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2007

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Recommended Citation

S., Timothy. (2007) SAISD history. Deaf Rochester News, 11(1).

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I'm deaf, but let's talk recovery

Contributed by SAISD

Written by Timothy S.

I have found that even within the supportive environment of a Twelve Step meeting, the obstacle of deafness is enormous.

It has been my experience that many people are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with deafness, so I thought this might be a perfect opportunity to write about my experiences as a deaf person in recovery.

My intention is not to complain about my difficulties or seek sympathy. My point is to emphasize that the deaf world can be lonely in ways that hearing people never think about. I'm on the fringes of both the deaf and hearing worlds, meaning I feel like I don't belong completely to either. But for sure, I belong in AA (Alcoholics Anonymous).

I would like to see fairness and consideration for those of us who don't hear, especially when we are seeking recovery. I'd also like to express my opinions on some things about which some people seem confused. First, deaf people have varying degrees of hearing and speech. Some of us can hear a little bit, while others are completely deaf. Some can read lips, while many others can't. We are all different. Further, I think there is a lot of confusion about cochlear implants. I have a cochlear implant but still cannot understand speech. It's important to realize that deafness isn't a disease and cochlear implants aren't a cure. In the same way that abstinence from drugs doesn't mean addiction is cured, having an implant does not mean I can hear everything. Much of my isolation stems from this misconception. I think that people might feel awkward approaching me because they are afraid they won't be able to communicate with me. If people want to communicate with me, I can manage it. I've been doing it all my life. I almost always have pen and paper with me and can express just about anything that way.

Many fellows in New York and elsewhere have taken the time to communicate with me and I am grateful for that. In other fellowships, I have felt hurt when people complained that writing notes took too much of their time or energy. Writing may be an option for most people, but it is a necessity for me! I have gone to all kinds of Twelve Step meetings across the country. I am perfectly happy if someone volunteers to take notes. I

typically try to arrive early and request that the Chair or Secretary ask for a volunteer note-taker. On several occasions, the Chairperson has seemed burdened by my request and merely told me that I should go to meetings with interpreters. People don't realize that interpreted meetings are scarce and sometimes the interpreters are not skilled. I have been shocked when people have tried to refer me away from meetings because they thought they knew what I needed. Also, I've had volunteer note-takers who refused to write down peoples' names because they thought doing so would violate someone's anonymity, even though the speaker had just announced the person's first name to the whole room. By refusing to write down names, the note-takers weren't breaking anyone's anonymity; they were denying me information that everyone else at the meeting had access to.

Sometimes people react in certain ways because they are unfamiliar with issues relating to interpreters. In some meetings and workshops, for example, a Chairperson has asked the interpreter to sit off to the side – far away from the person speaking. In some situations, this might be acceptable, but deaf people gain understanding from simultaneously watching the interpreter and the person speaking. People have told me that they think sign language interpreters are distracting. Well, I'd be much more distracting if I were loaded!

I have to work harder to “hear” the message of recovery. When I ask for help with interpreting, I'm saying to you, *Your help is saving my life*. I am not trying to annoy you.

Being deaf means living in a world of isolation and oppression. I want to say again how grateful I am for the people who have made an effort to get to know me and share in our recoveries. I hope that together we can make recovery easier for deaf people.