then bi-racial.

TH: OK. Go ahead Brielle.

BH: OK. Now we are going to focus on your theater career. I know that you're self-employed now. What do you do?

RL: Well my one-woman show started about five years ago. I've been involved in theaters since I was seventeen years old or fourteen, somewhere's in there. Between fourteen and seventeen. I was in a group theater or a theater group and about five years ago I started my one-woman show traveling around the country. My, my name, my business is started to grow and I made a DVD. We sell that, we make contracts. So, if someone is working a project and they need someone to sign it, they will hire me. Oh well, the lights went out, oh there we go. Good we are all set. Technical difficulties, oh, anyways. Do you know the Statue of Liberty in New York? They have a tour but they don't have access for deaf people. They have those hearing monitors where you can listen to the self-tour but where is the access for the deaf people? People from the Statue of Liberty contacted people in California who contacted me and I flew to New York to sign and made a new hand held video device where you could see me signing the tour, welcome to the Statue of Liberty.

TH: That's cool.

BH: Yeah, that's really wonderful.

RL: I finished it last November and now I want to go and see if it works; see it's me! It's me! But that's what I do basically, a bunch of different things.

BH: Why do you like to act?

RL: Hmm, well two reasons really. I started because it was really easy to make friends. I really don't like to make small talk with small groups of people. I really like being in a theater. People are really aggressive and asking your name and really wanting to talk and make a connection. Before I was really shy. And I really like theater because I was able to express my opinion and perspective. And I can express my emotion without really explaining myself. Through art, you can create something and you could leave it for people to ponder it and think about it. You didn't have to make a decision whether you understood it or not. It was like therapy for me. To be able to get out my emotions, you know how some people go the gym and work out? Well I write and play music and I express myself my opinion my feelings through theater. Especially college is a very confusing time for me. Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? I really needed help being able to express all that. But now I am hooked [laughs].

BH: I know that now you are self-employed and before you acted in a theatre troupe. What was the theater's group name?

RL: The theaters group name was Dangerous Signs. We did all sort of different things. Comedy, we signed songs, we danced. We did small shows all over. We traveled to New York, Canada, Maryland. There were many seven of us all together and we acted throughout college. We all helped each other think up ideas, and work together through workshops. It was really fun really great time.

BH: What's your acting name or show name?

RL: My stage name is Rosa Lee.

BH: I saw your website; I saw that you were signing a Michael Jackson song named "Scream."

RL: Yes.

BH: Why did you choose to sign that song?

RL: Well, my friend I were roommates in college she was involved in Dangerous Signs at that time we were very, very close. Well later she married, divorced, and now has a baby and I married and we separated. We hadn't preformed in a long time. So the two of I were chatting and she expressed that she really missed performing and I said maybe we can make a music video together. So, she chose Michael Jackson, "Scream." O.K. the two of us discussed the details and we videotaped ourselves separately and I sent my video to her she combined the two videos and she did the editing. She majored in film in college so her editing is awesome. The finished product was great we were very proud of it.

BH: I also saw you sign in a Justin Timberlake song – Tim and I were watching it together. We noticed that the words or lyrics of the song were not the same as you were signing, right? Why did you decide to do that?

TH: Right, we were interested in how, how you made the lyrics of the song and the way you sang it different.

RL: If you look at the Internet you see many, many, many songs being signed by interpreters, ASL students, other deaf people including, myself. Those songs are geared for people who can hear. Deaf people really can't understand the words if they sign exactly word for word. I want deaf people to connect to my music to enjoy it to be able to relate to it. So, I sign songs that correlate to deaf experience. The sign the song Cry Me a River is like hearing parents telling their deaf children you must speak you must speak, if you can't communicate verbally then you won't have a future. They are trying to change those children so that song is connected to Deaf experience.

BH: Yeah, it was a lot of fun watching it. I also saw you wear a lot of wigs in your videos and I thought that was fun.

RL: Yes, yes.

BH: I am a theatre major and I want to go into theater career myself. But, I know a job in theater is not easy money. So how do you make it work?

RL: Well I am very lucky I have a very supportive husband. If I didn't have his support, I don't know what I would do. Well maybe if I lived a thrifty life style, a small apartment, and rode a bicycle for transportation, ate one meal a day, maybe I could make it but my husband has a good job. I, I can concentrate on my business and he takes care of everything, sometimes money is scarce but we're getting, we're making it.

TH: So Brielle what you need to do is find yourself a rich man.

BH: Yes right now.

RL: Yes when you meet him you ask him what kind of work you do, how much money do you make; make sure he puts that ring on your finger. Perfect.

BH: You were telling us first you consider yourself a Deaf person and secondly a woman. Who is your current role model whether a woman or a theater person?

RL: Well, first and foremost my mother. In the theater there is a deaf man named Peter Cook. Do you know him? He's here now in Massachusetts performing tonight in Boston. He is an awesome, awesome performer. He has a one-man show, just like I do a one-woman show.

BH: Is he deaf?

RL: Yes he's deaf. He's been performing oh about fifteen years. I really admire his work it's amazing. He's also very good with hearing audiences, and that's one of my struggles. My shows target deaf audience. Sometimes hearing audiences don't understand because they can't connect with the deaf struggle but I try to combine -- my hope is combine a show that both deaf and hearing can enjoy and understand. But generally, my mother is my role model.

BH: What's your favorite movie?

RL: My favorite movie? *My Fair Lady*.

BH: Really! Oh, I love that movie.

RL: I love it also. It's a big parallel between Deaf experience. You know, you know the story. It's a woman from the country whose voice is just horrible. People trying to help her to change, to speak right, because they couldn't accept who she really was. That's a similar

experience that deaf people face. They try to talk because people don't accept who they really are. So, I love that song in *My Fair Lady*. Do, do, do.

BH: What is your favorite play or musical? Is it the same? Is it *My Fair Lady*?

RL: What kind of play?

BH: No, what specific play.

RL: Oh, the name of the play that I really like hmmm.

BH: Is it *My Fair Lady*?

RL: I actually saw the play *My Fair Lady* in New York. It was ok, but I like the movie better. I really don't think I have a favorite play.

BH: Well there's a lot of them out there I don't blame you.

RL: Yes there's so many.

BH: Well it's clear that deafness has an impact on your theater. Now who's your target audience again?

RL: My focus is on the signing community for deaf people along with the signing community of perhaps interpreters and ASL students. I just feel that hearing people can't quite understand the message that I am trying to relate so I focus mainly on deaf community.

BH: And do you have an interpreter at your shows?

RL: Yes my husband.

BH: Oh well that's easy.

RL: Yeah, very easy.

B: You don't have to pay him or anything.

RL: My husband an interpreter because he's here. In the past [I'd] hire interpreters but people would come up and complain that the interpreter was inadequate, they didn't understand the interpreter. The interpreter literally ruined the show. So, I recruited my husband. He knows my show, he can interpret the show blindfolded. He just understands that so he's my interpreter.

BH: What would you say is your theatrical style: new theater, musical theater, comedy... what is it?

RL: My theatrical style is mostly comedy. I use a lot of film during my show. I like to use technology and incorporate that in my shows as well. I try to make my show very visual. It's an art and I want it to be visual. I don't think people want to see me just stand signing, signing, signing, that's gets boring. So in my show I use a film, and I am on the film and then I stand on stage and I converse with myself in the film goes like back and forth. Something different. One example is sometimes I have an act where sometimes I am sleeping and then I am standing on the stage trying to wake myself up in the film. So I take a piece of paper and roll it up and throw it at the film. The paper hits me and I wake up and I look down at myself on stage and say, "What's up?" You know so that kind of stuff, those kinds of things makes it fun. People always come up and ask, "How did the paper end up in the film?" They enjoy. (Lights in the room turn off) Oh the lights, lights. Ok there we go sorry about that. So really, that concept is new to deaf people. They're always curious about how I can do that. I remember the time in the movie I practice and I just play with it to get it perfect. Yeah, it's a lot of fun.

BH: How has acting changed you as a person?

RL: It's given me confidence. Remember before I told you I was shy, sensitive, socially awkward. Well I was a country girl with a strong religious background. So, in general my life experiences were limited. It was hard for me to understand relationships and the theater was my way to connect with people. It helped me to become more confident, more open to things, more open minded if you will. In college, I set up the theater group Dangerous Signs. There were other people there that experiencing the same thing that I was. They were shy, didn't know where to start they were interested in acting but didn't know where to start. They had ideas so I just tried to encourage and call everybody in and we would get together and share ideas and the first show that we made we showed it performance and wow, they developed confidence and their fear was gone. And different ideas kept popping up and I was really proud of those people. I found out that acting can really change people. Mainly because you look at an actor and you say to yourself it's not me that is speaking it's that person I'm just an actor.

BH: Looking back at all the work you've done and all the performances you have had, what are you most proud of?

RL: I'm very proud that I did the one-woman show. When I first started, I was afraid. You know the Deaf community can be very critical. They would criticize if I used too many songs in my show, if the show was boring, if they didn't really get it, and the deaf community is a close-knit group. And it's very easy for the opinion of one to influence the entire group. So I was afraid they wouldn't like me what did I need to do to change it or improve it. If they didn't like my show, I would take it personally that they didn't like me so that didn't do a lot for my ego. Then I had a conversation with myself and I told myself that's a challenge for me. If I want to be strong and develop confidence I have to just go ahead and do it anyway it doesn't matter if the deaf community likes me or don't like me, this is my work this is my art I have to try. So I am proud of the fact that I did do it, I'm proud of the accomplishments that I made from then to now. And now I am here still at I standing strong. Yup, very proud.

BH: I know that you're pregnant and very busy, but are you working on anything new? Or do you have any future plans?

RL: Yes, recently my husband and I went to Illinois. We went there to a museum to see a historical film about Abraham Lincoln. You know he's from Illinois and the people there still get excited about Abraham Lincoln. So, we go in sit down and watch the film. And wow that technology was amazing. They used holograms, really one person, an actor opened up a big book. That book became a document. It seemed like it was writing itself and things was just bouncing all over the place and I was looking and my mind and I was just blown to see that. I asked my husband how they do that. We need to incorporate that into our show, we need to discuss things and talk to people and do research and find out how they make that and change our show to incorporate that. The deaf would really enjoy that. Having one person on stage, one person in film, and then the hologram. But now I stopped for a while because I am focusing on the baby. I'm at home now doing research, doing my homework, making plans, writing down ideas. Contacting people looking for money. You know just different ideas how to make that process work. But I will be back in about three years.

BH: That's really cool. That's neat.

TH: Ok. So tell me, if you have a bad day and life is just hard what do you do to feel better?

RL: I listen to music. That's my favorite way to relax. Listening to music is strange because I'm deaf.

TH: So how do you hear the music you just crank it up or something?

RL: Well I have earphones, put them over my ears turn the volume up full blast. Sometimes I use my computer. It has large speakers. I set it to iTunes -- they play my favorite songs.

BH: What are your favorite songs?

RL: Well my Michael Jackson is my favorite. I also enjoy Janet Jackson, some old songs from the 1990's era.

TH: So it just has to have a strong beat?

RL: Must, must I have to feel the vibration gets me going, makes me feel better. Sometimes I feel depressed, crying, and sad. Music helps me to push all that stuff aside and feel much better and relax.

TH: Ok. So, how do you define success?

RL: Success means to meet your goals. Doesn't matter if they (the goals) are large or small. You succeed if you meet the goals. For example, I wanted to become an actress. I tried, and I tried, and I tried. Didn't matter if I succeeded or not or if people don't like me. If nothing happened, at least I tried and that is success for me. My goal is to encourage my friends and my peers to set up goals to follow your dreams. Doesn't matter big or small. Try, try, try. If you

finish, you're successful. If you try, you'll successful. Success has various meanings to different people.

TH: Great. Now looking back would you--I don't know—change anything about your life, if you could change anything at all?

RL: Anything that I would like to change, hmmm.....looking back, I wish I had focused more on the arts. I never really got seriously involved in the arts until I was about 16, 17 years old. Of course before I was exposed to different things, I would take piano lessons, stop. Or tried to learn how to play the guitar, stopped. Dancing, stopped. I really wanted to play the violin but my mother said no because I had history of starting and stopping things. It was too expensive. But now I wish I had had the maturity to practice more I didn't really realize the importance of that until I was older like 16 or 17. Where I really worked hard and amerced myself into that. I would have also liked to become a painter but I'm bad at painting. I wish I had had more exposure to into that.

TH: OK so with all of your experience, what advice could you tell to another female, deaf actress?

RL: I would try to at some workshops time to time. My show travels a lot and I have an opportunity to meet many, many deaf female actresses. And they are always curious to know how I got started and where do I get my ideas from. And I always try to give good suggestions and ideas and encourage them.

TH: So do you have any advice for them?

RL: You must have the heart for acting and performing. It has to start from the heart. Why? If you have ideas of acting but you don't have the heart then you're not committed into doing the work that's involved. If you have the heart, it doesn't matter if you try and fail, if you have ups and downs, a disappointment, that's part of the process. If you don't have the heart you'll give up you won't continue. So, it all starts in the heart. You get an idea you want to become an actress you have to decide if it just the idea of acting or are you really, really passionate about it. It's an art it gives you opportunity to use your ideas, yourself but it always starts with the heart. It allows you to express things that you want to say, things you want to do. Sometimes you don't really like acting, maybe you should change. But as for me, I really like acting.

TH: OK now after your life is over how you do want people to remember you? How do you want to be remembered?

RL: Hmmm, I'm not ready to die.

TH: Oh of course not.

RL: Not for a long time. I'm still young. I'm not old yet. But actually, I would like to know that I made a difference to someone's life. I'm very passionate about a person following their dreams. Doesn't matter if that person is deaf or in a wheelchair, there is always a way, so I

would really value that. I just hope that my show, my work will inspire someone out there to change, to grow, to follow their dreams. So maybe if I die, if I influenced one person to change I succeeded in my life's work.

TH: Good.

TH: Well that's all we have for you.

T+BH: Thank you.

RL: Thank you so much.

TH: Good luck.