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W. Scot Atkins

*University of St. Thomas, Minnesota*

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EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF DEAF ENTREPRENEURS AND  
BUSINESS OWNERS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

By

W. Scot Atkins

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

March 2011

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found it is complete and satisfactory in all respects and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

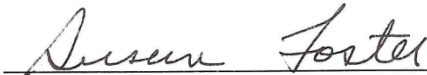
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3/15/2011

Date

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### **Dedication**

First, this dissertation is dedicated to my late father, Arland A. Atkins, who taught me at a young age, “To aim for the moon”. Secondly, this dissertation is dedicated to the late Dr. Sharon K. Gibson, who advised me through my doctoral coursework at the University of St. Thomas. This study was done in the phenomenological spirit that Sharon employed in much of her research. Her experiences in the deaf community, organizational development, human resources and research proved invaluable as I began my doctoral journey. Sharon passed away just before I started this dissertation journey, and this dissertation is dedicated to her memory.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to acknowledge the many people who have helped me along my way throughout this dissertation journey. My journey has been marked with certain individuals who have given me the guidance I needed to continue. First, I want to thank God for giving me the wisdom, the guidance and the humility to complete this work.

I would like to acknowledge my family, especially my wife, Sally, who has been a willing ear to my ideas for the dissertation process and for providing support throughout the journey. I would like to thank the members of my committee. I would like to thank my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Eleni Roulis for her guidance and wisdom through the dissertation process. I would like to also thank Dr. Alla Heorhiadi for her encouragement and for the use of her eagle eye in reviewing my work. I thank Dr. Susan Foster for sharing her wealth of knowledge and wisdom in the area of social research within the deaf community. I would like to thank the faculty and student members of doctoral Cohort IV for their collegiality and support.

Additionally, I would like to recognize Dr. Richard DeMartino, director of the Simone Center on Innovation and Entrepreneurship at the Rochester Institute of Technology for his encouragement and generous advice throughout the journey. I would like to acknowledge my many other colleagues at the Rochester Institute of Technology, especially Mary Lou Basile. I would like to thank my former employer, Michael Rizzolo, CEO of Interpretek, for providing me the support I needed to complete my course work. I would like to thank those who provided interpreting services throughout my doctoral experience, including Kathryn Jensen and Andrea West.

### **Abstract**

This phenomenological study focuses on the description of the nature and the meaning of the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. Very little is known of the nature of deaf entrepreneurs and business owners. Because of the growing numbers of deaf people becoming entrepreneurs, it is important that we gain a better understanding of the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. To gain further insight into the nature of this experience, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 participants. These individuals were selected in accordance to Crammate's definition of "deaf" and having had been an entrepreneur/business owner for at least 2 years. Through an coded analysis of the transcribed text from the interviews, six essential themes emerged: (1) pursuing their passion with experience and skill; (2) running their enterprise through collaboration, networking, strategy and understanding of the market; (3) reflecting on their identity as a deaf person and how it impacted their experience; (4) building bridges to the rest of the world using communication strategies; (5) having a support network; (6) desiring to make an impact on the world. These themes were present among deaf entrepreneurs/business owners in all types, sizes, and structures of businesses.

The implications of this study take the form of the establishment of training and development programs for nascent and experienced deaf entrepreneurs/business owners; the expansion or the creation of networking opportunities for deaf entrepreneurs; the creation of formalized mentoring networks specifically for deaf entrepreneurs within existing programs; the exploration of use of technology to enhance entrepreneurial opportunities for deaf people; and the need to use deaf entrepreneurs as role models.

Areas for recommendations for future research are to further explore: 1) the concept of

ethnic enclaves or a “deaf economy” in the context of the deaf community 2) the role of networking and mentoring for entrepreneurial and career success among deaf people 3) the role of access in the search of funding and capital 4) the use of social media for networking for deaf people 5) the concept of motivating and success factors for deaf entrepreneurs 6) the role of inhibiting factors for success of deaf people, and 7) the use of technology for access purposes.

As evidence shows, there is the increasing likelihood that entrepreneurship is becoming a more viable career option for deaf people, especially after they have gained some experience in a field of study of which they are passionate. Beyond the deaf community, there are possible concepts that may be transferrable to other marginalized groups.

*Keywords: deaf, entrepreneurs, business owners, phenomenology, deaf community, deaf business development, entrepreneurial education, deaf economy, crab theory, tall poppy syndrome*



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## **Chapter 1. Background**

Despite the growing research in entrepreneurship and interest in non-mainstreamed communities, there have been virtually no efforts to understand the nature of entrepreneurship within the deaf community. As a result, governments, organizations, and individuals with strong interests in promoting deaf communities lack both an understanding of the existing deaf entrepreneurship community and the insights, methods and processes necessary for entrepreneurial empowerment within this population.

As more deaf people gain employment in a variety of career fields, there is an increasing number of deaf people becoming entrepreneurs and establishing their own businesses. According to the National Deaf Business Institute, approximately 800-1,000 known deaf people are entrepreneurs and small business owners. There has been an increase in the number of members in the National Deaf Business Institute, the primary organization for deaf business owners in the last decade, which currently has 450 members (Schwartz, L., personal communication, August 15, 2009). However, there is no hard available official data that can give us accurate figures of deaf entrepreneurs and deaf business owners.

Throughout the study and the review of literature, the reader may see the word “deaf” and “Deaf” used interchangeably. Crammate’s (1968) definition of deaf is, “deaf to the extent that their communication is visually oriented; that is their reception of communication was through the eyes—reading written messages, reading lips, observing gestures and clues, or using a structured visual language such as American Sign Language”. Deaf people whose first or preferred language is American Sign Language (ASL) regard themselves as a linguistic and

cultural minority. Proponents of this approach discuss that if hearing people learned to sign, that Deaf people would not necessarily be disabled. Therefore, Deaf as denoted by a capital “D” refers to those individuals who have identified themselves as “culturally Deaf” and deaf as denoted by a lowercase “d” refers to the general view of deaf people or an audiological condition of hearing loss and does not necessarily imply a connection to the Deaf Community (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Schein, 1989; Sacks, 1990). Naturally, the parameters that define the meaning of “capital D” and “lowercase d” can be dynamic and change over time and across space. For example, learning sign language or learning about deaf culture may help to shift a deaf person’s self-identity. These conventions will be adopted in the paper if the meanings are denoted as such. In some of the literature portrayed in this study, the reader will find the term, “D/deaf”, which generally reflects all deaf people, including those who are culturally deaf. In this study, the lower case “d” will be used to describe the general nature of all of the participants.

The advent of laws such as Title 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act and the availability of new technologies has opened doors for deaf people. In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, higher educational opportunities have increased for deaf people. Additionally, social movements such as the Deaf President Now movement in 1988 have heightened awareness that deaf people can succeed in a variety of fields. Despite the increase in the phenomena of Deaf people as entrepreneurs and business owners, there is very little scholarly research in this area. New information regarding deaf entrepreneurs and business owners would help provide some insight into what stands out in the entrepreneurial experiences for these people.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Significant strides have been made in the employment of deaf people in recent years, expanding the amount of career opportunities for this population. While there have been studies into the employment of the deaf, there has been very little attention paid to the phenomenon of deaf people who are entrepreneurs or business owners. As this research will portray, there have been sporadic attempts to study deaf entrepreneurs in detail. With the exception of a very few, most of these studies have been anecdotal. Therefore, there is a need to expand knowledge in this area and help to provide information for future study to enhance future opportunities for deaf people.

### **Research Question and Purpose of the Study**

The primary research question to be answered in this study is, "What is the essence of deaf entrepreneurs' experience?" The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of those entrepreneurs who are deaf in the context of creating their ventures and sustaining those ventures. The overarching purpose of the study is to generate new knowledge in the area of entrepreneurs who are deaf. New knowledge may generate new insights on how to improve the ability of deaf people to achieve their dreams of owning their own business through the entrepreneurial process. Additionally, this new knowledge may create new areas of focus for activities with the intent to generate interest and knowledge about deaf people in the field of entrepreneurship.

### **Significance of Problem**

The unique nature of deaf people in general merits a focused attention on the lived experiences of these deaf entrepreneurs, so as to provide a rich description of this phenomenon. By educating the general population and deaf people regarding the results of this study, it is my hope that there is enhanced awareness of the issues and practical solutions from individual,

organizational and societal standpoints and to provide an impetus to generate more entrepreneurial activity among those in the deaf population.

From a practical standpoint, it is my hope that the information from this study has generated meaningful data for development of curricula and programs for deaf people who wish to engage in the establishment of their own venture. It is also my expectation that informing the general community of the experiences of these deaf entrepreneurs/business owners, they will better understand the experience as customers, investors, vendors and advisors in the process.

### **Researcher Interest**

As a deaf person, a professional, an educator, and as a member of the Deaf community, this research problem is meaningful for me as I seek insight into ways to make life more meaningful for deaf people. Currently, I am a new faculty member at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), within the college of the National Technical Institute of the Deaf (NTID). I teach primarily business courses and support the deaf students attending the Saunders College of Business. In the last year, I have become more involved in research and educational efforts related to deaf entrepreneurs through the Simone Center on Innovation and Entrepreneurship. I am currently one of the chairs of the NTID President's Roundtable on Entrepreneurship. At this Roundtable event, we facilitate meetings that involve deaf entrepreneurs who serve in an advisory role to the college on generating more entrepreneurship among students. I often meet with students who have ideas for businesses in the future. In an advisory role, I often find myself encouraging these individuals to pursue their dreams and I want to try to provide as much information as possible on how they can achieve their goals. Prior to being at RIT, I worked in progressively responsible positions in Human Resources and Operations for 18 years in publically traded companies, private and non-profit organizations.

I am a Deaf individual and grew up mostly in mainstreamed settings and learned sign language when I was 14 years old. I became more involved with other Deaf people starting at that age and I consider myself a member of the Deaf community. When I was a young child, I always enjoyed reading biographies. I wanted to learn more about other people and find out what made them successful. When I was about eight years old, I read the biography of Thomas A. Edison. To my delight, I learned that he was deaf and people communicated with him primarily through Morse code and through finger spelling. From a young age, I was always curious about what made successful people “tick” and this curiosity was a factor in leading me to want to explore the area of deaf entrepreneurship and business ownership. When I was an undergraduate in college, I became more exposed to a variety of deaf people successful in their respective careers. I read other books, such as *Great Deaf Americans* (Panara R. & Panara, J., 1983), which highlighted the lives of deaf people who were doctors, lawyers, business owners, race car drivers, etc.

For ten years, I was the vice president of human resources at a non-profit organization that was established by a deaf man. At this organization, I witnessed the tremendous growth of an entrepreneurial organization. At the company’s peak, we had hired a large number of deaf people in a variety of disciplines. This is where I saw the potential of entrepreneurship for deaf people who had a dream of creating new products and services. I saw the power of the entrepreneurial spirit at this company and wondered why there were not more deaf people pursuing their dreams of establishing their own enterprise.

Through a large layoff, I found myself unemployed in 2006. I decided to attend the National Association of the Deaf convention in Palm Springs to network for employment opportunities. While I was there, I had a long conversation with a successful deaf business

owner who encouraged me to set up my own consulting firm. He felt that there was a need for my expertise in human resources and organizational development. I thought about this long and hard and did some research. Soon afterward, I decided to establish my own human resources and organizational development consulting practice. The businessman whom I met at the convention, agreed to help me as I started out in my venture. I talked to him over the videophone on several occasions and he gave me ideas on how to market my services. I eventually created a company called Thrivo. During the summer of 2006, I spent my time establishing the business, and marketing my services. I focused my marketing efforts to target those organizations, in which I had some connections. In a short time, I was able to secure contracts for a variety of projects. This experience gave me additional impetus to learn more about the experiences of other deaf people who have created their own businesses. Through this experience, I connected with a number of other deaf business owners and realized that more and more deaf people were establishing their own business ventures. During this time, there were moments in which I became discouraged for a variety of reasons. One of the frustrations for me was to try to figure out how to reach out to the mainstreamed market and market my services to that group. I decided to continue to focus on the targeted market of disability related organizations, because there was enough work at that time. Eventually, I got a full time job as a director of human resources and organization development with one of my client organizations. This job allowed me the stability to help me to finish my doctoral studies and to continue the consulting practice on the side.

I have always been of the persuasion that deaf people have great potential in pursuing their desires for establishing a business, but I felt that there were possible barriers that may impede that pursuit. I saw some of these barriers personally through my own experience and



through the experiences of my colleagues. In conducting the research for this dissertation, my goal was to determine what that experience may look like so that we could create solutions to the problems of being a deaf entrepreneur. I was also acutely aware of the challenges and the frustrations of establishing a venture. As a researcher, this was a bias that I have had to deal with right at the beginning of this study.

As part of the researcher's *Epoche'*, I have had to consciously bracket my assumptions and set them aside as I interacted with the interviewees and analyzed the data from the interviews. As a researcher, I have become acutely aware of these experiences and the biases that have come with it and it was essential that I disclose these as part of my *Epoche'*. "In the *Epoche'*, we set aside prejudgements, biases, and pre-conceived ideas about things. We invalidate, inhibit and disqualify all commitments with references to previous knowledge and experience" (Moutsakas, 1994, p.85). With this in mind, I created a memo journaling system that has allowed me to record these experiences and my potential biases, so that I could set those aside as I focus on the experiences of others. At the same time, it is my experiences that helped me to understand some of the deeper essences of being a deaf person. According to Spiegelberg, one of the forerunners of phenomenology, the researcher must have "intuitive grasp" (Merriam, 1998). Because of my unique view as a deaf person, I believe that I possessed this intuitive grasp that allowed for me to effectively carry out the phenomenological study. It was important that I outlined my experiences so that I was conscious of those biases. Moustakas (1994) stated, "from the *Epoche'*, we are challenged to create new ideas, new feelings, new awareness and understandings". By revisiting my *Epoche'* from time to time using the memo journaling system, I was able to fully experience what the participants were experiencing, rather than making comparisons with my own experience (Moutsakas, 1994).

## **Definition of Terms**

These terms are used throughout the dissertation and are defined as follows:

**Constructivist:** The viewpoint in which the individual mind generates meaning based on his/her experiences and worldview (Crotty, 2003).

**Entrepreneur:** Someone involved in the creation, implementation, investment, the assumption of risk and managing a venture (Reynolds, 2007). This term is used in conjunction with and is interchangeable with business owner throughout this study.

**Nascent Entrepreneur:** An entrepreneur who is in the process of establishing his/her newly created business venture.

**Deaf:** Deaf to “the extent that the individual’s communication was visually oriented; that is their reception of communication was through the eyes—reading written messages, reading lips, observing gestures and clues, or using a structured visual language such as American Sign Language” (Crammatte, 1968, p. x)

**Phenomenology:** Study into the meaning for one or more individuals of their lived experiences of a common phenomenon or concept (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

**Small Business:** A business that has fewer than 500 employees (Fairlie & Robb, 2008).

**Angel Investor:** An individual or a group who are engaged in very early-stage investments in the entrepreneurial process. Usually angel investors invest smaller sums such as \$50,000. Angel investors tend to be involved much earlier than formal venture capitalists typically invest.

**Ethnic Enclave:** An area which retains some cultural distinction from a larger, surrounding area. Sometimes an entire city may have such a feel. Usually the enclave revolves around businesses that are run by the members of the community (Portes, 1987). An example includes,

“Chinatown” as a district within a city in which members of the Chinese American community gather, shop, run stores and restaurants.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 2 provides a review of literature to give the reader background information on the concepts surrounding deaf people in entrepreneurship. The research methodology is described in detail in Chapter 3. The data are presented in Chapter 4 and have been organized in accordance to the six themes that were distilled from the data. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings, implications of the study, recommendations for future research and the author’s personal reflections from the study.

### **Summary of Background**

The world is rapidly changing, and there are more opportunities for deaf people to create even more meaningful lives. Entrepreneurship is becoming a viable career option for many people, including deaf people. The act of entrepreneurship requires a full commitment from individuals to pull together available resources to achieve that goal. Little is known about the lived experiences of deaf entrepreneurs and business owners. The study of the lived experiences of deaf entrepreneurs and business owners may, in addition to the patterns of individual successes found within interviews, offer broader us insights into the vast potential of humans to achieve their lifetime goals. Their stories may provide us with a better understanding of our own experiences as human beings. In this study, the stories are put together in a composite framework so that the essence of those experiences may be portrayed in its entirety.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

### **The Entrepreneur and the Business Owner**

Small businesses, those organizations that have fewer than 500 people, were the fastest growing segment of business in the United States in the past 25 years. This segment produced 54% of all employment growth in 2004 (Reynolds, 2007). In 2005, about 15 million people in the United States were in the process of organizing and starting up 7 million new firms.

Approximately 5 million people were currently managing 2 million businesses that were up to forty-two months old (Reynolds, 2007). As companies downsize, especially during today's economic environment, more and more people are becoming self-employed, bringing with them a wealth of talents to share with the rest of the world. The rise in the number of people taking risks to go into business for themselves or to create enterprises underscores the need for more research in the general area of entrepreneurship as a driving force in today's economy. As a result, there has been a proliferation of literature in the area of entrepreneurship in recent years.

There is great variation in the definition of "entrepreneurship" in literature today because of the different fields and activities associated with the term. There does not appear to be a lot of agreement in the literature regarding the definition of entrepreneurship because it is such a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted concept (Howorth, Tempest, & Copeland, 2005). It is noted that entrepreneurship covers a multitude of disciplines, not just including those in the traditional business and economic fields. From a research standpoint, entrepreneurship is still a fairly new and unexplored topic (Reynolds, 2007). From a pragmatic standpoint, Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (1998) proposed that the entrepreneur could be: a founder of an organization (whether that is an act of innovation or not, and whether or not he is an opportunist or strategist), the

manager of a self-owned business, or, the innovative leader of an organization owned by others. One definition of entrepreneurship suggests that it is a situation in which a person does not work for another company or employer, but rather has created enterprises that they have control over. As Reynolds (2007) suggested, “Entrepreneurship is about doing something different- creating a business that did not exist, producing a new product, modifying an existing activity” ( p. xxi).

### **Theoretical Basis of Study on the Experience of Entrepreneurship**

Because this study explores the essence of the experience of the deaf entrepreneur, it is necessary to take a closer look at the theoretical basis beneath their entrepreneurial experience. The constructivist approach in learning about entrepreneurship assumes that the entrepreneur constructs what she/he knows on the basis of their experience. What people make of the experience constitutes the world that they consciously live in. This constructivist perspective challenges the predominantly objective view that reality exists separately from the observer. The constructivist view is a powerful framework for understanding how individuals organize their experience and what they believe is the reality of their situation (Lobler, 2006). The interpretivist approach to entrepreneurship takes the approach that it is shaped to a significant degree by past work and life experiences (Howorth et al., 2005).

What is the essence of being entrepreneurial? One insight that keeps appearing in literature is that the successful entrepreneur can be characterized by an expert mindset and deep cognitive structures. Behind deep cognitive structures are deep beliefs. According to Krueger (2007), deep beliefs are developed through a constructivist framework. As individuals go through their entrepreneurial experience from a novice mindset to a more “expert mindset”, the movement is reflected in deep cognitive structures, accentuated by critical development events in their experience. Developmental psychologists agree that experiences are less important than the

lessons learned from them (Lobler, 2006). It is the lessons learned that are of importance, therefore, I hope this study becomes a part of the lessons in the journey of being a deaf entrepreneur.

### **Deaf People and Identity**

For the purpose of this study, the issues of “identity” as a deaf person were explored within the context of the deaf experience in entrepreneurship. Generally, there are two basic models in which deaf people and society view their lives and experiences. Studying these two worldviews provided the perspectives and ways in which the experiences are happening for the individual respondents.

The first model is the medical model, mainly promoted by the U.S. cultural viewpoint that any physical malady, including being deaf, must be corrected through medical means. This model is also known as the “infirmity model” (Lane, 1993). The traditional way of writing about deaf people is to focus on their condition and to dwell on the consequences of this medical condition (Padden & Humphries, 1988). This model assumes that deaf people are handicapped and are not functioning as the rest of the hearing society. In this model, doctors, audiologists, teachers work towards the goal of “rehabilitating” the physical condition so that the deaf person is able to function in a predominantly hearing world. This is evidenced through the proliferation of aural rehabilitation programs, cochlear implantation, and speech therapy. In this model, deaf people may view themselves as inadequate compared to other hearing people if they do not meet the medical view of having good hearing and speech. For some deaf people, they may hear well enough with hearing aids or cochlear implants, in which they may consider themselves functioning as a hearing person. The term, “deafness” usually represents this medical worldview.

The second model, the socio-linguistic model, based on models of anthropology and culture, proposes the worldview that deaf people are members of a socio-linguistic minority. In this model, the deaf community functions very much like an ethnic group. Language is usually the center of a culture and deaf culture is no exception. American Sign Language is the language of American and Canadian deaf culture. Deaf people are not seen as having dysfunctional hearing as much as having a unique view on the world. With this approach, deaf people embrace their identity as members of a unique and close-knit community. This perspective states that deaf people are a minority group in a predominantly hearing world. Cultural norms are passed down from one generation to the next through language, socialization, schools, family, and folklore. With this worldview, the reality of deaf people is socially constructed through their experiences as a deaf person in a hearing world (Foster, 1992; Sacks, 1990; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Lane, 1993). The cultural norms in deaf culture are a direct result of having to come up with solutions to the problems of living in the hearing world. One definition of culture is, “a way that a group of people solve common dilemmas “ (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p.6). With the cultural view, Deaf people have evolved their own society to attend to their own needs, serve their own ends, to manage their problems and to provide interchange with the general society (Schein, 1989). As a recent example, the National Association of the Deaf has tweaked their organizational focus to provide opportunities for the younger generation of Deaf people to resolve community wide problems such as the lack of captioning on of Internet-based videos.

Jerome Schein’s definition of “Deaf” (1989) eschews the medical view on deafness. He defined “Deaf” as those who cannot hear and understand speech through the ear alone, with or

without amplification. Deaf people are visually dependent and cannot carry a conversation with their eyes closed. Well-known author Oliver Sacks writes,

“The study of the deaf shows us that much of what is distinctively human in us- our capacities for language, for thought, for communication and culture- do not develop automatically in us, are not just biological functions, but are, equally, social and historical in origin; that they are a gift- the most wonderful of gifts- from one generation to another. We see that Culture is as crucial as Nature (1990, xiii).”

These two opposing views have been in existence for a long time, with very little hope for reconciliation between these conflicting stances. It is said that very strong opinions and views on both sides contribute to this standstill in any resolution between the views. There is also the continuum that exists between the two worldviews and deaf people may find themselves being a proponent of both worldviews depending on their upbringing, and their current situation. However, it is through the lenses of these worldviews that readers will better understand the background information regarding how the deaf person views their experience as a deaf entrepreneur or business owner.

### **The Employment Situation of the Deaf**

Before the industrial revolution in the 1800's, deaf people were employed in the same positions as their hearing counterparts. Major occupations at that time were farmers, craftsmen, artisans and other positions that could be learned through visual means, hard work and through one-on-one training from their teacher or co-workers (Foster, 1992). One could say that there was an entrepreneurial spirit during this time, because of the necessity to learn a trade to be part of the overall market economy at that time. The shift to work in the urban factories, along with the number of immigrants moving to America, created new challenges for deaf people regarding employment and training for occupations.



Additionally, the proliferation of the telephone after its invention in 1876 created new jobs that required the use of communications through the device, further reducing the number of positions that deaf people could attain. To add insult to injury, in 1880, an international congress on the education of the deaf gathered in Milan, Italy, to overwhelmingly vote in support of oral/aural education. Only two deaf people were in attendance at this conference, so their viewpoint of providing a wholesome education based on communication in Sign Language was defeated. This created a situation in which the number of deaf teachers of the deaf was drastically reduced over the subsequent years. It is estimated that in 1869, there were 550 teachers of the deaf worldwide and that 41% of the teachers of the deaf in the United States were themselves deaf. This number fell to 25% by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and then down to 12% by 1960 (Lane, 1989).

During the two world wars, an interesting phenomenon occurred. The employment picture for deaf people became favorable, as significant numbers of young people went to join the armed forces. Many deaf people worked in factories and in other jobs vacated by their hearing peers who went to serve in the military. Although this was a temporary phenomenon, this helped employers to realize the value and potential of deaf employees in the workplace (Foster, 1992).

It is said that one of the greatest contributions to the growth of employment opportunities for deaf people are the increased educational options for this population (Crammate, 1987; Foster, 1992). During the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many residential schools for the deaf trained deaf people in a variety of trades. These trades included printing, drafting, sewing, and shoemaking. Ironically enough, at that time, the best students became printers. This has said to

contribute to the growing cohesiveness in the deaf community, because many deaf people printed newsletters and other literature to exchange information (Foster, 1992; Gannon, 1981).

During the mid 1960's, through President Johnson's "Great Society" initiatives, post-secondary options for deaf people greatly expanded. Additional funding was given to Gallaudet University, then the only college for the deaf in the world. New funding, created by Public Law 89-36, was extended to establish the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1968. Moreover, funding was established to create regional post-secondary programs for deaf college students throughout the nation. The number of people graduating from these post-secondary programs contributed to a bigger than normal group of deaf people who were qualified for more advanced employment opportunities. The number of deaf people who earned doctorates increased through the 1970's and beyond. The number of fields in which deaf people may enter grew significantly. Deaf people became accountants, doctors, dentists, scientists, college professors, computer programmers and a number of other fields (Gannon, 1981). During these two decades, the United States propelled forward in awareness and in legislation regarding people with disabilities. Deaf people have benefited from this humanitarian wave and from their own assertiveness. Deaf people were brought out of the fold into the active arena of competition for training, jobs and recognition (Crammate, 1987; Foster, 1992).

In 1988, a student movement at Gallaudet University mobilized an enormous number of deaf people and their hearing supporters to rally for someone who was deaf to run the university. The rationale at that time was that society has advanced significantly socially, educationally, professionally enough to produce someone deaf and qualified to be president of Gallaudet University. When the board of trustees selected a hearing person, deaf students protested and

caused the university to be shut down for several days. This movement, considered the “Selma of the Deaf, became a watershed moment for the deaf community, because it proved to the rest of the world that the world was ready for deaf people to be in high level roles such as a president of a college. Subsequently, the hearing president stepped down on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the protests and a deaf person, I. King Jordan, was selected to be the 8<sup>th</sup> president of Gallaudet University (Schein, 1989; Sacks, 1990). Jordan exclaimed, “Deaf people can do anything but hear” during one of his speeches, setting the tone for the new paradigm of deaf people in a hearing world.

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act was made into law, which made it unlawful for businesses more than 15 employees to discriminate on the basis of disability and required “reasonable accommodations” for those with disabilities (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). This made it possible for deaf people to advocate for access in the workplace and be employed in more careers. Around this time, an increasing number of deaf people established their own enterprises.

### **The Deaf Entrepreneur in Literature**

There has been very little written about deaf entrepreneurs. The earliest known and recorded account of a deaf business owner was an enterprising deaf man by the name of Edmund Booth, who sought his fortune by going west in the middle 1800’s to Iowa after having taught at the American School for the Deaf in Hartford. After taking in a number of jobs and joining the California Gold Rush, he then became an editor of the Anamosa Eureka newspaper, which he eventually purchased and ran for a number of years (Lang, 2004).

Another recorded example was that of an unidentified deaf business owner who lost five houses in a fire in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1895 (Gannon, 1981). The oldest known continuous business venture entered into by a group of Deaf people is that of Columbus Colony, an assistive

living and retired home for Deaf people in Columbus Ohio (Schein, 1989). Members of the Ohio School established this organization for the Deaf Alumni Association in 1896. This group of Deaf people purchased property on a defunct college campus in Westerfield, Ohio. As the organization grew, Columbus Colony was able to purchase an additional 140 acres surrounding the home. The board, made up of 100% Deaf people, ran the organization profitably for almost a century.

In the 1970's a consulting firm, which was made up of hearing people with little experience with Deaf people, provided free consulting to this organization and recommended that Columbus Colony apply for grants provided by the U.S. Department of Housing Urban Development (HUD). The stipulation was that the ten-member board be reconfigured so, that there were only 2 representatives from the Ohio School for the Deaf Alumni Association (OSDAA) and the other 8 would be outside representatives from people who were interested in working with Deaf people. The reason was that the consultants felt that government agencies are under the impression that Deaf people were not experienced to run the home, even though they ran it very well and with continuous profits for 81 years! When this occurred, Deaf people on the board became excluded from board proceedings and when the OSDAA got wind of the arrangement, they began to protest this movement in earnest. The hearing members of the board were perplexed that they were not trusted, even though they made no effort to include the deaf members on the board. Eventually, the board was reconfigured and a Deaf person became the administrator of the home (Schein, 1989). Board control eventually went back to the Ohio School for the Deaf Alumni Association and the organization is still going very strongly today.

In another recorded example of innovative entrepreneurial activities by deaf people, during the 1960's a group of three innovative deaf men took some old Western Union teletype

machines and converted them to working telecommunications devices for the deaf to be used via telephone couplers. These men, elated with their success, started a movement in which many people refurbished these old machines for use by deaf people for communication through the phone network. At first, communication was between members of the deaf community in the comfort of their home. In subsequent years, these devices were used to help to relay messages between deaf people and their hearing counterparts using an intermediary who used the device and an additional telephone to help relay the conversation (Gannon, 1981).

Harris (1989) listed two specific types of entrepreneurship for deaf entrepreneurs. The first type is entrepreneurship with a primary focus on marketing services and products to the general population. The second type is entrepreneurship with a focus on marketing to deaf and hard of hearing people in their own deaf community. According to the article, this has implications for the business venture in terms of communication, and the possible size of the market that the business is catering to. For a business that provides marketing services and products to the general population, there are likely going to be higher costs due to the need for interpreters and other access services. For a business that caters only to the deaf and hard of hearing population, there is the risk that the market may be limited only to this population (Harris, 1989).

In one of the few known published studies on Deaf Entrepreneurs and Business Owners, Pressman's (1999) doctoral dissertation on the characteristics of deaf entrepreneurs and deaf business owners delineated a number of recommendations to expand research in the area of deaf entrepreneurship, including the need for more qualitative research into the experience of deaf entrepreneurs. Pressman's dissertation included a written survey of 86 deaf entrepreneurs from a wide variety of educational backgrounds. The study, which focused primarily on implications

for career counseling, had several findings that are relevant to the topic of the experience of deaf entrepreneurs.

First, a vast range of businesses was reported that clustered into several definable categories. Most were home-based and classified as a sole proprietorship, used very little money to start their business and had fewer than 10 employees. Most of those that had employees hired hearing people. The vast majority operated in the private sector and served more hearing than deaf people. The two most frequently reported reasons for going into business were “desire to be their own boss” and “to earn more money” (Pressman, 1999). In this particular study, the 86 business owners reported owning a wide variety of businesses ranging from being a computer store owner to upholsterers to architectural firm owners.

Secondly, the typical Deaf business owner who participated in Pressman’s study seemed to be motivated by intrinsic factors rather than financial factors. This included strong interest in the area of their small business as well as having had already existing skills. Most of the people in this study used very little money to start their own business. (Pressman, 1999). The subjects of the study were drawn from the membership pools of the National Deaf Business Institute (NDBI).

Third, respondents were asked to identify who were the key role models and mentors to help these entrepreneurs to launch their own business. Asking for their mentors or role models growing up, 40% the respondents chose family members. In helping to start the business, 46.5% of the respondents indicated “friend” and 24.4% of the respondents selected “family. This finding was similar to that of MacLeod and Foster (2004) who looked at the role of mentoring relationships in the career development of successful deaf persons and found early mentors were for the most part, family members, followed by educators and school counselors. This study

focused on the general career development of deaf people, yet this has had greater implications in the importance of mentoring in providing role models to deaf people, helping them to set high goals and being an advocate for their success (MacLeod & Foster, 2004).

Fourth, Pressman's respondents were asked to share in their own words, their greatest challenges in starting their own business. Several commonalities emerged from their responses including (1) proving to hearing people that deaf people can run a business, (2) advertising and marketing their services and products, (3) developing networks and connections, (4) communicating with hearing customers, (5) developing both deaf and hearing customers, (6) starting and running the business, (7) paper work and time management (Pressman, 1999).

While there is no known hard empirical data to present, the numbers of deaf entrepreneurs have likely increased in the last 15 years, due to factors such as the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and with the advent of new technological tools in the workplace such as e-mail, video relay services, file sharing, and cloud computing, etc. With the Americans with Disabilities Act, Congress sought to remove unfair barriers to employment created by disabilities by asking employers to consider whether any reasonable accommodations could remove those barriers (Emerton, Foster & Gravitz, 1996). ADA is intended to enable people with disabilities to work in the workplace based on the same performance requirements that employers expect of people who are not disabled. An employer must provide reasonable accommodations unless it would impose an undue hardship. Undue hardship is "any accommodation that would be unduly costly, extensive, substantial, or disruptive or that would fundamentally alter the nature or operation of the business" (Emerton et al., 1996, p.51). Reasonable accommodation is the act of modifying or adjusting the situation for the employee so that he or she is able to perform the job.

Since many of these entrepreneurs are likely in positions in which they supervise others in their business venture, it makes sense to look into the supervisory aspect of the experience. In Pressman's (1999) study, 52% of those entrepreneurs surveyed supervised hearing individuals in their company. In one of the few studies regarding deaf people in supervisory positions, MacLeod and Foster (1996) sent out a survey to 213 deaf and hard of hearing supervisors/managers who had graduated from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology. The study was designed to focus on learning about the characteristics of those deaf and hard of hearing supervisors/managers who supervised hearing individuals. To help achieve this purpose, data only included those individuals who did not work for organizations that hired a lot of deaf employees or organizations that primarily served Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. 121 individuals responded to the survey and major themes were distilled from the data. "Communication problems and strategies fell out as a primary theme" in the study (MacLeod & Foster, 1996, p. 447). Communication difficulties ranked first among the list of issues brought forth by the deaf and hard of hearing supervisors/managers in the survey (MacLeod & Foster, 1996).

In today's society, it is taken for granted that most communications revolve around speaking and/or listening aurally and the activities of a deaf person may be limited in the workplace. Emerton et al. (1996) suggested that the accessibility problem is primarily one of communication and further suggested that there are several forms of communication used to achieve success in the workplace. Directive communications is the type of communications found in formal communication processes such as training, meetings, etc. Conversational or indirect communications is the communication that happens outside of the formal workplace situations, such as by the water cooler, in the hallway, during breaks. A lot of information is



exchanged through indirect communications. The indirect communication challenge is exacerbated by the fact that employers tend not to provide access, support, training and accommodations for the more indirect communication processes to be inclusive of the deaf employee. These informal communication channels have proven to help people to advance in their careers and to build strong trust with other employees (Foster, 1992). As Sacks (1990) reported in his book, most of the barriers that Deaf people face in today's world are primarily of a linguistic nature. The majority of problems encountered by deaf entrepreneurs who founded their business in marketing their services or products to the general public (non-deaf population), included communication barriers (Harris, 1989). At that time, very few deaf business owners were able to generate additional sources of revenue to afford a full-time interpreter. Now, with the advent of telecommunications relay services and new technologies, it is likely that those communication issues have been mitigated to some degree.

Foster and MacLeod (2004) conducted a follow up study to the MacLeod and Foster (1996) study in which they interviewed 15 deaf graduates in New York State who became supervisors. The purpose of the study was to look at the phenomenon of mentoring on the career success of these individuals. The authors found that having a mentor was a primary and persistent theme in their career success. They also concluded that it didn't matter if the mentor was deaf or hearing, rather it was the mentoring experience that provided the value in the subjects' career success (MacLeod & Foster, 2004).

Kavin and Brown-Kurz (2008) interviewed 11 deaf and hard of hearing professionals holding supervisory positions in deafness-related educational and social services professions regarding factors that have affected their career experiences, specifically regarding choices, mobility and networking. Common threads such as tokenism and merit, communication access,

and self-imposed limitations related to their career choices, mobility, networking were identified and discussed. The authors noted that their study was limited to the study of those individuals who currently work in educational and social services agencies that primarily serve deaf and hard of hearing people. The study demonstrated that all of the respondents discussed communication challenges within their current workplace and addressed the fact that if they left the field of deafness, they will likely face additional challenges (Kavin & Brown-Kurz, 2008).

Ten out of the eleven respondents in the Kavin and Brown-Kurz (2008) study indicated “frustrations about missing out on networking opportunities”, wishing they could join “water cooler conversations and engage in every day conversations and jokes with their hearing non-signing colleagues” (p. 37). Networking challenges had a significant impact on the career experiences of deaf and hard of hearing professionals. In the same study, respondents discussed different strategies for catching up on missed information exchanged in the workplace. The respondents discussed the need to use these strategies to access the informal information loop in the office (Kavin & Brown-Kurz, 2008). This is consistent with the findings from Foster’s (1992) study, which found that deaf and hard of hearing employees often experienced difficulty in engaging in social interactions, information networking opportunities and obtaining information through informal networks, which was often detrimental to the achievement of their long term career goals.

With the current surge of entrepreneurial activity, it is expected that more deaf people will become involved in creating these new ventures. As denoted in another section of the study, advances in technology, educational opportunities, and heightened awareness of deaf people will contribute to the increase in the phenomena of deaf entrepreneurship.

**Summary of Literature Review**

With the advent of an increasingly entrepreneurial society, it would be beneficial to look at this specific population for common themes that may uncover specific information that will help to develop specific strategies and tactics to foster the entrepreneurial spirit among those who are deaf. This must be accomplished by developing a foundation based on the current entrepreneurial climate in today's world, by understanding how deaf people experience entrepreneurship, understanding the people's view of their world and by understanding the history of employment and entrepreneurship of deaf people. The reality of the deaf entrepreneur is socially constructed through their experience, both as a deaf person and as an entrepreneur. This socially constructed foundation is the theoretical basis for the current study.

Over 20 years ago, Schein (1989) wrote in a book written about the Deaf Community, "Unfortunately, systemic studies of Deaf Entrepreneurship have not been undertaken. What we are left with, then, are anecdotal accounts that may mislead more than inform" (p.169). Today, there is still little research in the area of deaf entrepreneurship, which provides much opportunity to delve into the experiences of deaf people in entrepreneurship. This study is intended to add to this body of literature.

### **Chapter 3. Methodology/Methods**

The research question was, “What is the essence of the lived experience of deaf entrepreneurs/business owners?” The ontology of the phenomena being studied is of a social constructionist nature; therefore, an interpretivist approach to research was the most appropriate methodology for this study. Real life situations need to be explored in terms of its contextual nature as seen by the respondents. Therefore, phenomenology was an appropriate method to explore the topic of the lived experiences for deaf entrepreneurs. Each of the 14 entrepreneurs has been interviewed to understand his or her “lived experiences”. Common themes were analyzed, coded and distilled from all of the interviews. The goal of this research was to understand the “essence” of the experience as perceived by the participants (McMillan, 2004).

The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experiences into a textural experience of its essence- in such a way that the reader is experiencing close to the actual experience (van Manen, 1997). Phenomenological research explores other people’s experiences in order to better understand a deeper meaning of an aspect of human experience in the context of the entire human experience. Phenomenology goes beyond the subjective experiences or data of the participants to the orientation of inquiring about the nature of the phenomenon as an essential human experience. In phenomenology, the researcher collects data from the individuals who have experienced a specific phenomenon. The data is analyzed and organized and the researcher develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals (van Manen, 1997; Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 1998).

### **History and Philosophical Foundations of Phenomenology**

Modern day phenomenology has its roots in Edmund Husserl's work in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His mission in life was to transform philosophy into a hard science and his philosophy evolved in stages throughout his life's work. He started off with a foundation in the mathematical field, but then moved towards a new discipline, which focused on the philosophy of intersubjectivity and into ontology of the "life-world", or the world as people experience it. In phenomenology, intersubjectivity performs many functions. It is available to people through empathy, which in phenomenology, involves experiencing another body as another subject, and not just an object among objects. In doing so, one also experiences oneself as seen by "the Other" and the world in general as a shared world instead of one that is only available to oneself (Crotty, 2003). Husserl was concerned with the discovery of meaning and essences in knowledge. He believed that a sharp contrast existed between facts and essences (Moustakas, 1994). Through his work, he eventually embraced the social worlds of culture and history, moving completely away from his original positivistic roots in arithmetic (Smith & Smith, 1995).

Epistemology is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know. The epistemological stance for this methodology has its roots in constructionism. Constructionism is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality depended on human practices. Knowledge is constructed out of interaction between human beings and then the world. Meaning is not discovered, but socially constructed by the people who experience a particular phenomenon (Crotty, 2003).

Husserlian phenomenology focuses on the description and structural analysis of consciousness, as opposed to a hard account of its causal origin in brain activity or elsewhere. These acts of consciousness are to be studied precisely as it is experienced and phenomenology deals with how we experience specific phenomena and in dealing with different ways of relating to the phenomena via the concept of intentionality. Consciousness is “intentional” in the sense of being directed to an object being studied. The phenomenologist attends to these acts of consciousness and to the objects they “intend” as we experience them (Smith & Smith, 1995). This concept of intentionality focuses on the act of humans engaging with their human world through meaning making (Crotty, 2003). Phenomenology aims at creating descriptions that describe lived experience (van Manen, 1997). The phenomenological interview has very specific purposes. It is used to help analyze interview data based on experience, which may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper description of a specific human experience. It is also used as a way to develop a conversation with a participant about the meaning of an experience.

Husserl introduced the idea of “Epoche”, in which the phenomenologist is to “bracket”, or set aside their own personal experiences in attending to the phenomena as experienced by the participants in the study. This is necessary in order for the researcher to take a fresh perspective of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). Crotty (2003) states, “phenomenology suggests that we lay aside, as best we can, the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, then possibilities for new meaning emerge” (p.78). Husserl refers to this as, “going back to the things themselves” (Crotty, 2003, p.78). In other words, it is about “saying no” to the meaning system that exists in us. (Smith & Smith, 1995; Crotty, 2003; Creswell, 2007).

As a researcher, the goal for the phenomenological approach for this study is to obtain rich thick descriptions through the interviews of the deaf entrepreneurs and business owners. From the rich, thick descriptions, common themes are distilled to create a description of the experience being studied.

### **Participation Selection**

Participants were purposefully selected based on specific criteria. Each participant had to have at least 2 years of being an entrepreneur or business owner. The definition used for ‘entrepreneur’ is someone involved in the implementation, investment, the assumption of risk and managing a venture. The definition of “Deaf” is taken from Crammatte (1968), “persons deaf to the extent that their communication was visually oriented; that is their reception of communication was through the eyes—reading written messages, reading lips, observing gestures and clues, or using a structured visual language such as American Sign Language” (p.x).

Participants were located through personal contacts and organizations such as the National Deaf Business Institute (NDBI). A list of members was obtained from the NDBI for the purpose of this study. Although this comprehensive list was available, I was able to tap into my existing personal network and recruit appropriate individuals for the study. An introductory e-mail message was sent to each potential participant (see Exhibit B). The use of social media was a powerful way to recruit people for the study. The snowball effect quickly came into play, as many of the contacts were obtained through other individuals, who knew of entrepreneurs/business owners who may fit the parameters of the study. At an innovation conference, I saw a video of a deaf entrepreneur explaining about her start-up business. That individual was contacted and was willing to be part of this study. Many of these individuals

expressed that they wanted to be part of the study so that they may learn about other deaf entrepreneurs/business owners in similar circumstances.

### **Data collection**

Each participant signed an interview consent form, giving permission to use the data from the interviews for the purpose of this study (see exhibit C). A purposeful sample of 14 respondents was interviewed to get to the essence of the experience. Interviews were videotaped and recorded onto DVDs, which were locked up in a safe place for future reference. A semi-structured approach was used for the data collection from the participants. I attempted to establish rapport with each participant and to elicit dialogue, which allowed a freestyle discussion of the actual phenomenon itself. This approach allowed for a lot of rich descriptive information about the experience in the viewpoint of the participant, rather than having a structured format. The long interview method was utilized for the interviews, in which several major questions are used along with follow-up questions (Moutstakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). An interview guide with basic starter questions focused on the lived experiences of the participants in the study (see exhibit D). I used the opportunity at the beginning of the interview to explain my “Epoche” and my interest in this study. Probing questions such as, “Tell me about what it is like to be a deaf entrepreneur?” “What are some of the rewarding aspects of being a deaf entrepreneur?” and “What are some of the barriers you have faced in being a deaf entrepreneur?” were asked to obtain additional data regarding the experience. An open question was placed at the end of the interview so that the participants could add their own perspectives and ideas that might not be included in the responses to the other questions. Follow-up questions



were asked to elaborate on the essence of the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur until thick, rich descriptions were obtained from the interviews.

Short-handed written notes were taken during the interview to allow for cross-referencing with the transcripts from the videotaped interview. A qualitative data collection and coding system were deployed through the use of Microsoft Word, using a structured data analysis process developed by Ruona (2005). Due to the nature of communications by the participants in American Sign Language and other visual means, all of the interviews had been videotaped in their entirety. Phenomenology requires a continuous interaction with the data in order for a deep and rich understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Moutsakas, 1994; Cresswell, 2007). The interviews were transcribed into English text by the researcher. Videotaping and personally transcribing the interviews allowed me to look at the overall communication from the participant, including body language, facial expressions, and other non-manual markers and to record those in the final transcript. The constant interaction with the data provided a rich look into the many layers of the data.

Member checks were conducted by sending the participants a copy of their transcribed interview. These member checks were used to ensure that everything being said was accurately transcribed. The participants had the option of receiving a copy of the DVD of the recorded interview if they wished to have that available to them. None of the participants asked for a copy of their videotape of the interview. It was made clear that they were not be allowed to make changes to the information transcript except for correction of names and other specific identifying details, or if the transcription clearly does not reflect what was being said on the videotape.

Because of the inherent close-knit nature of the Deaf community, extra steps were implemented to protect the identity of the participants in the study. Pseudonyms were used and identifying markers were removed to protect the identity of those participants. General locations were used rather than the name of the city. If the participants felt that the information in their transcript revealed too much information about their identity, location, company and other issues, then the descriptors were changed to make it less discernable.

All of the interviews were conducted from the dates of May 10, 2010 to June 16, 2010 and were all done in person. The types of locations varied from person to person, depending on their employment situation, availability, and other factors. Seven interviews took place at the participant's place of employment. Two of the interviews were conducted at the participant's office within their home. The remaining interviews were conducted at a university in the city in which they worked. The places of employment varied from home offices to large corporate offices. The atmosphere in the places of employment varied in terms of the physical environment. Some of the more established businesses were in large office buildings. One retail business was in a large suburban mall. One business was comprised of a large campus with several buildings. One recent start-up business was a cluster of a few offices surrounding a communal workspace. A few self-employed individuals rented an office in smaller office developments. Meeting them at their place of employment allowed for another layer of data to study and an opportunity to observe the work environment in which the participants work. This also allowed for observation of some of the informal interaction between the Deaf entrepreneur and the other employees, if applicable. In the initial e-mail to the participants, they were informed that the interview would take up to two hours.

**Data analysis**

Information from the interviews was analyzed and coded for common experiences and themes. Microsoft Word, through the use of tables and other sorting tools, was used with the Ruona (2005) approach. This process involved formatting all of the transcripts into a Microsoft Word document using the table feature. The interview data was segmented by specific thoughts or ideas into individual rows. Additional columns were created to allow for the input of notes about specific chunks of data. The researcher reviewed all of the data and wrote notes into the notes column of the document. The notes for all of the interviews were analyzed for common topics. These common topics became the basis of the theme analysis. Codes were created for common themes and this allowed for organization of all interviews according to the themes. When codes were assigned to all of the data, all of the interview data were merged into one master document. Data was then sorted according to the created codes and organized for the final analysis. This allowed the researcher to see all of the data organized by code. This process may have been more time consuming than a more automated approach. However, this approach, rather than the use of specialized software, offered me excellent functionality for the coding process and greatly improved analytic capability. Most importantly, the rigor of data analysis was enhanced. This rigor was obtained through increased accuracy through the various steps of the coding process with its built in procedures for redundancy and data checks (Ruona, 2005). The recursiveness of the process required the researcher to go through the data multiple times to ensure that every piece of data was coded and analyzed. I also was able to tap into my existing knowledge of the use of Microsoft Word, rather than having to invest time, training and money into an automated process.

Theme Analysis refers to the process of uncovering the themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolved meanings and imagery of the data. Making something of a text of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is a process of insightful discovery or disclosure. Themes are structures of the interviewees' experiences (van Manen, 1997). Data from the transcribed text was organized and 6 major themes were created. A modified method of phenomenological analysis was used to help distill pertinent data from all the interviews and to record themes that appear among all the respondent data. This process involved conducting a preliminary data analysis to capture some of the themes that had emerged thus far at that time. Notes were recorded into a journal to reflect the recurring themes, which occurred in the early interviews. There was an extra column in the data charts to allow me to write notes about specific segments or chunks of data. Preliminary themes were identified through the use of open coding of the remaining interviews. This process was highly recursive, allowing the flexibility of adding additional relevant codes when needed (Ruona, 2005). Some of the steps were repeated, generating more interaction with data and cross validation in the process. The following steps were employed (Moutstakas, 1994; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Creswell, 1998; Ruona, 2005):

- a) Transcribing interviews directly from digital video.
- b) Organizing and preparing verbatim transcripts. Creating tables using Microsoft Word and organizing the data into meaningful segments (Ruona, 2005).
- c) Reading/Re-reading transcript charts (Ruona, 2005).

- d) Writing notes in the notes section (Smith & Osborn, 2003).
- e) Listing and clustering themes. Creating codes from the theme clusters.
- f) Producing coherent table of codes/themes.
- g) Prioritizing data and creation of final coding table using codes created from the data.

### **Validity/reliability**

A good phenomenological description is gathered by current and past lived experiences and recalls lived experiences. This is validated by others' lived experience and it validates lived experience. This is considered the "validating circle of inquiry" of phenomenology (van Manen, 1997). Data saturation is the process during qualitative research in which interview data no longer produces more new insights (Charmaz, 2003). Data saturation was achieved after the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> interview, but because appointments were already scheduled, interviews continued through the 14<sup>th</sup> interview.

Validity checks were accomplished in three phases. The first phase was conducted through member checks of the actual transcripts from the interviews. This is especially important since we had several participants who used American Sign Language as their first language and English as their second language. A copy of the transcribed interview was e-mailed to each participant. Each participant was asked to review the transcription for accuracy of information. For the most part, people offered input on the accuracy of names, dates, and other identifiers. There are interpreting and transcription services available for ASL translation

of video; however, this could have reduced the amount of time in which I interacted with the real data, thereby reducing the rigor of the data. General notes were recorded during the interviews. As a qualitative researcher, the decision was to transcribe the interviews in their entirety. This allowed an extra layer of interaction with the data on the part of the researcher.

The second phase was having an outside inter-rater check the data and the preliminary themes after the data was organized into 6 themes and its subsequent subthemes. This inter-rater had a doctorate degree and was versed in the area of social research. The inter-rater reviewed the transcript charts and suggested that there were an excessive number of subthemes and recommended that these be compressed into other themes. The number of subthemes were consolidated and reduced as a result of the inter-rater check process.

The third phase was a member check of a draft of Chapter 4. An email was sent out to all of the participants asking if they would like to review a draft of Chapter 4 (the data). A draft of Chapter 4 was sent to the participants who requested a copy. This phase had several purposes. The first purpose was to ensure confidentiality of the data in the quotes. Participants were given the opportunity to change any identifiers. The second purpose was to solicit any additional information from the participant regarding the theme or sub themes. Thirdly, this was an opportunity for the participants to offer their thoughts on the themes that came up from the data. Twelve of the participants in the study requested to review chapter 4 and offered their input. Very little was changed or added to the draft of Chapter 4, other than requests to de-identify the data further. Additionally, mechanisms during the study were created to ensure appropriate interpretations of the data. This was accomplished through a separate memo journal to document my thoughts and viewpoints regarding the information being studied. A separate memo chart

was created using MS Word to record all of my thoughts and observations throughout the research process. This chart was used to cross-validate researcher's interpretations with the outside inter-rater.

### Chapter 4. Findings

“I want to see more deaf-owned businesses, it is really important for the economic flow among the deaf community. Also, it is important for the economic flow in the hearing community.”

-Samantha, Deaf Business Owner

“It’s really important to understand what you really want to do. What does that mean for me? I want to feel good about what I am doing; I want to be proud of my accomplishments. If I go to work, for example, I was successful working at \_\_\_\_\_, but it doesn’t have as much meaning for me because I have a safety net. I can fall and get back up. Having a business is real life, either you make it or you don’t. I want an adventure and a challenge. When I get up in the morning, I want an adventure. That gives me motivation. I read about successful businesspeople, I say to myself, wow, if they can do it, that’s my motivation.”

-Frank, Deaf Business Owner

The research question for this particular study was “What is the essence of the deaf entrepreneur/business owner’s experience?” The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of deaf entrepreneurs and business owners in the context of creating those ventures and in the management of those existing ventures. The overarching purpose of the study was to generate new knowledge in the area of deaf entrepreneurship and deaf owned businesses. The author’s interest in this subject was to gain a deeper understanding of the essential nature of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. There are an increasing number of deaf people who are establishing their own enterprises and these deaf entrepreneurs/business owners have a story to tell the world!

The data was analyzed using an adaptation of the method of phenomenological research as outlined by Moustakas (1994). The themes from the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner were derived solely from the transcribed text of the interviews with 14 deaf entrepreneurs/business owners. Statements were identified through a process of open



coding and grouped by similar statements. These grouped statements were organized in clusters of meaning that represented essential facets of the participants' experiences. These six clusters subsequently became the major themes that explicated the essence of the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. These major themes also were expanded through subthemes, which further described the theme in detail.

The participants represented a wide variety of industrial experiences, number of years of experience, organizational structures, and organizational sizes. Two of the organizations were non-profit enterprises. One of those non-profits was a smaller one with 28 employees and the other one was a larger one with roughly 1300 employees. Three of the participants had failed business ventures and were in the midst of creating new business ventures at the time of the study. One of those had just launched her third venture a week before her interview. Another one of those participants was well into his third year of his newly created venture. Participants were purposefully selected based on specific criteria. Each participant has had at least 2 years of being an entrepreneur or business owner. The average age of the participants was 47 years, and the average number of years of their business venture was 13 years. An entrepreneur/business owner is someone involved in the implementation, investment, the assumption of risk and managing a venture. The definition of "Deaf" created by Crammatte (1968) was used as a delimiter in the study. The study was limited to "persons deaf to the extent that their communication was visually oriented; that is their reception of communication was through the eyes—reading written messages, reading lips, observing gestures and clues, or using a structured visual language such as American Sign Language" (Crammatte, 1968, p. x). The following table provides a description of the profile of the participants (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1: Profiles of Study Participants**

<b>Pseudonym*</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of Experience as Entrepreneur/Business Owner</b>	<b>General Industry</b>
Charlotte	Female	26	2	Software
Jasper	Male	27	3	Non-profit International Organization
Samuel	Male	50	13	Graphics and Web Design
Taylor	Female	44	5	Retail
Buddy	Male	52	14	Financial Services
Samantha	Female	38	5	Multi-media/Fundraising
Steve	Male	51	25	Financial Services
Paul	Male	70	25	Software/Management Consulting
Frank	Male	48	7	Automotive/Food
Greg	Male	38	5	Recreation
Bill	Male	53	6	Banking
Lizzie	Female	36	7	Writing/Editing and Design Services
Rick	Male	55	35	Non-profit National Services
Ed	Male	64	28	Catalog Sales

\*Pseudonyms were created to ensure the confidentiality of responses.

During the interviews, it was found that the responses varied in accordance to the stage at which the entrepreneur/business owner was currently. For example, for those people who have established their business many years ago and who are currently maintaining that business, there is less descriptive data regarding the start-up of the business. On the other hand, these well established entrepreneurs provided a lot of deep reflection about their experiences over the years and their experiences in managing their enterprise. In contrast, for those people who have very recently established their business, there were a lot of fresh perspectives about their nascent or start-up experiences. They may not have the years of experience to be able to reflect on the entire entrepreneurial cyclical experience.

Being a deaf entrepreneur or business owner was described as a very complex and dynamic experience. The complex nature of the demands of their businesses and how they function as a deaf person in a predominantly hearing world led to themes that were unique to these fourteen individuals. Six themes were distilled from all of the interviews and described the essence of the experience of the deaf entrepreneur/business owner. The first theme was described as the deaf entrepreneur's pursuit of their passion with experience and skill. All the other five themes were connected to this central theme and in their own ways supported the theme as spokes to a hub. The second theme told of the description of the deaf entrepreneur's running their enterprise through collaboration, networking, strategy and understanding of the market. The third theme described the deaf entrepreneurs reflecting on their identity as a deaf person and how it impacted their experience. The fourth theme discussed the need for building bridges to the rest of the world using communication strategies. The fifth theme expanded on the entrepreneurs' need for having a support network. Lastly, the sixth theme illuminated the deaf

entrepreneur's desire to make an impact in today's world. Figure 1 gives a visual representation of the six themes.

**The participants in the study experienced being deaf entrepreneurs/business owners by:**



**Figure 1. Six essential themes of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner.**

Under each theme, a number of sub-themes were described that support in further explicating the nature and meaning of the experience of being deaf entrepreneurs. The themes and their sub-themes are stated below:

Theme I: Pursuing their passion with experience and skill

- a. Sowing their Seeds of Passion into a Business
- b. Experience is the Best Teacher
- c. Reaping the Rewards of Being an Entrepreneur
- d. Learning to Overcome Adversity and Learning to Persevere

Theme II: Building the organization through collaboration, networking and a deep understanding of the market

- a. Leveraging their Networks and the Importance of Creating Partnerships
- b. Marketing Specifically to the Deaf Community and Beyond the Deaf Community
- c. Growing and Managing the Enterprise
- d. Being Deaf as a Competitive Advantage

Theme III: Reflecting on one's identity as a deaf person and how it has impacted their experience

- a. "I am Deaf, but So What?"
- b. Dealing with the Attitudes and Perspectives in the Deaf Community
- c. The Importance of Preserving One's Legitimacy and Reputation as a Deaf Entrepreneur
- d. Confidentiality as an Important Consideration as a Deaf Person

Theme IV: Building bridges with the rest of the world using communication strategies

- a. Dealing with Communication Challenges
- b. Use of Employees and Contractors to Aid Communication
- c. Experiencing Changes in Access Technologies over the Years
- d. Use of Video Technology as a Tool
- e. Improvising and Creating Alternative Communication Strategies

Theme V: Having a support network

- e. Family as a Source of Support
- f. Enlisting the Support of Friends and Other Professionals
- g. Enlisting the Support of other Entrepreneurial and Small Business Community Members
- h. Use of Mentors as Support

Theme VI: Making an impact in today's world

- i. The Altruistic Nature of their Business
- j. Giving Back to the Community

**Theme I: Pursuing their passion with experience and skill**

The first theme that emerged from the data from the interviews was connected with all the other themes and portrayed the participants' desire to pursue their passion with experience and skill. This pursuit of their passion is what drove these individuals to establishing and running their enterprises and affected everything that they did. Because their drive to pursue their passion affected all of the other themes that were explicated, this theme is visually represented by an inner hub in Figure 1, of which all the other themes radiated.

**a. Sowing their seeds of passion into a business.**

Many of the entrepreneurs discussed how they created their business venture from a passion of theirs, whether it was a vocation or an avocation. For some of these participants, their ventures were established as a result of a lifelong dream. Frank discussed how he dreamed of owning a business when he was younger.

When I was in college, or even high school, I dreamed of owning a business. I was thinking about the different kinds of businesses I could set up. When I was working at \_\_\_\_\_ as a manager, I was always watching how the owner would run the business, and how they made it successful and how they managed their employees. I considered that training on how I can own a successful business. (Frank)

For others, the passion was created because the participants' were born into a family of business owners. Ed described it was like a seed that was planted when he was younger. He decided at that time, he would not go into business, and went into a different field.

The best I can remember is it was like a seed that was planted when I was very young. My father owned a business, as well as my grandfather owned a family business. My grandfather owned a paper company and my father owned a lumberyard. At that time, I was not even thinking about setting up a business. I felt that psychology was the answer, I would be working with deaf people and everything was fine. (Ed)

Many of the participants recalled how some of the reasons for creating their business were partly due to serendipitous circumstances or a timely meeting with a person who would

eventually help them in the creation of their venture. For example, Taylor had a fledgling online business when she met a neighbor who had a similar interest in selling retail products.

One day, my neighbor from three houses away came over to my house. She was a hearing, she was a CPA, owned 7 rental properties and had a dream of owning a \_\_\_\_\_ store, but she didn't want to do this herself. All the neighbors had been gossiping about the other neighbors so she heard about what I was doing and my fledgling E-bay business. So, she decided to come over for a visit. After we had talked, she asked me if I wanted to join her \_\_\_\_\_ store business. She heard that I was selling \_\_\_\_\_ things online. (Taylor)

Lizzie recalled an experience, which led her to start her business after she left a high pressured job as an Editor in Chief at a newspaper. This opportunity led her to establish the framework of her business.

It was all good; I realized I was lucky to have that job, even with all of its challenges. I was so lucky to have that job at the young age of 26. That job taught me a lot regarding running a business. I eventually quit that job. The day after I had quit my job, I woke up thinking, "shoot, what am I going to do with my life now?" I got an email at around that time from one person who worked with me at \_\_\_\_\_, asking me if I had time to work on a book project and that I would be paid for that effort. That was that, and, many clients later, here I am! Everything was happening. (Lizzie)

Ed was laid off from his job as a psychologist and he went right into the establishment of his business when the opportunity came up. He had been selling TTYs on the side while working as a part time psychologist.

The manufacturer representative suggested that I become a \_\_\_\_\_ dealer. It was not a big deal and I sold that teacher a \_\_\_\_\_. At the same time, the old telephone companies like Qwest (or it was Northwest) had a five year program to allow any phone customers to borrow money up to \$600 with free interest. When deaf people heard about this program, they started buying \_\_\_\_\_. I was eventually laid off as a psychologist, so I went right into the \_\_\_\_\_ business (full time) when the opportunity came up. So, that was ironic, and it was a mixed blessing. (Ed)

Charlotte told of her experience, in which she attributed the start of her business as a combination of her personal interests with several key incidents that have happened in her life.

This business started off with a personal experience of mine. When I was at a museum, I didn't have an accessible option to be able to join an audio tour. I used cued speech, cues

audio wise. I asked them if there was something that could help and they gave me a transcript. It was really awkward and fifty pages long. So, I got the idea that I would take the transcript home, set up my Mac computer and set up a tour in cued speech from the transcript. I'd have a visual tour, and then I took the video and transferred it to my I-pod. I thought, oh, that is so much better than a transcript! I took this to the museum director, and I asked if something like this could be offered? They said that they would, but no one offered this. So, I was like, hmmm..., maybe I will go for it! So, that's how it all started! I met a connection of mine who was in the business school, who needed to write a business plan for class. I told her about this idea. She needed to write a business plan for class, and asked if she could help write it with me. So, we wrote this business plan together and she came on as my business partner. (Charlotte)

Charlotte explained further that her partner was winning business plans competitions, and they realized they needed to parlay the business plan into an actual business.

My business partner entered a business plan competition, and won the competition, and then we won another one, and won another one! We looked at each other, and we agreed that we needed to stop winning business plan competitions and actually make the business happen! So, I left my job at the \_\_\_\_\_ and started this start-up two years ago. It has been going well and it has been really insightful, it's been a lot of fun. (Charlotte)

Rick told of a traumatic event in his family, which gave him the initiative to want to do something about it by setting up his organization.

My father was a farmer. When I was a small boy, I saw my father as a very proud farmer. One summer, his crops were destroyed and some farm buildings were destroyed. After thinking about what he could do, he decided to go to the bank, just like any other normal hearing farmer who wanted to borrow money. I went to the bank with my father and I saw the banker tell my father that deaf people should not be running a farm. He told my father that he didn't think the bank could help him. That's where I saw firsthand that he was discriminated against based on his being deaf. My father gave up his farm and auctioned everything he had. I witnessed his possessions being taken away, one, by one. I mean, they took away farm machines, tractors, and livestock. So, that ignited an internal fire within me. This wasn't right! We moved to the city and soon thereafter, my father died of a heart attack. I knew that it was related to the loss of his farm, because once he moved to the city, he was not a happy man. My dad had been a farmer all of his life until he was 50 years old. I went to the school for the deaf, and then attended Gallaudet. I came back after one year and worked at the \_\_\_\_\_ company. There were 30 of us deaf people working at the company and I saw there were no opportunities for deaf people to move up within the company. A group of us decided that we needed to do something. We discussed ideas and at that time I was the \_\_\_\_\_ Association of the Deaf president. I decided to resign as the president to set up the company. (Rick)



A number of participants communicated the fact that they did not intend to be where they are now and were surprised at how things have worked out for them. Steve reflected that he thought he would be a one-person business forever, but his business has grown on a national basis and his business has added employees.

I started basically as a one-person business; I never dreamed that I would grow to where I am today. I never dreamed that I would have four advisors and three staff members in several offices around the country. I thought I would be a one-person business forever. (Steve)

Jasper expressed his disbelief in the fact his organization has remained viable.

I was shocked because I honestly did not believe that this organization would last a long time. I was discouraged previously because I was not sure that the \_\_\_\_\_ idea would fly. I was proven wrong, and that experience proved me wrong. I realized that there was an impact! (Jasper)

Samuel explained that he never expected to own his own company in the first place and that he thought he would work for a company.

I never expected to own my own business in the first place. I thought I would work for a company for the rest of my life, with health benefits and so on. I talked with my wife about leaving the company to set up my own business. (Samuel)

Lizzie described that she did not formally intend to start her own company, but it happened to be a way of using her skills, for creating income and it gave her new contacts.

Did I formally set out to establish a company? No, I didn't do that. It was a way of making money and I had the skills, why not? I was doing this on a freelance basis and it was something to do with my life and it gave me new contacts. (Lizzie)

When Rick established a non-profit organization, his original plan was to stay for the short term and to go back to college to finish his degree. He ended up staying with the organization for 35 years as its CEO.

My plan was to stay for the short term and not stay for a long time. My plan was to work a short time and then go back to Gallaudet to finish my degree. The first grant that we got was only for a nine month period so I felt that fit my goal to go back to Gallaudet.

But those nine months became 35 years! It is interesting, when I was young, I never intended to be a CEO, and I had never intended to go the direction that I went. (Rick)

Many of the participants attributed the start-up of their ventures because of a person they had met or had networked with. In one particular instance, Samuel told of an experience in which a hiring manager had hesitated to hire him because he was deaf. A college friend convinced the hiring manager to give him a chance.

While I was in school, I had a hearing classmate who was working at \_\_\_\_\_. While I was working on my thesis, actually I was finishing it up; she let me know of an opportunity to do some contract work at \_\_\_\_\_. I went in for an interview. The hiring manager was hesitant to hire me because I was deaf. Thank God my student friend persuaded him to hire me and to give me a chance. She knew my work because we had worked together while we were students. Good thing that I met her and you never know when your networking will lead to opportunities. If I had kept to myself and not interacted with her, I would not have gotten this opportunity. Grab the opportunity because you never know! I was blessed that this woman helped me get this opportunity. I worked as a contractor through the summer on a big project. (Samuel)

While he worked as a contractor, Samuel met a colleague, Jim, who convinced him to set up his own business. Samuel recalled, “About a month later, Jim asked me to have lunch with him. We had lunch and talked. He suggested that I leave the company and set up a business because he had plenty of work that I could do.”

Several people told of how they transitioned into the business as a result of “hitting the glass ceiling” or as a result of being burned out in their jobs. Paul reflected upon his establishment of his business after he felt he “hit the glass ceiling” because he felt he couldn’t move up the organization as a deaf person.

I felt that I hit a ceiling, so I was looking at the possibility of forming my own company. I had many friends with whom I worked over a number of years. I talked with them and they said they would be happy to join me if I set up my own business and things like that. One of them got a project for himself and he needed another person to join him as a subcontractor. He offered me the position as a consultant. This was for one year and this paid \$45 per hour, 25 years ago. I thought to myself, I am going to start my business with that! While I was working on that one contract, I was doing marketing calls to drum

up more business. When that project ended, or the contract was over, which was pretty successful, I immediately got more work! (Paul)

Jasper described his experience in establishing his current social enterprise after having had two business failures. He explained that he is finally doing something that he is passionate about as an entrepreneur.

I experienced two business failures before setting up this organization. This is my third venture, and it is finally successful, because I am doing something that I am really passionate about. I am enthusiastic about this organization and I want to keep it going. It is important that you have passion for the business you want to set up, not something that will just help you get money, because that can really hurt you. (Jasper)

In describing what it was like to be a deaf entrepreneur/business owner, the participants explained that their businesses were created from building on what they are passionate about. These individuals explicated the different paths in which they acted on the area in which they are passionate about. Some of these experiences were triggered by life events, network connections they had, but the desire was always a part of them. For some of these participants, this pursuit of their passion resulted into a bigger enterprise or a lifelong business of which they never dreamed would happen.

#### **b. Experience is the best teacher.**

Many of the participants explicated the large role that their experiences and skills developed during their careers prior to becoming entrepreneurs/business owners. Buddy described his experience in learning about his business well by being motivated through a direct sales commission system and by putting in a lot of hours.

I was in that business and learned a lot about the business in the first five years. That time, I was still working for myself and was compensated through a direct commission method, so I had to be self-motivated. I learned the business well and put in a lot of hours. (Buddy)

Buddy further explained that it was important to really understand the business before establishing his business. Buddy recalled, “It all goes back to my knowledge, experience that had built up over the years. Also, it was important to really understand the business itself. At that point, my agency was established. “ Samantha described her past experience which helped her in her business.

In four years, I was able to raise about a half a million dollars and I hired seven staff members. I mean it really took off. I sat on the \_\_\_\_\_ City Council as a member of \_\_\_\_\_. I was helping reviewing the budget for the city of \_\_\_\_\_ and worked on issues regarding language barriers, such as Hispanic, deaf, etc for transportation, and different issues. I was on television and interviewed with many newspapers. (Samantha)

Samantha further explained how this experience has made it easy for her in her current business.

I wanted to focus on marketing and fundraising. I put together all of the paperwork in setting up this business. I did have experience in setting up an organization in the past, so it wasn't like I didn't know what I was doing. I had experience in this sort of thing so it was pretty easy for me. (Samantha)

Samantha explained further, that it is actually tough, but because she had the skill, knowledge and experience, it was not as tough for her as it might be for other people.

I really enjoy the challenge even though it is tough. I really enjoy it; it is probably not as tough for me as it might be for other people. I have that skill, knowledge and experience and I am not afraid to try new things. (Samantha)

Even though Charlotte disclosed that she was a young entrepreneur, she discussed the important role that her past training and experience played in her current role as an owner of a fledgling technology company.

I graduated from \_\_\_\_\_ with a degree in Art History and I had a museum background. I went to work for the \_\_\_\_\_ organization then I went to work for the \_\_\_\_\_. I got a really good understanding of the field of disabilities and accessibility from \_\_\_\_\_ and the Museum structure and how museums operate. Then, I went to work for the \_\_\_\_\_ in their disability office. In those two years, I gained a really strong network in the accessibility of the arts. (Charlotte)

Paul described his experience in ten different companies and how it helped him with the creation of his enterprise.

I started working as a computer programmer, and I was pretty good at it. Altogether, I worked for ten different companies, including two start-up firms. I also worked at large companies such as Computer Sciences and EDS, which is Electronic Data Systems, Ross Perot's company. (Paul)

Paul continued to explain that it was important for him to really understand the business and to always be learning. He described this through his advising of deaf students at Gallaudet University.

I speak to students at Gallaudet University often. If you were to set up a business, make sure you understand the business. I spent twenty-five years in the computer services industry developing software programs. I knew the business from the technical side, but I didn't know well enough about the marketing side (of the business), so that was the only area I really had to learn. I had to convince the customer why they should use me instead of these other huge companies. You also need to learn as you go. (Paul)

Samuel talked about his experience and then offers advice on what he thinks needs to happen in setting up a business.

I decided to work in New York City for the City of New York in their graphic design department. The job gave me an opportunity to get a taste of what the real world is like. This was way before computers were used for art. What I did was mostly mechanical. I applied what I learned in school into the job I had. I always say this again and again, be sure to get a real job first. Get your degree and then get a job. Don't set up a business right away, no! No! No! No! You need to get the experience to develop your skills, increase your network and let that build up over time. The people who you work with will know your work, your skills, knowledge and expertise. You never know when someone will quit and set up their own business, and then the network will help you lead to new opportunities. That's what happened to my co-worker Jim. He quit his job and said he had a lot of projects waiting for him and wanted me to join him. He knew my work so I accepted the contract work with risk. (Samuel)

Frank's experience in working for a previous employer gave him more insight into running a business.

I worked for \_\_\_\_\_ and I saw how I could increase sales. I found I could do that and how to teach my employees how to interact with the customers. I learned everything I

needed to know how to run the store from my boss. That's how I learned to run a business. (Frank)

Greg told about his experience in working in a bicycle store and being given the opportunity to run a small skateboarding business within the bicycle store. This is where he learned the intricacies of running a business.

That's when I started to visualize the concept and I worked with other co-workers and I started to understand the products themselves, the design, and the process of running a business. I learned about what sells and what does not sell, customer service, timing, inventory, practically everything under the sun, really. I learned on a steep learning curve, and that was around the time when skateboarding had become very popular. Of course, skateboards had wheels, so I really got into that too. My store decided to carry skateboarding products, tricks, wheels. My boss let me set up a new division within his bike store, a small corner that was transformed to a small skateboarding store within that store. I was responsible for setting up everything in that store at the age of 15 and 16 at that time. That kind of an opportunity was a welcome challenge for me. I began to understand things like profit margins, pricing, organizing products to make it attractive for purchase, managing perishables such as wheels and plastic products that tend to wear out often. That was so that the customers would keep coming back. So, I really got into that process and that background and knowledge was put in the back of my mind. I moved on to other things, went to High School and then College, but that experience stayed with me. (Greg)

Lizzie recounted her experience working for an agency, which gave her the skills for grant writing, which helped her in her writing and editing business.

When I graduated, I was trying to figure out what to do with my life and I was offered a job in a Midwestern city as the director of programs for a medium sized agency. That is where I picked up my grant writing skills, and this state was one of the best places for me to learn grant writing. It is one of the leading states in the US for grants. I really learned how to write grants during that job experience. I brought in \$250,000 within a six-month time span. But, that agency itself had a lot of issues. I am proud of my grant writing experience at that agency and I did a lot of written communication on the job there. (Lizzie)

Ed discussed his experience as a budding entrepreneur when he was 13 years old. He also described his experience in working for his father's business, where he learned that communication was a powerful barrier.

I had a good friend who was deaf who was three years older than me. His father owned a business, so we had a bond and we would talk about setting up businesses, etc. We decided to set up a small business selling his father's products, which were charcoal lighters. We were thirteen years old. I worked with my father during the summer time and got a taste of the business. That experience taught me that communication was a powerful barrier, at that time there were no TTYs or anything for deaf people. We communicated mostly through writing. (Ed)

Many of the participants explained that formal training programs in their past jobs helped them prepare for their experience as entrepreneurs. Buddy recalled of his experiences in a formalized training program at a previous company and explained how it helped him with his current business today.

\_\_\_\_\_ at that time, (this was the 80's) had the best training program for new start up agents. Even today, many people agreed that it was the best training program. In the insurance world, only one of five new agents actually makes it as a long term agent. With \_\_\_\_\_, I had a great instructor. They invested a lot of money into the training program in the '80's. So, I think the training was the key for me to become really good at what I do now. I saw that instructor pretty frequently after that and many of his students are still in the business today. Even though we learned a lot from the program, we all went off in different directions, working for different companies. Many people still remember that \_\_\_\_\_ had the very best training program around. I thank \_\_\_\_\_ for that! (Buddy)

Additionally, some of the participants discussed the importance of other outside training offered for owners of small or medium sized businesses. These were usually offered through a local chamber of commerce or through an organization for small businesses. Experiences were mixed in terms of the level of training offered and the amount of help provided through these organizations. Buddy discussed his experience of receiving training through the Small Business Association. He found this helpful, even though the instructor didn't understand his specific industry.

So, what I decided to do was to attend a training course in \_\_\_\_\_ that was sponsored through the Small Business Administration. It was a three day program. This program was available to anyone who wanted to set up a business. So I took the three day class and I had a nice female instructor. She was well known and she wrote a book on setting up a business. I believe this book is still being sold today. She was extremely helpful

even though she didn't understand the insurance business specifically. She did understand how to set up a business. There were twenty of us in the class with diversified business backgrounds and interests. (Buddy)

Lizzie recalled a similar experience in attending a local training session for small business owners.

I found out about the Small Business management classes that were offered here through a local college. These were classes for actual business owners, not for those who wanted to set up a business. It was a ten week class, it was pricey, but I went ahead and took the class. Oh, that was the best investment, well actually, probably the only investment that I made into the business. It was definitely worth it. Luckily, I live in an area where everything is "deaf friendly", they provided interpreters without question. Even the doctors and hospitals here provide interpreters gladly. I arrived on the first day of class and I was nervous and felt that I was out of my league. After a few minutes, I felt comfortable and was on the same par with everyone else in the class. The discourse was rich and it was the best class I've ever taken in all of my experience. I had two wonderful teachers for that class. They knew their stuff; they both had big city and small town business experience. They were both funny and wonderful, and this contributed to the overall atmosphere, the attitudes of the people in the class. (Lizzie)

For the deaf entrepreneurs/business owners, past experience and the skills picked up in their careers were an essential part of their experience. These participants discussed the role of having specific training to help them get the knowledge and skills in running a business. These individuals described the different ways in which their past career experiences helped them in creating their enterprise and pursuing their passion.

### **c. The rewards of being an entrepreneur.**

In this subtheme, the entrepreneurs/business owners discussed the rewards of being an entrepreneur. Most of the people discussed different motivators and rewards and considered the monetary rewards as secondary. Taylor discussed that she really enjoyed being in the retail business and that it really worked. She eventually made the leap from doing her business online to actually having a store in a mall.



This really worked and I thoroughly enjoyed this, plus I was earning an income. I was staying home and earning money! This was really cool and I liked it a lot. So I went beyond my house and went to garage sales and bought more stuff to sell on E-bay. I did this for fun, and then I wanted to socialize with other people, so I went to a craft show. At that time, I was making hemp bracelets and necklaces. (Taylor)

Taylor talked about the rewards of getting excellent feedback from her E-bay customers.

This has given her the motivation to look at trying something new, selling toys at Christmas.

E-bay has reduced my rates because I am selling so well for them. I have achieved “star” status with them plus, I have received excellent feedback from customers which E-bay uses to evaluate my status with them. I get 20% off the E-bay fees because the customers have given me excellent rankings. Because my fees have gone down, I am much more motivated to continue the online business. Now, I am starting to look at selling toys online. Christmas is coming, why not toys, yeah! (Taylor)

Taylor added that it is all about loving the type of work that she is doing. She stated that it is a lot of work but she is having fun with it.

You have to love the job and be motivated. For me, it is all about loving this type of work. I am having a lot of fun with it. Yes, it is a lot of work and very time consuming, but if you are doing the right thing and you are on the right path, you are okay! (Taylor)

For Samantha, her motivation for having the business was about creating a future for “the next generation of deaf people.” She saw her business as having an impact on their future. She also reiterated Taylor’s earlier point that it is fun and it is hard work.

I do have an agenda behind all of this to promote sports on a bigger level. I have two deaf children so I see the implications on the next generation of deaf people. I think I am getting off a tangent here. It is fun! It is fun! Also, it is very rewarding. It is hard work, but rewarding work. (Samantha)

Prior to his being a businessman, Steve was working at the hospital as a pre-med student. He felt that he had worked harder than the other hearing people on staff, but was paid the same as them. As an entrepreneur, he saw that the harder that he worked, the more rewards he received.

When I was working at the hospital for two years, hearing people would talk to each other and I felt left out. I worked harder than them, but I was paid the same! I was

working at the same 9-5 job as they were doing, but I was paid the same even though I worked harder. As an entrepreneur, usually, the harder I worked, the more rewards I got. That's the best part of it for me. (Steve)

Jasper discussed his experience in establishing a social enterprise. He often wondered how much longer the organization would be able to continue but his passion was there. As a result, it has been a rewarding, yet challenging experience.

I often wonder how much longer we can last with this organization, but the passion is there. It is important to have the passion and the enthusiasm and for all of us staff members to be all on the same page, and we will see this through.

I wake up every morning excited about coming to work for the organization. It's not like I feel obligated to go to work. Some days are tough, but I want to see this succeed. Feeling like you want to do this makes me feel like I am doing a hobby rather than a job. (Jasper)

Charlotte reflected on some of the things that have motivated her to keep going, even though there were times when she thought she would have to shut down the business. She talked about this being an up and down experience but overall it has been positive.

There have been times when I thought I'd shut down the business because we were out of money. There have been high moments when we thought we would secure angel financing and we would get a check from the investor, and when that didn't come through, it became a low moment and we were at the bottom again. (Charlotte)

Charlotte expanded on this thought by discussing some of the subsequent experiences that allowed her to keep her business going.

We entered a business plan competition in which we won \$20,000, when five days before, we thought we were out of money! We thought we had to shut down and five days later we got \$20,000, so you can't really top that! Another high was getting into the Business Accelerator program last summer. That was big for us, and that came a week AFTER we won the \$20,000. We were like, wow! We were really on fire. We got to pitch in Silicon Valley in August, and that was exciting. (Charlotte)

As she reflected on what these experiences meant to her, Charlotte felt that it has been rewarding to see that she is getting a lot done at such a young age.

So, it has been kind of neat to see that I am achieving so much at so young of an age. That's been really rewarding for me to see that I am getting a lot done. So, it's been cool. (Charlotte)

Paul recounted his experience when his company won its first contract with the Department of Agriculture. Subsequently, he kept winning bigger contracts for the company against much larger companies. Paul considered this to be a real high.

The first contract with the \_\_\_\_\_, the \$7 Million Dollar contract, we had no idea how big it was. The three of us went to that presentation and the other two were not really my employees. Both of them were friends who eventually joined the company when we were awarded that contract. One of them became the project manager, and the other one became a vice president. With the Haiti contract that I talked about, we were engaged in an open competitive process. When the bid first came out, it was a \$30 Million dollar contract for five years. That contract involved 50 people, half of which were subcontractors. We had a strong team. One of the three final companies in the bidding process was a \$500 Million dollar a year company, and the other one was a \$750 Million dollar a year company and we were a \$12 Million dollar a year company! We were picked to do the contract. We had already done a part of the work and they were familiar with us and we had formed a great team. After six years, after the \$30 Million dollar contract ended, they re-issued the bid and made it an \$80 Million dollar per year contract. The same thing happened. One of the finalists was a \$1 Billion dollar a year company, we were a \$15 Million dollar a year company. We won the contract, even though there was a lot of competition. It was a real high! (Paul)

Samuel recalled a similar experience in winning a contract that his competitor thought he “blew them out of the water” even though they were much bigger than his company was.

The competitor for my services thought that I blew them out of the water. I saw myself as David against their Goliath and somehow that competitor folded. That business is now a small business because they lost the contract I currently have now. I “won” and proved that you can “beat Goliath” if you wanted to. (Samuel)

Ed shared his experience in winning a large contract that he did not expect his enterprise to win. He called this “the best joy” for him.

When I won a big contract that I did not expect to win, that was the best joy for me. That provided income for our company over five years. All the other competitors were shocked that we won that contract. I felt good because we worked hard on the RFP, which was very lengthy, and involved a lot of details. (Ed)

Frank talked about his experience in marketing his services. He made door hangers and put them on doors all over town. This yielded in increased sales, which was one of his best moments.

I created door hangers and had them made and went all over town. I put this on over 5,000 house doors in one month! People did come to the shop and I was excited about this. We had great sales for a few weeks and that was one of the best moments for me. I saw that it really worked (Frank)

Greg said that there were a lot of different rewards in having his business. He discussed several different kinds of rewards in his description.

As for the people aspect, I enjoy it when someone simply tells us to continue with what we are doing. That is a peak experience in itself. It tends to be people who own businesses, \_\_\_\_\_ stores that make that kind of compliment after checking out our products at \_\_\_\_\_ (trade show), for example. Another peak experience is when I \_\_\_\_\_ with my company name on it. I have that experience and I have to pinch myself often to remind myself that this is really happening. It's really cool. (Greg)

Ultimately, Greg has shared that the "reward is in the journey itself" regardless of all the rewards that he has received in being an entrepreneur.

Regardless, the reward is in the journey itself. I read that quote somewhere and people tend to think that once they embark on a journey, there is a reward at the end. For me, the reward is already happening during the journey. The journey is the reward itself. I am meeting lots of people, a lot of new people and we share our experiences. Also I have learned a lot of lessons regarding life, business, and the industry. (Greg)

Lizzie reflected on how she loved her work and she loves it when she gets emails from her clients thanking her for her work. This has made her feel good when she is able to help others do their work. She felt that she could sleep at night knowing that she did her best.

I love my work and when I get e-mails thanking me for my work, or when students tell me they got their PhD because of our services, it makes me feel good, but at the same time, it was their work. We just happened to help \_\_\_\_\_. This may sound a little idealistic, but that's how it means to me. I can sleep at night, that's the best part; I can sleep at night knowing that I did my best. That sounds really mushy, but that's my situation. I have people telling me that they got a job because I helped \_\_\_\_\_. Sometimes I go through the motions at work, dealing with the different personalities, my own personality, and all the different issues that come with this work, but when one

person thanks me or tells me they got a job, passed a class or whatever, I feel good and I forget that people do really count on me. It's a nice to have the feeling of being needed and the impact I made on other people. (Lizzie)

Rick explained that his greatest pleasure was seeing consumers who succeed through his non-profit enterprise. He also remarked that on a personal level, his greatest joy was the love shared by everyone in the organization to achieve their goals.

My greatest pleasure is to see consumers succeed through our services. For example, when they are able to get employment because of our services, or when they are able to get housing through our work, or when they are able to achieve communication access through the services that we provide. That's pertaining to the consumer. On a personal level, the greatest joy is the love that is shared by everyone in achieving the goals that we are working toward together. We develop products together, we work together to develop those products. We may not always agree on how we do things, but we are able to achieve results and that's a great joy. It's the joy of seeing that a deaf person can succeed without regard of where they are. It could be that they are in medical careers, educational careers, etc. If they succeed through the services that we provide and the support that we provide, that's a great joy! (Rick)

In discussing some of the factors that motivated him, Samuel recounted, "I work my own hours and I am my own boss! It is a great sense of being my own boss." Taylor expressed a similar sentiment when describing the differences between her online business and her retail store.

With the E-bay business, I do everything myself and I have no employees. I like that a lot. I am my own boss and no one tells me what to do! That's one nice thing about the online business and having my very own business at home. I can make any decision I want and do anything I want. I don't need to call in sick to work. I can work any amount of hours I want with that business. Here at the store, I have to find an employee who is willing to replace me. So, it's a give and take situation here. (Taylor)

These deaf entrepreneurs/business owners described that they are motivated by the rewards of having their own business. Some of these rewards included winning additional contracts, watching their employees succeed by working together, meeting new people, etc. Some of these participants described this as a way to keep going in their ventures.

**d. Learning to overcome adversity and learning to persevere.**

The participants offered descriptions of their experiences in dealing with adverse situations and offered their experience on how they have persevered through those situations. Samantha discussed her experience in becoming more “thick skinned” after having gone through some adversarial experiences.

I became stronger because of the people that “stabbed me in the back”. I had been a very sensitive person, very sensitive. In the business world, you can’t be that way. I am truly sensitive, boy. Bless my husband for his strong support. Now I am more thick-skinned and firm. When people talk behind my back and say negative things, I just let it go. And, the best part is that I learned how to speak up now. That got me to the point where that becomes useful in lobbying. I could speak up more now without fear of recrimination. What’s the point of that fear? I know who to stay away from and I am not afraid to cut people off now. I don’t want to do business with those types of people. (Samantha)

Samantha continued with her description of how these situations have made her a stronger person.

I got burned by some people, I got screwed, but that made me work even harder and do more. I am not the kind of person that tries to get even if I got screwed by people. I just keep going and continuing to do my thing. As an example, at \_\_\_\_\_, after I had closed the previous company, I was going through severe depression. This was unusual for me because I am usually very upbeat and positive. Give me one thousand negative things and I will give you two thousand positive things. That is the kind of person I am, but with the closure of my business, I crashed. Remember, I couldn’t pay my staff and the business was my baby, you know. It weighed heavily on me. (Samantha)

Steve described a going through a similar process in the creation of his agency, in which he was facing a number of rejections in the first two years of his business.

In the first two years, I faced a number of rejections, so I was feeling down from that. I was wondering if I should be working in a different career instead of having my own business. At that time I was really sensitive to people saying “no” to me. When I talked with other people, I was told that it was normal to face a lot of rejection at the beginning. The more experience you have and the more the time goes on, it got better. So that was definitely the worst part of the first phase of my business. (Steve)

In reflecting on the lessons learned during this time, Steve discussed the need for him to persevere through adverse situations in order to be successful.

You must have a degree of perseverance and you cannot give up easily. Patience is critical and you will face adversity at the beginning and this is a normal part of becoming successful. One client rejected me at the beginning and it was very painful for me. I talked with other people in my situation and they all reassured me that it was normal to receive rejection. If all I faced was good, then there is something really wrong with this picture. I have to go through the stage of rejection in order to be successful. (Steve)

Jasper explained about his experience in learning from his failures and frustrations in his social enterprise.

All the failures with this business have taught me how to do better in the future. I know that is a cliché, but you don't really "get it" until you actually experience it. I mean, no one likes to fail and I always wanted everything to be perfect. I began to realize that it is through those failures and frustrations, even though they are exhausting, it's important that we learn from those. I mean this organization is run by volunteers! The more experienced I am with this organization, the more accepting I have become. I have learned not to take things too personally and not to get too emotional about these things. I realized that I need to accept these things and just move on. That is part of the journey of setting up a business. (Jasper)

Samuel talked about "becoming wiser", and that this was a painful process. There have been times when he has gotten projects, only to find that the client was very difficult to work with.

I have gotten wiser, yeah. It is also painful! I mean painful in the sense of getting into something that I don't want to get into, but I am stuck with it. For example, I get all excited about getting a contract and get right to work on the project, only to find out later that the client is very difficult to work with. She would be really picky about little details and continuously be critical of my work, but that person has asked me how I can help solve her problem! When I first worked with her, I gave her some options and recommendations and she really liked those ideas. I wrote a proposal and won the bid for the contract. And then, she proceeded to be overly picky about all facets of the project. She really knew what she was talking about, so I had to deal with her gingerly over a long period of time. I needed to support her and the project was good, but the client was very picky. At the end of the project, she let me know that there were two more projects coming, so I accepted those, albeit painfully! That project had a lot of potential, so I was stuck with her but I had to accept that fact. (Samuel)

Frank delineated some of the lessons that he learned from having a business that ultimately failed. He chose a specific franchise at the recommendation of an external consultant. This turned out to be a mistake for Frank and this helped him to be a much better manager for his next venture.

I trusted him (the consultant) and took the risk to get into that business. That was one of my most expensive mistakes. I was not terribly upset or blaming myself for this but saw this as a learning experience and to move on. It helped me to be a better person and a much better manager for my next business. (Frank)

Greg talked about having a business plan and starting up his business in accordance to the plan. After a bad experience, he learned he had to be flexible with his business plan in the future.

From there, we just rolled and ordered our first batch of \_\_\_\_\_ from our manufacturer in Taiwan. I discovered that this batch had an awful paint job, it was horrible. It threw me off because the prototypes were good, but when it was time to manufacture the \_\_\_\_\_, the paint job was awful. I had to have the paint job redone at my expense here and that cost us more money. So that was a big blunder on our part and our business plan was out of whack. I realized I had to be pragmatic about this and I had to be flexible. It was at that point when I realized how much of a hindrance a business plan can be, because it conflicted with my present situation. The business plan didn't match my new reality or give me a response to that new reality. I decided to put my business plan aside, including the pricing structure, the distribution network, etc. (Greg)

Dealing with adversity was explicated by these participants' various examples of specific incidences. Numerous references were made to the "lessons learned" from these situations and in helping them to do better next time.

The first theme, pursuing their passion with experience and skill, was an essential ingredient in the participants' experience as a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. This was described through sowing their seeds of passion into a business, learning from their experience in their past careers, reaping the rewards of being an entrepreneur, learning to overcome adversity and learning to persevere.



**Theme II: Building their Enterprise through Collaboration, Networking and a Deep Understanding of the Market**

The second theme was what the deaf entrepreneurs saw as an essential theme in their experience, the ability to tap into their networks and to collaborate with other stakeholders to help build their organization. The theme was described in a number of examples of the different networks that these entrepreneurs utilized to help them in their journey. For example, some of these participants were plugged into the deaf community network, which allows them to grow their business through a specific targeted community. Others were plugged into networks that are not specific to the deaf community, for example local entrepreneur groups, industry networks and social networks.

This theme is fully fleshed out through the deaf entrepreneur's focus on their markets and in growing their organizations. This theme was explicated through descriptions on their marketing strategies, their customers, and their managing of their enterprises.

**a. Leveraging their networks and creating partnerships.**

In this subtheme, many of the participants discussed the value of leveraging existing networks and partnerships to grow their enterprise. Taylor expanded on her experience in entering into a partnership with a neighbor who had similar interests and business goals in mind. Taylor already had a fledgling E-bay business and had an opportunity to expand that through a partnership with a neighbor who had similar interests in selling retail products. This partnership became an advantage for her, as she explained further in her description.

It worked out because she needed another partner who had the same interest as she had, with the same kinds of skill and business savvy to run a place like this. We tend to split the products in the store so that she is not overwhelmed. (Taylor)

Charlotte discussed the importance of networking with her own personal contacts in starting up her business. This network helped her to yield even more contacts with the people she needed to talk with to grow the business.

I did a lot of informal networking and made a lot of contacts and I held on to them. I kept seeing them for lunch, and kept following up with them. I kept helping them out and vice versa. So, I had a really strong network in place, so when I went to start my company, I already had a pocket of people to talk to in D.C. about business and opportunities. That yielded me opportunities to talk to all the museums. (Charlotte)

Charlotte suggested that one needed to take advantage of their own personal networks, no matter how minor the contacts are. Her explanation is that everyone can help in different ways. She described her own experience how she developed and maintained her personal network.

No meeting is too small, and no person is too minor. Everyone can somehow help you through another route. Don't drop the connections at all. I mean, I kept in touch with all of the people I worked with, and all of the people I came in touch with in the past two years. I've maintained connections with them, I would meet them for coffee and give them an update and help them out a little bit. I would give them help, kind of a quid pro quo kind of thing. (Charlotte)

Samuel expanded on this concept further through his description of how his business depended on his own network. He developed this network while working for another company. He did not think that he would have been able to set up a business if it wasn't for the network he had developed.

I think the most important thing for me when I was working with the company was that I was developing a network. This network helped me to be ready when I set up my own business in my own home. Having a home office was I think a wise move for me. If I had graduated from college and tried to set up a business, there would have been no networking for me. How would I do that? (Samuel)

Lizzie said that her previous experience in a leadership role in an organization helped her build a network within the deaf community, which has helped grow her existing business. She explained that when she was at this organization, she became one of the people that everyone wanted something from. Because of this, people knew who she was.

\_\_\_\_\_ helped me set up my networking, although I knew who was who in the deaf community. With \_\_\_\_\_, I became one of the people that everyone wanted something from. I remember my boss at \_\_\_\_\_ warning me that once my name got out there, people would come out of the woodwork. She was right. Even to this day people are still coming out of the woodwork. (Lizzie)

Bill discussed how he was able to grow his business through the contacts that he had developed over the years. His network helped him to expand his business by purchasing a new branch office.

I had wonderful contacts that helped me find this particular \_\_\_\_\_ to buy. Starting a new \_\_\_\_\_ from scratch, with no systems, and no customers was very hard to do in this economic environment. We found this small national \_\_\_\_\_, which had a few problems but had the entire infrastructure there in place. All I had to do was to buy it and to make the improvements. That was right up my alley, and now we have to think about growing it and making money. (Bill)

Many of the participants stated the importance of leveraging their own personal and professional networks to help start and grow their venture. This was explained through their experience in past businesses and organizations of which they were part.

#### **b. Marketing to the deaf community and beyond the deaf community.**

The participants' enterprises included in this study were of diverse variety. Some enterprises marketed exclusively to the Deaf Community and others marketed entirely outside of the Deaf Community. There were also some enterprises that marketed to the Deaf Community, but the enterprise expanded to include other markets. For some of these entrepreneurs, there was some discussion regarding marketing to the Deaf Community. Those participants who focus on marketing to the Deaf Community explained that there is enough business in this specific market. Buddy explained that he is the only one in the deaf community who does what he does and that he has a narrow niche and this has given him enough business to keep going.

Even to this day, I am one of the few, if not the only one, in the deaf community who sells \_\_\_\_\_ to this market. There have been many deaf people who have gotten into

selling these services, but I believe I am the only one in \_\_\_\_\_. You have to be willing to write a good business that is a good risk to the insurance company for property and casualty. I know a few individuals who have tried to get appointed by insurance companies to sell property and casualty products, but they couldn't do it. \_\_\_\_\_ companies today are more concerned about losses and claims if they are not sure if the person will write a good business. The agency is doing fine; we have a narrow niche focusing on non-profit organizations, interpreting agencies. I have plenty of business to keep me going. My experience has been a very positive one. (Buddy)

Many of the entrepreneurs discussed the need to branch out their business beyond the Deaf community, or even entirely outside the Deaf Community. While some of these entrepreneurs were able to sustain their business through marketing to the Deaf Community alone, others explained that the market is too small to sustain their business. Samuel described his experience in needing to expand beyond this market.

The work with other deaf owned businesses is very limited, but there is a lot of work with hearing owned businesses. You need to contract with a variety of clients, government clients, and other hearing owned companies. There are much more opportunities out there than just with the deaf owned businesses. (Samuel)

Bill stated that his initial vision was to cater exclusively to the deaf and hard of hearing market, but that he realized he cannot survive on this market alone until he has built up his business and catered to the general market, especially during the economic situation he was facing at that time.

We are not really exactly at that point yet, so we are not yet serving the deaf and hard of hearing community. The economic situation is still unsettled. In the meantime, I have not given up and I still am committed to carry out the vision that I had before. (Bill)

Bill added that he has to make his business plan broad in order for it to work in the current economic environment. He stated, "We cannot survive with only the deaf and hard of hearing market. I have to make my business plan broad, and multi-dimensional. I can't just have one narrow niche, it has to be broad." Samantha realized that, after having had a previous business, she couldn't just limit her business to the deaf community if she wanted to succeed.

I realized I couldn't just limit myself to the deaf community only. If I wanted the company to succeed, I can't limit myself to that narrow vision of supporting only the deaf community. I had to broaden my scope a bit more. (Samantha)

Samantha further explained that it has been her experience that deaf people set up businesses for deaf people only, but they need to think about setting up their businesses to serve all people.

Oftentimes, deaf people set up a business for deaf people only; they need to think about setting up businesses that serve all people. That's the reason you don't see a lot of deaf terminology on the \_\_\_\_\_ website. For all you know, it looks like it is run by hearing people. You need to broaden your horizons. (Samantha)

Ed described his experience by discussing that he had initially thought that the deaf community was large worldwide. He later realized that the number of hard of hearing people greatly exceeded the number of people in the Deaf Community.

Before that time, I had thought that the deaf community was enormous worldwide. But I realized that the number of hard of hearing people greatly superseded the number of deaf people in the market! So, my company has changed tremendously over the last ten years to include this market. (Ed)

Ed continued with his description of how his contracts required the provision of products for hard of hearing people.

Because these programs must provide equipment for hard of hearing people, I was forced to learn more about the hard of hearing market and the equipment that they used. I learned a great deal about this market and got a good understanding of that market. That also helped me to realize that the deaf community represented a very small percentage of the entire population of people with hearing loss. (Ed)

Charlotte expressed her delight when she discovered that her product had a broader appeal than its intended audience of deaf and hard of hearing people who would use the product for museum tours. Hearing people wanted the product for themselves.

What we didn't realize at the time, everyone else wanted to be able to take the tour! Hearing people were coming up to us were asking if that was a guided tour on the iPod? They were asking if they could use that as well and we told them, sure! We started handing them out, and we realized it was not just an accessibility issue; it was something

for everyone to use. So, we just kind of ran with it. We have found that a lot of people, those people who are hearing, like the captions. They are standing in the middle of the National Mall, which is very loud, so they like to be able to read the captions. (Charlotte)

In this subtheme, the participants described their targeted markets and many of them explained the need to market beyond the deaf community in order to remain viable as a business.

### **c. Growing the enterprise.**

The participants described an important part of their journey in building their organizations. In this subtheme, the deaf entrepreneurs/business owners explicated their experience in growing their business through the establishment of business plans, raising capital and the use of programs such as the 8A program under the U.S. Small Business Administration.

The participants discussed the need of additional capital to help their business be more viable. Many of these participants started up their business with little or no outside financing. Some of these participants talked about the need to grow their venture conservatively and some of them talked about need to raise capital through small business loans, angel investors and other sources.

In his non-profit organization, Jasper discussed the need to raise additional funds to support his venture. He stated, “This year we are going to be focused on fundraising and grant writing. Hopefully we will see some funds to help support our efforts and we can then move on.” Charlotte described her experience in growing the business to the point where they are ready seek angel investing.

We are a lot better positioned for angel financing. Two years ago, we thought we could get the money just like that (snaps fingers), which actually wasn't the case. We were still “bootstrapping”. We haven't gotten our first round of financing yet. We are just now in a good position to get financing. So, looking back, we did a whole lot in terms of our concept, our revenue modeling, and revenue pipelines to get ready for angel financing. So, having a much better knowledge of what is needed to progress and understanding that the checks is not going to make the business grow. (Charlotte)

Greg talked about his desire to secure angel funding, and expressed his frustration in trying to achieve this.

We need capital to do more. I have many goals and dreams for \_\_\_\_\_, but at the same time, I need capital. I have met with angel investors. I have given presentations to these angel investors with an interpreter. This was a struggle for me. (Greg)

Some of the participants discussed their experience in working with the Small Business Administration and its programs, including the 8A program, in which businesses can achieve favored status as vendors for governmental agencies. When Taylor checked into the Small Business Association, she did not find anything that was useful for her.

I tried the Small Business Association (SBA), but there was a not a lot there either. I expected more assistance in things like setting up a bank account, business license, but I didn't get any information about that. I was like, huh? (Taylor)

Frank described a similar experience in looking into resources provided by the Small Business Association.

I looked around at different opportunities and I tried to buy a bagel business, but I learned it was too expensive. I went to the Small Business Administration (SBA) and I did not find this to be of much help. They had consultants, but nothing much came out of that.

Samuel specifically sought out help through the U.S. Government 8A program for favored vendor status. He moved his business to Baltimore and he thought he would be able to tap into opportunities presented through the 8A program because he would be closer to a lot more government agencies.

When I first moved to Baltimore, I have to admit that I did have high expectations. I thought that maybe because I was deaf, I would get more work through the 8A process. I didn't know about Section 8A through the Small Business Administration (SBA), so my mentor taught me how to complete all of the paperwork to apply for this designation. When I meet with other hearing people at SBA conferences (I used an interpreter), yes, the SBA provides interpreters at these conferences. It's great that they provide interpreters, well, since the government requires this. When I sit around the table with the other hearing people at the conference, there is an interpreter there and everything is interpreted. We are all sitting around and chatting and they would make the comment

that having the 8A designation is a “joke”. This made me feel discouraged. On one hand, people give me high hopes about 8A and then the hearing people at the conference tell me that it is a bunch of crap. I feel demoralized by that. Deaf people tell me encouraging things about 8A then hearing people tell me that it is hopeless. So I go from high to low, low to high, etc, so I give up. I learned that I had to balance myself and approach it by asking myself if it is worth a try. You never know. (Samuel)

This subtheme regarding seeking capital through different sources explicated the participants’ experience in seeking ways to grow their enterprise. Topics such as angel investing, the use of resources under Small Business Administration and the Federal 8A program were discussed in the various examples.

#### **d. Being deaf as a competitive advantage.**

Many of the participants talked about being deaf as a competitive advantage in running their enterprise. Some of that was attributed to the knowledge of deaf culture that helped them to be more sensitive to other cultures. Some of it was attributed to their character and the need to constantly prove themselves as a deaf person. Lizzie described her business as being unique and she explained that because she knows their language, their culture, and that she can work with hearing people, clients feel comfortable using her services.

A part of that is that there are not many businesses like mine – a person with this type of business who is deaf like them and is familiar with the hearing world. Secondly, it is easy for them to communicate with me. I have many thank you letters and clients tend to say that they feel comfortable working with me because I know their language, their culture and I can work with hearing people. (Lizzie)

Buddy discussed that “it is a great time to be deaf in this business today” when referring to his specific industry and enterprise. He explained that it is because the market has become really soft and that he is able to grow his specific niche market.

It is probably the best time to be deaf in this business today. Let me tell you why. The market has become really soft, so \_\_\_\_\_ companies are cutting rates (I am speaking of the commercial side), which is causing current clients, businesses and non-profits to start shopping around for lower rates. Those businesses are looking for ways to reduce costs



in today's economy, so it has become cut throat for \_\_\_\_\_ companies. I am hearing from my agency that the sales people are trying to save their current clients. They are even sending three or four agents going to the same account, so it has become very competitive. Junior (the managing partner) is going crazy, I can tell you that. As a result, \_\_\_\_\_'s "book of business" went down. That means they are below the book value they were in 2008. This is pretty much the standard in the industry today. My own agency, however, went the opposite direction. My book of business actually went up 22% for that same time period, which is significant, as this is in the double digits, which is unheard of in today's world. (Buddy)

In Charlotte's specific business of providing accessibility solutions, she saw that being deaf was an advantage.

If you have the drive and if you have the motivation, and if you have the inspiration, you should carry that through, but of course there's the opportunity to use your deafness to your advantage. In my instance, I can use that for accessibility purposes and I am trying to get into the market. (Charlotte)

Samantha talked about leveraging her knowledge as a deaf person to help mediate a complex international meeting between deaf people and hearing people.

So, they want me to step in to help out and mediate that meeting. They want me to educate the hearing people that deaf people can do it themselves. So, there are a lot of issues to that particular situation. (Samantha)

Greg stated that being deaf really helped him in dealing with his supplier in another country because of his deep understanding of culture. He saw this as an advantage in his business.

Even by being a deaf person really has helped me with this. With regards to Taiwan culture, I understand culture and I have that advantage. The \_\_\_\_\_ industry has been predominantly made of white males. If you look at the \_\_\_\_\_ industry, you see white men everywhere. It is a white male dominated industry, which is probably true for many other industries. So, I knew that meant that there is mostly an Anglo-Saxon view, a northern European cultural view, which is also shared by American culture. So a lot of people in that industry are reluctant to work with people like me and other people with disabilities. I knew that and Taiwanese people will not usually accept new clients or work with new players. They will tend only work through their own acquaintances. So, I knew that \_\_\_\_\_ was the key in that regard. I am certain that my position and my experience in the Deaf community really helped me prepare for what I will face in the \_\_\_\_\_ industry. I see that as my huge advantage. I can imagine if I were hearing, I would work in a \_\_\_\_\_ store and I would be stuck with knowledge that could be limiting

in many ways, maybe not realizing how many stores are out there and the level of competition and the level of knowledge expected before having a company of my own. I had none of that, I understood and had a good feeling and was a customer and consumer all the way to the point when I started my company. (Greg)

Paul talked about being deaf as an advantage because of the need for hard work to prove himself. He also compared this to his being an athlete.

Being deaf in one way was an advantage. I understood the principle of hard work to create success. I played football, ran track. In both sports, the amount of time in getting ready for the event is actually 99% of the total time spent in that sport. Time is spent practicing, doing the same thing over and over, getting in great shape and then you play. If you don't invest in the preparation, you are not going to do well. That applies to everything in life, marriage, job, raising children. You spend a lot of time helping kids be better, make sure they are better. Life is not easy. (Paul)

For many of these entrepreneurs, being deaf was an advantage in doing business for a variety of reasons. Some of these individuals explained that it allowed them to access to a niche market within the deaf community. Some of these individuals said that by being deaf, they are more sensitive to cultural issues on a global scale. Others attributed that being deaf helped them to develop the personality attributes that allowed them to overcome the barriers in running their own enterprise.

The second theme, building their enterprise through collaboration, networking and a deep understanding of the market, was an essential theme. This theme was explicated through the deaf entrepreneurs/business owners' examples of how they leveraged their networks, made decisions whether to market specifically to the deaf community, grew their enterprise through different means and in reflecting on their being deaf as a competitive advantage in their business strategy.

**Theme III: Reflecting on one's identity as a deaf person and how it has impacted their experience**

The third theme that arose from the data was about the deaf entrepreneurs reflecting on their own identity as a deaf person and how that has impacted their experience as entrepreneurs/business owners. Some key points centered around whether being deaf was central to their experience or whether the experience was independent from their identity as a deaf person. Other discussion items included the perspectives of the deaf community, maintaining one's reputation and legitimacy and confidentiality considerations.

**a. "I am Deaf, so what?"**

Although there were different experiences for each person and how they saw themselves as deaf people, there were common themes that emerged for many of these individuals. Among the 14 participants, there was a wide range of communication needs, although all of them were deaf in accordance with Crammate's (1968) definition. While all of the deaf entrepreneurs came from a variety of educational backgrounds and experiences, many reflected on their identity as a deaf person in their role as entrepreneurs. For example, when asked to reflect on the meaning of her experience as a deaf entrepreneur, Taylor stated that she does not think about being deaf while she is running her business.

I am deaf, yes, but I don't think about being deaf. I don't know. I am human just like anyone else; the only thing is that I can't hear, that's all. That's all I can think of. There is nothing negative about it for me. (Taylor)

When asked Charlotte about her reflections as a deaf entrepreneur, she felt that being a deaf entrepreneur was not any different from being an entrepreneur and that she did not want to be perceived as a deaf entrepreneur.

I don't think that being a deaf entrepreneur is any different from being an entrepreneur. I don't think any special considerations should be made. I definitely do not want to be perceived as a deaf entrepreneur, so I am an entrepreneur first. That is my philosophy. (Charlotte)

Paul, who started up his business in 1985, also discussed his viewpoint as a deaf person and suggested that he would rather see people focus on deaf people's capabilities. He also emphasized that this is what other people who are in minority groups deal with.

I am deaf, but so what? That's what every member of a minority deals with. You can do it to open new doors or to open doors for yourself, to make lives better for other deaf people. I would rather see that people be measured based on their capabilities, not by the color of their skin, or their disability. Try to be measured for what you can do. Just because you are deaf, that doesn't limit what you can do. I can't hear, so what? I. King Jordan said, "Deaf people can do anything except hear", which is very true. (Paul)

Paul further discussed while this was the case, it was also important for him to show the world that he was deaf because he wanted to show that this wasn't going to get in the way of running his enterprise. This was his identity and he wanted to make sure that people were aware of his identity as a deaf person and he compared his situation to what other minority group members faced.

The reason I signed and spoke at the same time was to let the world know that I am deaf, but it was never going to stop me! I always felt that the deaf history paralleled that of black history, in terms of trying to break through with civil rights. There are simply people who don't believe that black people can do certain things, and they don't believe that deaf people can do certain things. I have bumped into some of those people. Their attitude was how can a deaf person be better than them? Well, I can be better! I carry that and I represent the deaf world all of the time. (Paul)

Samuel talked about how the emergence of new technology such as video relay services has helped other people view him as a business owner first, rather than as a deaf business owner.

I think video relay services helped a lot since I am hiding myself, I am not showing myself as "disabled" first. I am Samuel and they look at Samuel, business owner first and I can deliver my goods. That's the easy step, after several months I work with them. It doesn't happen overnight to get a contract, no. (Samuel)

Greg, upon deep reflection of his role as a deaf person, indicated that although he grew up in a deaf family, went to schools for the deaf, a college for the deaf, was considered a full-fledged member of the deaf community, as an entrepreneur, he has dissociated himself from his

identity as a culturally deaf person. He rationalized that he is doing the deaf community a favor by doing that.

As a deaf entrepreneur, it means, “not being deaf”. That’s what it means to me, “not being deaf”, and it is simple as that. I am reaching that point now; I challenge myself “not to be deaf”. This is ironic, I know, but that’s how I have gone this far, I think, by simply, being not deaf. I try to disassociate myself from the deaf community I guess. I have no tethers or anchors by expectations, values, customs, and the traditions, of the deaf community. I free myself from all of that, cut myself off and just keep going. Ironically, I do the deaf community a favor by doing that. The \_\_\_\_\_ newspaper did a full page article on our company. We were in a well known \_\_\_\_\_ magazine and they asked us about our deafness. I explained that we work with interpreters to help those who don’t know ASL. That’s reverse thinking and I use that to get my points across to people. I tell them I have a deaf family, I grew up at a school for the deaf, and I emphasized a lot of key themes that really make the deaf community look really good. I use that medium to expose the people out there. For example, I know that many politicians and corporate owners read those publications for recreational purposes. They read those magazines and it’s a way to get the message out to them. (Greg)

Samantha reflected on her desire to show her identity as a deaf person and what she would like to show the hearing community. She offered that she would like to show hearing people that deaf people are just like them.

I would like to show the world that deaf people are just like the rest of us and to show that we need the hearing community too. I would like to bridge the gap between the hearing and deaf communities. I often hear, “I want to be the same as hearing people”. We are already a part of them; they are already a part of us. At what level do we intertwine? (Samantha)

Rick told of having to make decisions as a founder/CEO of his business and he explains that sometimes he forgets that he is a deaf person himself and gets caught in a role between what he has to do as a CEO and as a deaf person. He explained that because his company focuses on the deaf community, that he runs into this particular dilemma.

One other thing I want to mention is that sometimes as a deaf CEO, that often sometimes I forget that I am a deaf person myself. Sometimes I am caught between the role of what you need to do as a CEO and what I need to do as a deaf person. For example, as part of business practice, you need to do what is appropriate to run a company, but at the same time as a deaf person, I feel with the (deaf) community. I feel with the consumers and sometimes I have a hard time to separate myself as a deaf person and as a business person

and doing the right thing. I sometimes fall into a trap. That is one challenge I saw from time to time. (Rick)

Many of the entrepreneurs talked about having dual identities as deaf entrepreneurs/business owners. For some of these people, one foot was in the “deaf world” and the other foot was in the “hearing world” or the world of business. Greg offered his perception of what he considers as dual identities.

My experience as a deaf person, having that dual identity is important as an American and as a deaf person, I use both English and ASL- I am bilingual and bicultural. Having a strong identity means having a strong sense of self, this also translates into confidence. I have to admit that my comfort level with the use of the English language helped me a lot. I know a number of deaf people who are eager to set up a business struggle because of their ability to use the language. You must have good English language because English to me is the language of commerce. That’s very true in today’s world. (Greg)

Ed offered a different perspective by explaining that he saw deafness as a barrier but it challenged him. Ed stated, “I appreciate the fact that deafness is a barrier, yet at the same time it challenges me.”

These participants reflected on their identity as a deaf person. For some of these people, they consider themselves as entrepreneurs first, even though being deaf is an essential part of who they are. This is described through their examples of how they have perceived their identity as a deaf person in their role as an entrepreneur/business owner.

#### **b. Dealing with the attitudes and perspectives in the deaf community.**

A common discussion thread throughout the interviews was regarding the deaf community’s perspective of the deaf entrepreneur’s business. The reactions from the deaf community appeared to be mixed, ranging from being very supportive of that deaf entrepreneur’s business to being critical and unsupportive of the business. Most of these entrepreneurs expressed that while they are generally supported, there is some skepticism or negative reactions

from the deaf community regarding their business. Charlotte explained that because she had a product that was well received by the deaf community, they were supportive.

The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive because our products are the only thing that they can use in tourism. They are definitely rallying for this and have been big supporters. They love the sign language tours; they love the captioned tours, the cued speech tours, so they (the people in the deaf community) are our biggest fans right now. So, that's been good. (Charlotte)

Ed reiterated this point by adding that he understood the needs of the deaf community and he worked to meet those needs. He added that this was connected with the support he received from the deaf community.

I think many factors contributed to the success of my company. Firstly, the deaf community supported my deaf owned business and that helped a lot. I understood the needs of the deaf community, for example related to sign language books. Everything I did was to meet the needs of the deaf community. (Ed)

Entrepreneurs in this study described the mixed perceptions that they have received from the deaf community. While they generally were supported in their business, there was a degree of skepticism, perhaps negativism regarding their being deaf entrepreneurs. Buddy described some of the reactions he has received from the deaf community. Several entrepreneurs attributed this lack of support to a phenomenon referred to in the deaf community as, "the crab theory", in which members of the deaf community will "pull down" those who are successful in the deaf community. Buddy explained that he thinks that the phenomenon of the "crab theory" still persists in the deaf community.

Deaf people sometimes look at me, and say, 'you're deaf?? You can't sell \_\_\_\_\_!' It's like they have never heard of that before. Deaf people in that job- that can't be right! So, I have to show that I can do it by building their trust in me. I do think that "crab theory" is existent in the deaf community. It is still a problem. (Buddy)

Samantha expressed a similar sentiment and described this through a comparison to the perceptions in the hearing community.

In the deaf community, you have people who are very supportive of what I am doing, and in the other half of that community, you have people who stab my back and want to take me down. In the hearing community, I don't feel like they are trying to take me down. (Samantha)

Taylor added to this point by explaining some of the questions that members of the deaf community tend to ask with their skeptical comments. She also expressed her frustrations and explains her general response to these people in this fashion.

Deaf people can do it. Many times, deaf people are like, "how can deaf people do this??" They ask, how do you communicate with hearing people? They are very negative about it and not supportive. I tell them that we don't need that kind of negativity. They need to move on and show people that they can do it! It's like, "really?? How do you do that??" I get both negative and positive reactions. Negative, it's like, "how??" I tell them if you have the money, set something up! I don't go into a lot of detail with them because I own a store and I am running it fine. People tell me I need a social life and I tell them, yes that would come later. I presented to a group of deaf people at a workshop and one person in the audience was asking me how I did it and was negative about it. I told that person that now there is special technology that makes it possible for deaf people to succeed in business. Just move on and work at it and it will happen. (Taylor)

Taylor explained this particular issue in further detail by emphasizing that she does get positive reaction from the community, but the reaction has been generally more negative than positive for her.

On the other hand, the positive reaction is along the lines of, "cool! You own a store!!" "They ask me questions about it. I tell them that it is all fine. I have to admit that most of the reaction is negative more than positive. (Taylor)

Lizzie explained a similar frustration regarding perceptions in the deaf community regarding her business. She also expresses her disappointment in this phenomenon. She stated, "It seems I have more challenges with deaf people, yes. They don't think that deaf people can do this kind of job. They have their own preconceived notions that other people put in their heads." She continued with an additional thought about what deaf people perceived of her skills.

My (number two) challenge is deaf people are skeptical of my business and don't believe that deaf people can write as well as hearing people. This happens to me often and quite



frankly, that makes me angry and disappointed. It is just not a deaf or hearing thing. Many of my clients are hearing too. (Lizzie)

Steve explained when he started out with his financial services business, that he was laughed at when he told a prominent leader of the deaf community about setting up his business.

When I was thinking about starting out a career as a \_\_\_\_\_, I met with the director of the \_\_\_\_\_ Office on Deafness, who has long since died. When I told him about my plans, he laughed at me and said, "You want to be a \_\_\_\_\_???" He said that deaf people have no money and was poor for the most part. He said I wouldn't do well in this business. (Steve)

Many of the entrepreneurs in the study expressed that it took some time before the deaf community either accepted or supported their business. Some of these individuals explained the need to prove themselves over time before they received the support. Frank explained that perceptions in the deaf community warmed up after he had started the business and was doing all right.

After I started the business and was doing all right, they became more supportive and they would ask me how I was doing. They wanted me to be successful. Hearing people on the other hand have been very supportive from the start and wished me luck. Today, hearing people are very supportive in my wanting to own a business. I talked with a lot of my hearing relatives about my new business idea. (Frank)

Greg added that the members of the deaf community tend to adopt a "wait and see" attitude and articulated his wish that the members of the deaf community had more faith in their fellow deaf entrepreneurs.

It's more like, "wait and see" to see if we are for real. I have noticed that in our third year, people in the deaf community have started to accept, ACCEPT, not simply acknowledge, but ACCEPT that we are for real. I understand that "seeing is believing", but I wish the deaf community had a little more faith in its people, their own kind. (Greg)

Buddy also discussed the "wait and see approach" among those in the deaf community and he explained that this is a situation that had he seen or heard from his deaf business owner friends.

It is not just me, it happens to many of my deaf business owner friends. I mean, it's not part of me, but it always seems to be an attitude of "let's wait and see". They wait until the person is successful, if they are successful, then they are agreeable to the products. (Buddy)

For Steve, it took two years before the members of the deaf community were willing to work with him in his business.

It took me two years to build up trust among people in the deaf community. When I finally worked with my first deaf client, they were really impressed at the amount of information I gave her, and she told all of her friends about me. After my second year, people were lining up to see me for financial planning. When clients are happy, they will spread the word to other people in the community. (Steve)

Buddy further explained his perspective on this phenomenon in the deaf community.

Basically there are deaf individuals who are very supportive of other deaf people in being successful and in moving up, but they don't actually follow through or buy products from other deaf people. They don't seem to trust other deaf people or they don't want to see other deaf people more successful than they are. So, within the culture we have a problem, a real problem. I am not saying that it is all deaf people; a lot of them are fine. You have a group of deaf people who talk on both sides of their mouth and they don't practice what they preach. They say they are supportive of other deaf people, and then when time comes for them to buy the products, they don't follow through. Is it "crab theory"? I think so. It's a problem all over the country. I eventually want to do something about it, but I don't want to do it now while I am still in business. Someday, I would like to sort of "slap these people's faces". Names are not important here, but, my reason for the proverbial "slap in the face" is so that we can help each other in this community. People don't realize this but, the Indian community does well together, and the Jewish community does well together. I know that the black community has a similar issue that we have. I would like to find a way to get that message out, especially with the younger deaf people. (Buddy)

Samuel expressed similar thoughts and offered an example of what he saw was an incident of the "crab theory".

One thing I know that sometimes you work hard and do the best you can, but sometimes people are negative. You know, the crab theory and they try to pull you down. I have seen some incidences of this. I have to be very careful to draw the line. I know that one time there was an interview for a dean for one college. I knew that one deaf person had a lot of potential, but other people were very negative about this person's prospects for the position. They would make those negative remarks and try to influence the interviewing committee members. It eventually cost that deaf person the position. That's one small example. (Samuel)

Rick explained that it is possible that deaf people do not want other deaf people to rise above them because they want everyone to be equal.

In the deaf community, we don't see that level of support in the community. We see this as a challenge, I don't know if it is because they are competing with each other, or they don't want to see someone or a leader to rise above them. Maybe they want everyone to be equal? That's a shame. We need to work on that and tell deaf people that it is okay for one deaf person to rise, that it is okay for deaf people to succeed, that it is okay for people to fail and try again. We need to encourage more of that and not to pull people down. (Rick)

Samantha explained her experience with being oppressed in the deaf community as a business owner. She also offered her view that she has been given opportunities in the hearing community that she is not given in the deaf community.

I feel that the majority of oppression is by the deaf community. There is a significant amount of oppression from this community. When I try to find ways to collaborate with various communities and organizations, hearing people really open the door for me and they introduce me to their sources and circle of connections. There is a lot of meaningful dialogue. For example, I tend to be asked by hearing publications and newspapers to interview for articles, etc. I am never asked by deaf related publications to interview with them. For example, SignNews never contacted me to for an interview! I have been asked to appear on Comcast News. (Samantha)

For the deaf entrepreneurs, reflecting on one's identity as a deaf person and how it has impacted their experience was greatly influenced by dealing with the perceptions from the people in the deaf community. These participants described their differing experiences and how it has impacted them as a deaf person, as well as their role as an entrepreneur. A number of situations delineated how the perceptions of the deaf community were both supportive as well as negative.

**c. The importance of preserving one's legitimacy and reputation as a deaf entrepreneur.**

For these participants, legitimacy as a deaf entrepreneur/business owner arose as an important topic. Even though these entrepreneurs found less acceptance with deaf individuals than the hearing individuals, they still found they often had to prove themselves with hearing people as well. The topic of legitimacy was described in their experience of “having to prove oneself”. Greg suggested that deaf people are already at a disadvantage when it comes to owning a business. States Greg, “Legitimacy is a key ingredient. Deaf people are already at a disadvantage, especially in the \_\_\_\_\_ industry. They are wondering what this deaf man is doing?” Lizzie echoed this sentiment by highlighting that she needs to constantly maintain her reputation because she is well connected in the deaf community.

I have to constantly maintain my good reputation. I have never had a client cut off a contract with me yet, knock wood. I did some calculations a few years ago and found that a significant number of my clients were repeat clients. I think, at least I hope, that’s a mark of consumer satisfaction. I am well connected in the deaf community. I think it is important for me to provide good quality work, at least I hope I do. The quality of work should speak for itself. Also, I have staff double check my work and vice versa. That’s where I have to toss ego out the window and we cross check our work. It’s not perfect, but it works. (Lizzie)

Buddy described the challenge of having to work hard to prove himself when he was trying to build up his business in his early days as a business owner.

A huge challenge at that time (now it is much easier), was that I had to work harder to prove myself as a deaf person. As a quick example, with \_\_\_\_\_, if an agent wanted to be appointed by an insurance company, you have to work with somebody. When I tried to be appointed by a \_\_\_\_\_ company, the first thing I did was to call the local representative. But that local representative never returned my calls, so I would call the regional representative. The regional representative would not return my calls either! At that time, I was using the TRS (telecommunications relay services). It was very frustrating, then I called the corporate office. The corporate office was somewhat lukewarm to my inquiries. (Buddy)

When Greg was challenged by foreigners who approached his exhibit at a trade show, Greg simply pointed to his product as a testament of his work.

I noticed that the foreigners were thrown off to see that I was deaf and that a deaf person was running the booth. They became testy to see if I really did design those bicycles on display. I don't need to reply to them, I just point to my products to tell them that, "they get what they see". They tend to walk away impressed. (Greg)

This subtheme described the participant's need to preserve their legitimacy and reputation as a deaf entrepreneur. This was explained through examples of being members of a close-knit deaf community.

**d. Confidentiality as an important consideration as a deaf person.**

Another theme that arose with this group was the perceived heightened need for confidentiality given their identity as a deaf person in the deaf community. This theme was attributed by some of these people due to the close-knit nature of the deaf community. Samuel described his experience with confidentiality in detail.

If I contract out with a deaf person, chances are that I will know a bit more about the person through my other friends. That happened to me with two deaf contractors who leaked confidential information, and it cost them their contract work. They do sign a non-disclosure form and I do have a new paragraph on the form. They are not allowed to discuss my business on Facebook or any other social media, like vlogs or blogs without my permission. I need to do this for protection because of everything that is out there. Facebook is nice, but you have to be careful, that's all. (Samuel)

Frank discussed the need to be careful in not sharing his new business plan with members of the deaf community.

I don't plan to show this plan with members of the deaf community, not just yet, because I haven't met any other deaf people who have created the same business concept as mine. I know that some people are already in the same general line of business, also interpreters, and everyone knows each other. I can't share with those people. Some of those people have the money and the power to take away my business idea. I need to keep it quiet until I am successful. At that time, I can show the world what I am doing. I do ask around and ask about my idea and I am very careful about who I would ask. Those who I asked thought the business concept was a great idea. (Frank)

Lizzie further described the implications of when information is shared with a member of the deaf community. She explained, "Confidentiality is extremely important in this business.

When I see clients in public, we will greet each other but I make a point of not discussing our projects. I pride myself on ensuring confidentiality.” Later in the interview, Lizzie explained that this is especially important in her family, where there are a large number of deaf family members.

Yes, I keep my mouth shut, but sometimes it is very hard. For example, his (my husband’s) parents live in a place where there is a very strong deaf community. I know many of those people from my years at the newspaper because many of the people I knew live there now. Every time I talk with his parents on videophone, they mention someone’s name. Some names I acknowledge, but for other names, I am deliberately vague and don’t go into detail about how I know that person. There’s always that risk of mentioning something little about that person and then people figure out things and it gets out to the deaf community. That’s a significant challenge for me. (Lizzie)

The need to maintain confidentiality as a deaf entrepreneur/business owner appeared as a common situation for these individuals. Some of these individuals attributed this to the close-knit nature of the deaf community and in the need to foster trust and legitimacy in their roles.

#### **Theme IV: Building Bridges to the Rest of the World Using Communication Strategies**

Because of a need to collaborate and work with hearing people in their businesses, a number of communication strategies were used by the participants in achieving their business goals and to operate their day-to-day businesses. This was an essential part of their experience as a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. While all of the deaf entrepreneurs had different communication styles, they all adopted communication techniques in various forms in order to effectively interface with hearing stakeholders in their enterprise. For example, some deaf entrepreneurs use American Sign Language as their first language, and other deaf entrepreneurs who do not employ the use of sign language. For these individuals, their stakeholders included customers, suppliers, buyers, board members, partners and supporters.

##### **a. Dealing with communication challenges.**

Communication barriers were a common theme for these entrepreneurs. For these deaf entrepreneurs, there were differing methods in overcoming those barriers, primarily because of the differing communication styles they deployed. Differences were also attributed to the type of business that the entrepreneur ran. In describing his communication barrier, Paul discussed his situation in dealing with people in group situations.

Dealing with customers one-on-one, I did not have problems communicating. Being the project leader, I often had to present to large groups. The biggest problem was when someone wanted to ask me a question from the audience. I always had someone with me, later I had an interpreter, when I started my business. I was able to function, except when someone asked me a question. I didn't know who was asking it, so I always had people with me who knew that. Someone would help me. I always asked people to raise their hand. Even then, some people would mumble or speak softly, so I was unable to lip-read them. (Paul)

Frank described his main challenge as an owner of an automotive business by stating that, "My main challenge at that time was the use of the phone." Ed also reiterated that by saying, "The number one barrier was communications, especially in telecommunications." Charlotte stated, "Communication on the phone has been the only boundary for me". Bill explained his challenge as being complicated because of his communication challenges.

If you are talking about the aspect regarding communication, some of that is complicated. I have one bank with four offices and that was a challenge because I can't just pick up the phone and call people and do my business on the phone. One way around that is through the use of e-mail or through a web-cam, but the kind of business that I am in is a service business. The best way to do business is in person or through the phone. E-mail is not good enough, so I have had to drive around a lot. It is important for me to have a strong network and that has helped me to communicate more effectively. (Bill)

Charlotte further described her experience with communication on the phone and her feelings with using the phone.

Really, the only challenge is the technology for telephone communication. I can get on a (telephone) conference call but I don't like to. I would much rather do a video chat, but not all of the angel investors or the content providers are tech savvy. So they prefer a landline or a regular telephone, so that's really the only challenge. I just do my best, I

use the phone, but I am not comfortable with it. I use Sprint Captel as a back-up, and I always have that ready in case I don't understand what they are saying. (Charlotte)

A number of communication tools were discussed, from using in-house staff to the use of technology to the use of mainstreamed techniques such as e-mail and text messaging. A number of entrepreneurs discussed the use of Video Relay Services (VRS) and Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS), both of which are federally funded access services through the Internet. Video Relay Services is the use of a webcam for sign language interpreting services to facilitate communications between a deaf person and a hearing person. Telecommunications Relay Services is the use of an Internet based text services or a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) and is considered to be for those people who do not have the higher broadband needed for VRS or for those who do not use sign language. This includes Captel, which is a real time telephone captioning service in which the user will use her/his voice.

**b. Use of employees and contractors to aid communication.**

For those entrepreneurs who use in-house staff to help with communication access, sometimes it is simple as having a receptionist take messages and make phone calls for them. Taylor, who set up a retail business, stated that she had an employee who takes phone calls for the business. She felt that she needed to have a hearing person at the store due to the nature of her business.

I have an employee who acts as a secretary; she will take the phone calls for the store. She takes in my messages. I think you always need to have a hearing person in your business so they can answer the phone for you, and do other things related to communication. It all depends on the kind of business the person is in. (Taylor)

She also explained that sometimes this was a bridge to connect with her stakeholders so that they can continue to communicate using another method.



One of my employees/secretary took the phone call and told the person that I was hearing impaired. We ended up talking on instant messaging after my employee hung up with that representative. (Taylor)

Frank recalled his experience from the days before videophones, “The difficult part is that I had to rely on the manager to field phone calls for the store.” Frank described his frustrations in further detail and explained that this was one reason why he walked away from the business.

At that time, I couldn’t sell my services through the phone. I couldn’t just tell the customers to come on over and explain to them what was going on. When people called me, I couldn’t just answer the phone. When my employees answered the phone, I would ask them who was calling. Their response would be, “oh don’t worry about it”. So, I left the company. The person running the auto shop next door told me that it was good that I had left because too many people were taking advantage of me. (Frank)

For others, it means the hiring of sign language interpreters and other specialists to help with the day-to-day communications that occur within the business. Steve reflected on his decision to hire interpreters for his business, which depended heavily on telephone communications. He considered this a cost of doing business.

I have always used a sign language interpreter from the very beginning. Right now I have a full time interpreter. In 1985, I made the decision to pay for interpreting services out of my pocket. I considered this as an investment in doing business. I was making phone calls all day and needed the interpreting services. (Steve)

Greg contracted with a freelance interpreter to accompany him when he had an exhibit at trade shows related to his business. He explained his rationale for contracting with an interpreter.

For all of the shows, we brought an interpreter with us; we paid for the interpreter and paid their way to the show. That interpreter is from around here so he is familiar with my signing, and not only that, hearing people could hear the Minnesota accent. Some people mentioned that they could tell it was a strong Minnesota accent. It felt right because I wanted to be sensitive to hearing culture, their communication, and their language. I have to think twice. I have two hearing children myself so I become more cognizant of that. I think it means a lot for \_\_\_\_\_ to maintain its strong Minnesota identity. (Greg)

Bill discussed the need to employ a captionist to caption his board meetings. Bill does not use sign language as a form of communication.

I started using a captionist to caption the meetings over the Internet using a speakerphone. I use the same captionist for every meeting because that person has become familiar with all of the subject matter, names of people. That's very helpful. As for the captionist, this particular woman has been doing captioning for me for about twenty years and I know her well from my "past life" in the government. She's on her own now and she's looking for opportunities in different areas but she doesn't want to give up her skills. Her business has gone down somewhat, so I called her about a year ago to tell her what I have been doing, etc. Now we are talking about a different opportunity to maximize my opportunities and to minimize my limitations. I had an important meeting about a month ago and she captioned for that meeting. All the other board members were impressed and had never seen anything like it. They were all very supportive and suddenly, they are suggesting that I hire this woman. They are saying that they want her to be part of my team. They are very positive and I am working on getting this done now. (Bill)

In summary, some of these entrepreneurs/business owners described the use of in-house staff and contractors to help with communication needs. This is explained through the hiring of interpreters, receptionists, captionists and other specialists.

### **c. Experiencing changes in access technologies over the years.**

For those entrepreneurs who have had their business for a long time, they have witnessed the change of options for communications access over the years. For those entrepreneurs who ran their enterprises before the advent of videophones and other technologies, they recalled the times when they were using text based relay services in which they would type their comments onto an electronic device and it would be relayed to the hearing phone user. Steve discussed his situation at the time he established his business in 1985.

There were no fax machines, nor were there e-mail accounts we could use. At that time, everyone was using TTYs so I used the TTY a lot. There were a lot of expenses at the beginning; I was paying for an office, computer rental, and my fees for my licenses. Before that time, I was communicating with clients using TTYs and they were not always able to understand the financial advice I was giving them through the TTY. So, it was

almost always necessary to meet with the client in person. For example, when I was stationed in Boston, I would spend a week in New York to meet with clients. (Steve)

Buddy recounted, “I was using the TRS system, which was very slow and people were very impatient with my phone calls.” Samuel described similar experiences with the use of this service.

Back then, I had to use the TTY relay or the IP relay services to talk with them. It was very time consuming and I had to type everything I wanted to say. When the information was typed back to me, sometimes I would do other things while I was waiting. Hearing people like quick communication. With the TTY relay services, people did not have patience while they were waiting for me. The client would have a lot of things to do themselves so they become impatient waiting for the typing to be finished. With VRS, communication is simultaneous and we can interrupt each other in the middle of a conversation. With the TTY, you had to wait for the other person to finish and say, “go ahead” before the other person can talk. That’s a big difference. (Samuel)

Bill offered that he does not use relay services, even though he does not use sign language.

I do not use relay services because I don’t think that the relay services is very effective. It is not fast enough. When I use that with hearing people, they tend to be impatient. The webcams are now more acceptable nowadays. (Bill)

A number of these deaf entrepreneurs have witnessed a tremendous change in access technologies for deaf people over the years. The new technologies have aided them in running their businesses.

#### **d. Use of video technology as a communications tool.**

Steve later stated that the videophone technology was a blessing because he can interface with his deaf clients by talking with them through videophones instead of having to travel to meet with them in person.

Videophones are the best technology ever created for deaf people. Now I am travelling much less because God created this technology! When videophones became widespread, I didn’t have to meet with my clients in person as much as before. Now, I have more time to spend with my family. It is easier for me to communicate with my clients using

sign language through video so I can explain things better. In the past, I would spend at least a week meeting with clients, now I just go for a day just to touch bases with them. (Steve)

Charlotte, an entrepreneur who does not use sign language as a primary means of communication, used video technology to chat with her stakeholders who are hearing. She stated, “A lot of times, my colleagues and I do a video chat and that’s been really good. That’s been the only challenge. I have not been shot out of an opportunity because I am deaf.” Samuel discussed the fact that Video Relay Services have really helped him with his business and he calls the advent of this service his “turning point”. He uses this service and on one occasion, he did not tell two clients that he was deaf so he can show them what he has to offer first.

It (communications) was a challenge until Video Relay Services (VRS) were introduced. That was my turning point. I talked with two hearing clients who didn’t even know I was deaf because I asked the interpreter not to mention that I was deaf. The communication was very smooth. When I met the clients for the first time, they were surprised to learn that I was deaf. They didn’t realize it because we had been communicating in rapid fire sequence. I already showed my skills and was able to communicate with them. I don’t tell them I am deaf, we do a lot of business virtually on line, whereas in the past we would talk in person. (Samuel)

Frank, the business owner who walked away from his business several years ago, reflected on what it would have been like if he had set up the business today with the use of technology that is available today. He felt that it would have been different and that he would not have had to hire a manager to run his business.

If I started the business today, I would not hire a manager to help run the business, I would do it myself first. With VRS, the customers can call me and I could explain to customers what we could do for them. It would make a big difference. Yes, in those days, I tried to hire an interpreter for two weeks to interpret phone calls, but interpreters are so expensive. I was hoping to do away with having a manager and do everything myself with an interpreter. It didn’t quite work out the way I wanted it to. (Frank)

Due to the international nature of his enterprise, Jasper does not use videophones, except for the use of Skype. As an example, he communicated with a stakeholder in India primarily through e-mail.

We did not use other means of communications, since they did not have videophones. We did use Skype for long distance communications. As for India, I was born there, so I had connections there. I went to the first Deaf Expo in India and I gave a presentation. A lot of people from different organizations in India came up to me after the presentation and asked me to set up programs in India. I basically communicated with someone from India through e-mail. (Jasper)

Although videophone technology and video relay services are considered significant technological advances that have really helped deaf people to communicate with each other and with hearing people, experiences with using video relay services have been mixed with the participants. For some of these individuals, because of the quality of interpreters for these video relay services, video relay services were often not smooth. Ed recounted his experiences in using VRS in his business dealings. He indicated he had to depend on his staff to make calls for him when he contacted his buyer about a RFP that he had submitted. He explained his rationale and discussed when he will actually use the services.

I would have to call the buyer through VRS, which is never smooth for me. So, I have to depend on my people to make the calls. I noticed a new thing that I was not aware of before. Most of the time I am not satisfied with the VRS service because of the quality of signing. I won't make any sensitive calls through VRS; I will make simple calls through VRS, that's it. (Ed)

Greg explicated a similar frustration with using video relay services, explaining that the people in the industry in which he has his business are predominantly white males who tend to have ethnocentric attitudes and are not ready for these types of calls.

One interesting thing for me, I have stopped using the videophone and I have stopped publishing our ten-digit number. We do appreciate videophone technology very much, yet at the same time, a lot of hearing people are not familiar with that technology. For example, those people in the educational or the social services field seem to be receptive with getting videophone relay calls. For those in the bicycling industry, it is different.

Again, remember the industry is dominated by mostly white males, who tend to have ethnocentric attitudes and perspectives and are not ready to accept these types of calls for the sake of deaf people. (Greg)

Lizzie discussed the use of Video Relay Services as a way for hearing people to call her directly or to leave a message. She recounted that this was a real blessing in many ways, although she uses e-mail primarily.

When we moved here in 2003, videophone technology was almost non-existent. I remember getting a free videophone and testing the connection at that time and we were just barely making do with that technology. A few years later, the technology became more widespread. Voice mail is a blessing, or I should say video mail. Now we have a direct 10-digit number for the videophone so that hearing people can call me directly through VRS and even leave a message. That is a real blessing for me in many ways, but for the most part, I use e-mail for my business. (Lizzie)

Even with the introduction of the relay services, many of these deaf entrepreneurs utilize e-mail as a primary means of communication with their stakeholders. For these people this has leveled the playing field for them in many regards. Lizzie offered, "It's (communications) mostly through e-mail. I haven't had any challenges with communicating with hearing people. Communications have been through e-mail." Taylor, an owner of a retail business uses e-mail and websites to order her products.

Most of the time, with my vendors, we communicate through e-mail, plus everyone has a website in which I can order the products from. Every time I meet a new representative, I get their email address and we communicate through e-mail. It's usually not a problem at all. Many times the representative will email me to let me know they are stopping by the store to show me new products, instead of talking over the phone. They bring the products and show me and explain to me about the different products. I can feel and see the products in person. A few reps actually do that. (Taylor)

Instant messaging and text messaging via cell phones have become popular communication technologies in the mainstreamed society. Several entrepreneurs discussed the use of this technology as a means of communicating. Samuel described his thought of how hearing people are using technology that deaf people once primarily utilized with each other.

Later, more and more hearing people started using their phones as text devices. I never thought that hearing people would be involved with this technology since I thought it would be too much work for them. I see more and more hearing people using phones to send messages. SMS is easy to use and we go back and forth with SMS. I give them my phone number and they would text me. (Samuel)

Greg discussed the value of using pagers and email to help operate his business. He described how he has designed his company around the use of existing technology that is available.

Again, technology through pagers and email is the key. I know that I cannot do this without technology. Also, I designed my company and developed our business plan based on what we can do with existing technology. I look at that as a big factor. That's the kind of strategic thinking that I am starting to do on a regular basis now. It has become second nature and automatic for me. I use e-mail, the website. You know we tend to try to think of something grand or complicated when it comes to technology. The fact of the matter is that, "the simpler the technology, the better" and we try to keep it that way. We look at efficiency. (Greg)

Ed described that there are a number of technological options available for deaf people, making it easier to set up a business. He stated, "Now, the deaf "menu of options" has expanded greatly including email, instant messaging, VRS, TTY, etc. Deaf people have a better chance of succeeding in business than before."

The participants discussed that communications with hearing people was a primary challenge in creating and maintaining their ventures. Different communication technologies were described, including the use of telecommunication technologies, captioning, and videophones. These technologies have greatly improved over the years, according to the deaf entrepreneurs/business owners; however, there have been some challenges with those technologies. Some of these participants described different ways that they have gotten around those limitations.

**e. Improvisation and creation of alternative communication strategies.**

Even with variety of technological options that are available for deaf people, a number of participants expressed that they need to improvise and create other solutions to communicate with their stakeholders. Some of the reasons for this include the need for dialogue, relationship building and the need for negotiation in person. Charlotte said, “Mostly, I will go and make a personal visit to them in their office or they come here, whenever possible.” Bill discussed the need to create solutions to his communication challenges. As an example, he described, “I have to develop solutions for communication. For example, I don’t allow board meetings to go for more than an hour and we tend to take frequent breaks.” Ed talked about training his employees “how to think and strategize” in his behalf.

Because I am unable to speak myself, I have to teach my employees how to think, and how to strategize, how to get the appropriate information, and not to make an offer until you have all good information. Most people quote for a bid by talking with large organizations like hospitals. (Ed)

Greg discussed the creation of a homespun solution to resolve his particular dilemma with using VRS. Greg did this because it was important to the successful operations of his business.

What I did was to contract with a local Minnesota interpreter for the phone calls I need to make. Simply, I used a videophone to call that interpreter, and that interpreter will use a hands-free headset to help relay phone calls between me and the hearing person. It’s like having my own personal video interpreter. I would pay the interpreter by the minute and that’s really nice. That’s the kind of adaptation that I need to make to keep things running. It’s too bad that I am not able to take advantage of current VRS services. I struggled with that a little bit and when I use the video relay services, some video interpreters are not familiar with some of the Minnesota signs that I use. I prefer to use the same interpreters for my calls, especially those who know Minnesota signs. The FCC doesn’t allow for that, obviously, so I decided to contract with interpreters instead. (Greg)

Bill discussed his method to minimize his communication challenges at his location of business. He supported his staff that does most of the interaction with customers.

When I talk with the loan officers, I often don’t talk with the customer directly. Usually, I will see the customer when they come to visit the \_\_\_\_\_ and I will come out to say



hello, but the loan officers are the front line workers and I am in the back end. Therefore, my communication problems are minimized. The customers know that and they accept that. If the customer has a problem, they can always come and talk with me. It doesn't happen that often. If it does happen often, then something is wrong! I think everything is going fine. (Bill)

A number of deaf entrepreneurs discussed the need to educate their stakeholders in terms of how to effectively communicate with them to carry out their business dealings. Taylor discussed this in detail as she described the need to educate others.

Oh, it's really important that I teach them too! I tend to teach them how to communicate with deaf people, and not to be afraid of deaf people. If you don't teach them, they may freak out and back out of working with me. You need to teach them, your job in the hearing world is to teach them how to communicate with deaf people. The same goes for my customers. I tend to teach my customers how to communicate with me, especially at Christmas time. When I am the only person in the store, sometimes I have to deal with many customers at once, three or four sometimes. They are trying to get my attention. (Taylor)

Developing communication strategies to bridge with the rest of the world arose as an essential theme for these deaf entrepreneurs/business owners. Communication strategies were portrayed through their descriptions of the different options that were available to them over the time they had been running their businesses. These options included the use of federally funded text-based and video-based relay services, websites, email, sign language interpreters, captionists and in-house staff. Some of these individuals expressed frustrations and challenges with the use of these strategies and have improvised their own strategies to help them succeed. Some of the individuals discussed some creative approaches to their communication challenges such as driving to meet with stakeholders, establishing ground rules for meetings, and educating their customers.

### **Theme V: Support is an Essential Part of Being a Deaf Entrepreneur**

Having a good support system was a common theme with these deaf entrepreneurs. Participants cited support from family members, friends, business associates, mentors, and other business owners. Jasper stated, “Without the good support system I have in place, the organization could fold.” Samantha reiterated this point by expanding on the different support sources that she uses in her business.

You need to have a good support system and you can't do it completely alone. I have a support system for different reasons and different areas. For support regarding my business model, I have my hearing colleagues. They are always so willing to help me and answer my questions. Even though I don't know some of these people well, they are willing to help. I tend to connect with them through other business colleagues. So, essentially, there are different areas and different levels of support. They are all equally important. The most important though, is the support through my house. My husband, children are the greatest source of support for me. Without that support, it would be impossible to continue my business. (Samantha)

Bill discussed similar points with his thought that he would not be running his business if it was not for the support that he received.

I don't think I would be sitting right here (in board room) if not for my wife and all of the wonderful people who saw my vision and helped me, pushed me and encouraged me to keep going. That's my story. (Bill)

Jasper expanded further on his point by explicating that the support structure is important because it is not easy to run any business.

Luckily, I have a good support system to help me keep going. I have often told people if you want to set up a non-profit organization, to be ready for all of the criticism you will get. You need to develop skin that is tough like a brick and you can't let that criticism kill you. It is not easy to run the business; it is not easy to run any business, really. It is important to have a good support system ready to back you up in your new business venture.(Jasper)

These participants further delineated the different ways of receiving support in their ventures. Individuals who provided support included people who were family members, friends, professionals, other entrepreneurs and mentors.

**a. Family as a source of support.**

For many of the participants, a primary source of support has been members of their immediate family, including spouses, parents and children. Rick explained this in detail by describing that his family is his basic support structure.

I must have the support of my family. Family plays a very important role in supporting me. I have to give up a lot of time and energy for this organization, which means I am probably losing time to spend with family. So, my family needs to support my goals. So, that is my basic support structure. (Rick)

Samuel discussed the sacrifice that his wife made in supporting him in the establishment of his organization.

My wife has definitely helped me. My wife has been especially supportive of me. She quit her job and is a full time mom but she is always there to support me. She is willing to learn the business. (Samuel)

Greg's experience is described in a similar fashion. Although his wife has very little knowledge of the industry, she has provided support in other ways for him.

I must mention that my wife is pretty much a big part of this, too. She has no knowledge of \_\_\_\_\_, no idea so she has become my sounding board. I would run ideas off of her and she would let me know what she thought considering things like color, business approaches, strategy, and publicity. It is really nice to have someone doesn't know the industry. I think it is really important for a business owner to have somebody like that person. Also, my wife is very optimistic by nature. She is always telling me that I can and to go for it. I knew what I was getting myself into with setting up a booth at \_\_\_\_\_, even though it's a really big deal. There was a lot at stake and I could have easily blown it right there. My wife insisted that we continue with this. She had faith, very strong faith. So, I went ahead and did it, thanks to my wife. (Greg)

Lizzie discussed a similar experience, explaining that her husband offers a unique perspective when ideas are bounced off of him.

My husband offers me wonderful wisdom in many ways, which is one of the many reasons I married him. He often does not volunteer information until I ask him. When I bounce something off him, he would think about and offer great insight. And with his comments, I always think, "But of course!" It is nice that he gives me a different perspective. (Lizzie)

Charlotte described the reasons why the support from her family is important as well as the support from her friends.

I appreciate the support I am getting from my family and the support I am getting from my friends. They are the ones that say, this is great, I love this idea and to keep going. They are always there for me when I am experiencing the lows. (Charlotte)

Charlotte further discussed her background and described the impact that her parents on her desire in owning a business. She expressed, "My family is hearing, so my mom has always told me that I can do something about this when I got older. She was very much of a cheerleader." David added that his mother told him that he could do anything he wanted when he got older.

When I was little, my mother would encourage me to try different things. I would tell her I want to try this and that and she would tell me to grab it! My sister told my mother that I wanted to become a nurse. My mother said, no, you will become a doctor! I was involved as a figure skater before, and my mother encouraged me to try that! I competed even though I couldn't hear music. My mother told me that didn't matter, and told me that I could do it! My parents were a big help in building up my confidence. Without my mother, I don't know what I would be doing. People say, "you can't!" but I always heard, "you can do it!" That's how I knew that I can do it, period. If you can't do it, try it, you never know unless you try! Deaf people can fly, there are deaf doctors, they can't hear, but there are ways! People say, "Deaf people can't own a business, that is impossible!" In Russia, people can't believe deaf people drive in the USA. (David)

These entrepreneurs explicated the need for family support to help them in their experience. For these individuals, family members served as "cheerleaders", sounding boards, and sources of moral support.

#### **b. Enlisting the support of friends and other professionals.**

Other entrepreneurs touched upon the need for support from outside the organization, such as from friends and other professionals. Many of the participants talked about several kinds of support that is essential to keep their enterprises up and running. Earlier, there were some depictions of how family members and friends helped the deaf entrepreneurs in their journey.

Jasper mentioned that he has friends outside the organization to whom he can vent. He explained, “I do have some friends outside of the organization to whom I can vent to. I can share my frustrations and challenges with them and they provide me with the support I need.” Lizzie described her experience by talking about having a small circle of friends/professionals who help in their way. For her, they are both deaf and hearing people.

I also have a very small circle of friends/professionals who give me valuable insight. They are hearing and deaf, mostly deaf. Those friends have the same interests and same broad perspectives as I do. Most of them are experienced administrators, so that helps. (Lizzie)

Jasper talked about how many of his staff members are also close friends. He has come to realize that this could pose a problem, so he has had to draw the line and he has accepted this in establishing the business.

Another challenge is the fact that many of my staff members are my close friends. I have come to the realization that our friendships are not the same after we have worked together. I have already accepted the fact that they are “employees” so we have to draw the line somewhere. It’s hard because sometimes I need to vent, and this is not always appropriate in that new relationship. That’s the risk I took when I established this organization. (Jasper)

Samantha has described a similar issue in her role as the CEO of her start up firm by outlining the guidelines that she has established for herself in these situations.

To vent to other people, you know as a CEO, I can’t just vent to my staff, so I have a support system for that. I am the CEO as well as the HR person so I am not in a position to vent to my staff. I have to create boundaries. I don’t attend parties with my staff. Sometimes I come across as aloof, but that is not the case. I don’t want to play favoritism. So in that case, my support system is my husband and \_\_\_\_\_. I rely on \_\_\_\_\_ for advice regarding how to handle certain situations as a business owner.

Frank described one painful situation in which he reached out to his father’s friend when he was having difficulties with his business. He was contemplating walking away from his business and wanted to run this by him for advice because he knew that his friend’s father experienced bankruptcy.

I had a friend whose father had gone through the loss of a business and had gone bankrupt. He gave me a lot of good support and kept telling that it was okay and that it was not the end of the world. He said that failure was good and you can learn from it and next time will be better. So, I was able to build up my confidence again. (Frank)

For these participants another key ingredient were other sources of support, such as other professionals who are in the same field as they are or other employees or professionals who are vital to the operations of their enterprises, such as CPAs and attorneys. Rick talked about how his organization relies heavily on the support of all of his stakeholders for survival.

Support is important in this organization. If we want a successful organization, we need to have the support of employees, the support of the board, the support of the community, and the support of our partners. If I didn't have the support from any of these people, then this organization would not survive. (Rick)

Taylor touched upon her support within her store in the form of one of her employees.

Be sure to have support. I don't get the support from my husband because he doesn't understand the business. It's like when he talks about golf, I don't understand it at all. But at the store, I have the support. There's a woman at the store by the name of \_\_\_\_\_. She sells the small things in the store. She is a part-time employee in the store but she volunteers for us to help us save payroll costs. She pays a very small part of the rent and sells her products in the store. Sometimes we talk about our frustrations. I also have my business partner. If she gets frustrated, I take care of the problem and vice versa. So we have that support of each other, it is really nice! (Taylor)

Some of the entrepreneurs discussed the importance of having outside professional support as a way to supplement their operational activities. Steve discussed the benefits of having this type of support beyond the scope of what they do.

It is important to have a good relationship with a lawyer, CPA and other people who can help your business succeed. They also have been sources of referrals for clients for me. We work with each other to refer our clients. When I was in Boston, I worked with a CPA who was hearing. We agreed to work together and he referred a number of hearing clients to me. This went on for 20 years and this continues to this day. I network with lawyers in Boston, Maryland and other places out of state. (Steve)

Lizzie shared a similar thought about the need to have professional relationships from the inception of her business. She described her experience and advises on the importance of having professional resources from the beginning.

I always tell people to do their homework and to have professional people on board, for example a CPA, an attorney, and other professional resources. Even though I set up my business quickly and haphazardly, I did my homework. It's not that I went in blind. I set up the LLC and at the same time, looked and hired a CPA. I looked into other competing businesses and everything I did was for a reason, for a very specific purpose. Many people still don't do that. I am shocked at how people will proceed aimlessly and then their businesses close down. (Lizzie)

Ed discussed that having outside professional help with the enterprise allows him to focus on what he does best. He did this because his father taught him that it was important to have these specialists to allow him to focus on his business and that he couldn't do everything himself, especially at the very beginning. As he grew, he was able to hire some employees who handle some of the specialist work.

I always had a CPA and I always had a business lawyer, so whenever there was a business question, I could ask them. For example, when I set up my business, I asked my CPA to take care of certain aspects of the business and I asked my lawyer to take care of some of the other aspects of the business. I learned one thing from my father. He said that it was important for me to support all specialties and for me to focus what I do best. I couldn't do everything myself. For example, if you are skilled with sales, then you can hire an accountant to do the accounting for you. I was not skilled with accounting, but I knew enough to ask the right people. For advertising, I would go to the printer and he would advise me. When we were big enough, we hired people to do some of that work. That was really nice to have. Before I would have to go all over town to get this work done. I would actually drive to the UPS to drop off shipments. Now I have specialists to take care of company needs. It's nice. I have a total of 28 employees now. (Ed)

These deaf entrepreneurs/business owners explained in detail the need for support within their organizations and from outside individuals, such as friends and other professionals. They also discussed the dependence on other professionals such as CPAs and lawyers to help maintain their enterprise.

**c. Enlisting support from the entrepreneurial and small business community.**

The participants remarked on the importance of tapping into the entrepreneurial and small business community for support. While most of their experiences in receiving support from this community have been somewhat mixed, they all agreed that this is an important, albeit a possible missing feature in their experience as entrepreneurs. Steve summed up this concept in his sentiment, “It would be nice to have a deaf entrepreneur convention or meeting so we can share our experiences and ideas and network with each other.” Frank described his perspective that it is important to have deaf entrepreneurs to come together and support one another.

When I was working at \_\_\_\_\_, there was a group of 5 or 6 deaf people at my restaurant and they all owned businesses. I believe it is important to have deaf entrepreneurs to come together to meet so they can support each other and give feedback to one another. They can explore different ways to communicate with hearing customers, whether it is through VRS, the Internet. They could discuss what to do if hearing people take advantage of them. It would be a great resource to have such a support network.  
(Frank)

Charlotte talked about how helpful her networking with the general entrepreneurial community has been very important for her and that this was a main source of support for her. She stated, “The entrepreneur community has been instrumental and having that support network is the number one thing for me.” She described this experience in further detail by explaining how she got involved with this network and delineating some of the ways that this network has helped her. She further explained that she is the only deaf person in her specific network.

We have a really great network of entrepreneurs. We are all in this together and we support one another, trading resources, they help us out and we help them out with other things. We’re better business developers in terms of technology and that is what we can offer the other entrepreneurs. So that’s been really insightful, the network of entrepreneurs, family and friends. We are really plugged into the entrepreneur community here and being able to collaborate, meeting together. We were all part of a very competitive program last summer, a twelve week business accelerator program. There were three hundred applications and only eight companies were selected. We were one of the eight companies so we worked with the other seven startup companies for



twelve weeks in downtown D.C. They were all hearing companies too, and I was the only deaf person so it's been a big benefit to have an entrepreneur community as a big source of support in terms of being able to vent, and praise each other, so it's been good. (Charlotte)

As a long time entrepreneur/business owner, Ed lamented on the lack of opportunities for deaf entrepreneurs as expressed from his perspective. He shared, "In the hearing world, hearing business people have opportunities for networking and mentorship every day, especially on a local level. As for deaf business owners, those opportunities are limited." Samantha echoed this sentiment by describing her own specific experience in networking with other deaf women entrepreneurs.

In contrast, in the deaf community, there are not enough deaf businesswomen with whom I can rub my elbows or to have meaningful discussions. There really isn't very many of us and the network is really limited. Often times, I would have my discussions with \_\_\_\_\_(name of woman) even though she runs a large non-profit organization, there are a lot of fundamental issues that we share. I am limited in the number of connections of deaf women and there is a serious lack of experience. (Samantha)

Greg described his experience as "being pretty much on his own" as far as being connected to the general deaf entrepreneurial community. He described that he did check into opportunities for this, but this did not meet his specific needs.

I realize that I am pretty much on my own and my wife feels the same. There's not much mentoring in the deaf community for business owners. I did check into the deaf business "sphere" or world. I heard about a national organization for business owners who are deaf. I found nothing in there, pretty much a network of people, nothing more, and nothing less. I feel it's not instrumental to the company's future so I don't use that organization. (Greg)

As a suggestion, Lizzie recommended the idea of "piggybacking" on the efforts of a hearing entrepreneurship organization. She expressed concern that many deaf people set up their business only to have it fold within a few years.

Maybe we should piggyback on the efforts of a hearing entrepreneurship organization instead of being isolated? I am not sure and it depends on who are the leaders. GLI, NDBI, or any other business group should help with that. Many deaf people set up their business and then it folds quickly within a matter of years. (Lizzie)

Ed told of his experience in being invited to a local CEO's network in his community and expressed frustration in their hesitation when interpreting services were requested.

One manufacturer here invited me to join to a "CEO-Only" club. You pay a lot of money for that so I asked if they would provide an interpreter. They hesitated and they didn't have a straight answer for me. I never bothered to follow up with this. (Ed)

Samuel discussed the value of being a member of several organizations, including the National Association of the Self-Employed (NASE). This has helped keep him informed of what is happening in the industry for those who are self-employed.

I am fortunately a member of the NASE, which is the National Association of the Self-Employed. I am a subscribing member of that organization, which is an advocacy group that keeps me informed of what is going on in the legislative front, tax changes, etc. This helps me to plan for my business better so I know what is going on. They help a lot plus they offer good benefits, such as rental car discounts, travel discounts, postage. They offer really good benefits and it is a wonderful organization. Oh, and health insurance is also another benefit they offer, which is part of a universal benefits package they offer. (Samuel)

In sum, many of the participants talked about the need to network with other entrepreneurs and business owners. While experiences have been mixed, they all explained the need for this network so that they can grow as deaf entrepreneurs/business owners. Networks such as deaf related entrepreneurial networks and other general entrepreneurial networks were discussed.

#### **d. Use of mentors as support.**

Many of the participants described their experiences in having mentors in running their enterprises. The amount and the kind of mentoring varied with each person. Buddy described how having a mentor in industry helped him navigate the business, especially at the beginning. His mentor provided valuable business advice as well as encouraged him from a morale standpoint.

What really helped me was that I had a mentor at that time. This mentor was a hearing man who was in the business for 30+ years. He was willing to sit down with me and give me really good information, advice. We met once a month for a cup of coffee and he would ask me how I was doing with my business. I was frustrated with \_\_\_\_\_ (name of company) not returning my calls. He returned my call. He was a “big agent” for them. Basically, he gave me advice, helped me to understand the business. He gave me a lot of useful tips, suggestions. He actually showed me his numbers and how the system worked. He was giving me suggestions on what I should be doing and what I should be aiming for. We were engaged in a dialogue. I brought my frustrations to him and he gave me advice. He understood my frustrations and understood the fact that I was deaf and knew I had unique challenges. His attitude was that “deaf people CAN do it”. (Buddy)

Steve, a long time entrepreneur/business owner recalled his experience in going to senior personnel for advice and mentoring. This became less frequent over time for him.

In 1985, when 12 of us shared an office, I would go to some of the senior counselors to get their opinion on different things. It was nice at that time, because we were all together in the office sharing one big giant computer. As time went on, I went to the senior counselors less and less for advice. There were a few of these people who I really loved to talk with about the business. Ever since they have retired, I have not been in touch with them since. The adage, “Two heads are better than one” was especially true at that time. (Steve)

Paul received mentorship and training while working for a corporation prior to the establishment of his business. He saw that it helped him build his business in subsequent years. He recalls, “I had a lot of mentorship and a lot of management training, especially at \_\_\_\_\_ (name of company). As a computer programmer, I quickly became a project leader.”

Lizzie talked about the mentoring that she had received while attending a local small business training session that was offered in her community. There was value in this even though she only had one session at her home office.

I had gotten a lot of advice from the teachers and they actually came to my office to sit down with me to go through my books with me. They actually went to each student’s place of business to give one-on-one counseling for two sessions. I thought that was great, even though I only had one session. (Lizzie)

Buddy shared a similar experience while attending a small business training workshop.

In both cases, the mentoring was related to establishing a business, not so much about their specific business. He discussed that the teacher in that workshop was very helpful.

She was extremely helpful even though she didn't understand the \_\_\_\_\_ business specifically. She did understand how to set up a business. There were twenty of us in the class with diversified business backgrounds and interests. (Buddy)

Samuel described his experience in having a mentor through the National Deaf Business Institute. He saw that there were opportunities for improvement with the kind of mentoring he received.

Also, I had a mentor through the National Deaf Business Institute (NDBI). That business owner mentored me. The downside of that was well, that mentor was good, but I noticed that, deaf people helped me a lot, well, some of them bragged too much. They bragged about their success and that everything was dandy. I am like, okay. One person told me honestly that building a business is not easy and can be a struggle. I took that seriously. It is important to be honest, and I appreciate honesty. My mentor, he was sort of superficial in his encouragement of my business and gave some advice. That mentor tended to have big parties with lots of business people in attendance, but he never invited me. I think it is important to invite all people regardless of their background so we can help each other. You never know what will happen. I think it is appropriate for them to invite all of us. Well, that mentor happened to be arrested by the FBI recently. I look back and I thank God that I was not involved any more than I already had. He hired a tremendous number of people for his business and never asked me to do any contract work for him. He was my mentor but never offered any business to me. He was arrested by the FBI and I think it was a blessing in disguise not to have been more involved than I was at that time. His misbehavior is a good lesson in being careful in whom I am dealing with. No one is perfect. I mean it could have been one dollar instead of millions of dollars in fraud. (Samuel)

Ed reflected on the general lack of mentorship for deaf entrepreneurs as the number one thing missing from being a deaf entrepreneur. He discussed his own personal experience in receiving mentorship from a business colleague who happened to be his competitor.

I think the number one thing that is missing is the lack of mentorship. Before I was a pioneer as a psychologist for deaf people and now I am considered a pioneer in setting up a deaf owned business. The role models who helped me a lot were people like \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_. Those were the only two people who were my role models at that time, that's it. The only times I would talk with the two of them were at conferences for deaf people.

\_\_\_\_\_ and I always got together, even though we were competitors. We saw each other as friends. I looked up to \_\_\_\_\_ and we would talk. He enjoyed teaching me little things about the business. (Ed)

Others reverted to learning about their business through outside sources such as the Internet, books and magazines. For these people, this was a source of information about how to set up their business as well as information about the specific business they were in. Also, some of these participants remarked that this helped them to realize that they were not alone and there were others in their situation. Taylor discussed how she learned a lot from books and catalogs when she was establishing her business. She tapped into the resources provided by SCORE, but did not find this helpful.

I learned on my own mostly from the magazines and the catalogs. I used Google to help me learn about the business. I tend to read the Country Store magazines for country store owners to learn how to run the business. The magazines and catalogs helped me to get a start in the business. I really learned on my own basically. I learned a lot more from the books and catalogs. Books like "How to Run a Business for Dummies" were helpful. There was a lot more information from the books than from the people. I was not impressed with the SCORE program. So, that was an interesting experience! (Taylor)

Lizzie echoed these sentiments, adding that she does research into the challenges that she may face in her business. She explained, "Also, I do a lot of research on the Internet regarding the challenges that I may face in my business, as I know I am not alone in this. I do use Google to check on the issues." Greg shared a similar experience and expressed that he was pretty much on his own. He said that by being on his own, this is what makes him stronger and more resourceful.

I read the Harvard Business Review, articles on the Internet, and rely on my experience. I subscribe to the industry trade magazines. So essentially, I am pretty much on my own, unfortunately, really. So, I feel like that we are on our own, yet at the same time, it's what makes us stronger. We become more resourceful, and we identify new resources, we stretch our limitations, we maximize our capabilities as to communication, language and approaches. (Greg)

Ed, who described that there is a lack of mentorship opportunities for deaf entrepreneurs, described what he did to keep up with the issues in his industry.

As an alternative, I read a lot to keep up. I remember going to a trade show for hearing people just to observe how everything was set up and how they publicized their businesses. This gave me ideas for what I would do at the deaf trade shows. (Ed)

Many of the participants discussed their experiences in receiving mentorship from other people. Some of these individuals had significant mentoring experiences while others bemoaned the lack of mentorship opportunities in the deaf community for deaf entrepreneurs.

Deaf Entrepreneurs/Business owners explicated the importance of having various sources of support as an essential part of their experience. Without this support, their experience as deaf entrepreneurs/business owners would not be what it is.

## **VI. The Desire to Make an Impact in Today's World**

The sixth and final theme outlined an additional essential area for the deaf entrepreneurs/business owner. This theme was represented by the participants' desire to make an impact in today's world beyond the scope of their existing business operations.

### **a. The altruistic nature of their business.**

The theme was supported by the participants' depiction of the altruistic nature of their business. This sense of altruism was represented by a wide variety of experiences and reflections in what these participants perceive as their ultimate goal. Samantha reflected on what is really meaningful for her regarding her business by explaining that she felt she can really make a difference.

What is really meaningful for me is the ability to help other people. As an example, I work on the international stage. Oftentimes people in other countries are not sure of what to do. I meet with them and collaborate with them and I am able to help them utilizing my skills and experience in establishing businesses. I am able to help through board training, financial management and different areas. It's like when they use my services,

it is a one-stop shop for them! I can help them with a lot of different things. They then turn around and help other people! (Samantha)

When reflecting on this experience, she emphasized the need for more people in her field. Samantha stated, “When I am gone, I would like to be known as a person who has made a difference. I would like to see more people in that field.”

Steve mentioned that he sees his business playing an important role in bridging the deaf world with the finance world and in increasing the quality of life among deaf people. He explained, “It struck me that there was no connection between the deaf world and the finance world. At that time, I decided that I wanted to help bridge those two worlds by being the bridge.” Steve explained his rationale with this thought, “We want to serve clients nationally. We want them to enjoy their quality of life. I feel a sense of pride in proving that deaf people can be successful.” He further illustrated this point with a specific example from his experience.

I had a client who was 91 years old. She had never invested her money. All of her money was either in a bank account or under the mattress. I helped her by enrolling her into a program that allowed her to receive income off the money she had. She was pleasantly surprised that she was able to do this. This taught me a valuable lesson, that it is “never too late to start helping clients to invest their money”. I get a lot of clients who are 60, 70 years old who tell me, “I am too old for this”. I tell them it is never too late and I explain about the specific program for people in their situation. (Steve)

Jasper described how he wants his social enterprise to go beyond just helping people in other countries. He wants the organization to teach them to help themselves.

This year, we will have 40 high school students and we will be working with two local Kenyan organizations. The purpose of that is to train them on how to run a camp for the deaf so they can run this on their own in the future. The goal is for them to take it over in the next three years. We don't want to have to keep going to Kenya and have them depend on us. Yes, our goal is to give them the opportunity to learn how to manage these events and to engage in fundraising so they can support their efforts. So far, it has been very effective and successful. (Jasper)

Paul explained that his customers loved him because his company was always trying to find ways to improve their lives through his computer consulting business.

My customers loved me because I was always trying to find ways to improve their lives, not just do exactly what they wanted. I was always the one dealing with the customer and I always got along well with my customers. (Paul)

Samuel explained that he sees deaf entrepreneurs/business owners as role models for other people to follow. He said, "Running this deaf owned business proves that I can inspire others to do the same if they have the dream of doing that. It's important that we are role models for others." Frank outlined his motivation for his business and the idea that he wants to see more articles about successful deaf people so that more people would hire deaf people. He explained, "I am hoping to be on the Oprah Winfrey show to show the world. That is my motivation. For example, I want to see in the NY Times Sunday magazine articles about successful deaf people so that more people would hire deaf people."

In this particular subtheme, the participants discussed the altruistic nature of their ventures and how their business goes beyond the concept of making money and survival as a business. For some of these individuals, there was a sense of calling or purpose in this overarching sense of mission.

#### **b. Giving back to the Deaf community.**

This theme was described in the examples of the participants in which they desired to give back to the community of which they are a part. Bill expressed his desire to give back to the deaf community through his vision for his business.

I have a vision to open a new \_\_\_\_ with a special program for the deaf and hard of hearing community. I knew that the deaf and hard of hearing community was forgotten by the banking sector. Many \_\_\_\_ don't understand the needs nor do they have the time or the passion to work with them. I have heard horror stories from other deaf and hard of hearing people and how the \_\_\_\_ treated them. So, it would be a wonderful opportunity for me to eliminate the problems that they were having by developing a special unit to focus on the deaf and hard of hearing community. (Bill)



Bill continued this thread of thought by explaining that all of this keeps him going and that if he continued to do what he is doing, then he would be an inspiration to so many people, not just to deaf and hard of hearing people.

I am over the age of 50 now, but all of this gets me going! I am an innovative person but I want to look for more deals and to look for more solutions. I think if I can continue to do this, I would be an inspiration to so many people, not only to deaf and hard of hearing people, but to lots of people all over the world. That's what I am working on and if I could do more of that, that would be very powerful and I am starting to figure that out. I am thankful for that. (Bill)

Greg talked about his desire to give back to the deaf community by sharing what he has learned through his experiences as a deaf entrepreneur/business owner.

So I want to share my thought processes, my information, my experiences and knowledge back to the deaf community through organizations like schools, non-profits, higher education, businesses, on boards for example. Even through casual conversations with people, I would be honest with them and tell them what I know, from one person to the next. This way we can spread and share information. That's how I want to give back to the deaf community. (Greg)

Lizzie discussed that she was pulled to where she is now and that the money she makes goes to her children, who are deaf. This in turn will flow into the deaf community.

Yes, I am still young, but I do think that I was pulled, or led (for a lack of a better word) to where I am now, sure. And, better yet, I earn a living! The money goes to my children and my children are deaf, so the money goes to the deaf community and so it goes around. (Lizzie)

Other participants discussed similar situations regarding giving back to the deaf community, monetarily and in other ways. Samantha talked about being excited to make money and to give away the money to others who really need it.

I am excited when I make money! It's nice to have the money to enjoy the luxuries of life, and it's nice. Also, it is nice to be able to help others with that money. I can give away money to those people who really need it. I like that. I am big on helping other people. In my past experience, helping others ended up in frustration. Now I know who, when and how to help. That is my new lesson. It's like the story of the golden egg. I have a golden egg in my possession. When people ask for it, I happily share it with them and I have no problem giving it to them. I expect that person to share that golden egg

with other people. If they end up keeping it for themselves, that's not so good. I want it back sometimes. If it is gone, then I have nothing. (Samantha)

Frank also discussed the role of money as an important way to give back to the deaf community. He wants to give money away to set up a private school for the deaf.

Of course, money matters. My goal is to use that money to pay back the community. Business owners always pay back the community. In what ways do I want to pay back the community? I have thought long and hard about this. It depends on how much I earn. My ultimate dream is to set up one of the best deaf private schools in the United States and provide every resource that the students need. That's my dream. (Frank)

Ed talked about enjoying the process of giving back to the deaf community through donations and other gifts in kind.

I enjoy giving back to the deaf community through our donations and also gifts in kind, for example donating equipment for silent auctions and door prizes. It is nice to give back. They seem to enjoy getting something to support their cause. (Ed)

Rick reflected back to his years as a CEO for a large non-profit organization by explaining his thought that because he was busy advocating for the rights of deaf and hard of hearing people through the organization, that this may have caused the organization to suffer business-wise. He reflected on this and explained that if he were to do this over again, he would have done things differently.

Given our role as a consumer advocacy organization, we tend to be involved with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to fight for the rights of deaf consumers through business practices, and by showing them that specific behaviors by certain companies was not right. We spent years fighting with the FCC. Those years are lost on possible neglect of our business years. If we were to do it again, I would have worked in close alliance with national advocacy organizations for that type of work. The company has played a variety of roles. (Rick)

This sense of advocacy was also reflected in Jasper's explanation of a time in which his organization helped an individual fight for his rights to drive in his country.

For example, one person in India asked his American peer if they actually drive in America. When the American asked the Indian peer if they drive, the Indian responded that they were not allowed to drive in India because they were deaf. With that

information, the Indian decided to fight for his rights to get a license. He eventually got his license 6 months later for his specific home city, not for all of India. So, it is small things like that that really impact them and help them to wake up to the fact that they are important too. (Jasper)

Bill discussed the desire to “pay it forward” to those people who have helped him while he was growing up.

I wanted to give back to the community and I wanted to “pay it forward” to my parents, my neighbors, and other people who were there for me when I was growing up. I wanted to “pay it forward”, so I told my wife that I wanted to do something else and that I wanted to do more as far as community involvement. I couldn’t really do that with the government, but I could do that in the private sector. (Bill)

Thus in this theme, the deaf entrepreneurs/business owners described the essential theme of their desire to make an impact in today’s world. This was explicated through their examples of the altruistic nature of their business venture and in their desire to give back to the community.

To review this chapter, six essential themes were distilled from all of the interviews and explained the essence of the experience of the deaf entrepreneur/business owner. The first theme was explicated as the deaf entrepreneur’s pursuit of their passion with experience and skill. All the other five themes were tightly connected to this theme. The second theme was the description of the deaf entrepreneur’s running their enterprise through collaboration, networking, strategy and understanding of the market. The third theme described the deaf entrepreneurs reflecting on their identity as a deaf person and how it impacted their experience. The fourth theme explicated the need for building bridges to the rest of the world using communication strategies. The fifth theme expanded on the entrepreneurs’ need for having a support network. Lastly, the sixth theme described the deaf entrepreneur’s desire to make an impact in today’s world.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of those entrepreneurs who are deaf and who have established business ventures and in the joys and challenges of maintaining those ventures. There is very little information or literature on the experience of deaf entrepreneurs/business owners. The overall purpose of the study was to generate new knowledge in the area of entrepreneurs/business owners who are deaf. The primary research question uncovered in this study was, "What is the essence of Deaf Entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial experience?"

In order to gain insight into the entrepreneurial experience, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 deaf entrepreneurs/business owners. The long interview method was used to obtain information about their experience as deaf entrepreneurs and business owners. Through a phenomenological analysis of the text of the interviews, 6 essential themes were identified. Additionally, sub-themes were described under each theme to help further explain the nature of the phenomenon of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. The following chapter contains a discussion of these findings as they relate to existing relevant literature, implications of these findings, recommendations for future research, and the researcher's final reflections.

### **Discussion of Essential Themes**

Six themes were generated from the interviews and described the essence of the experience of the deaf entrepreneur/business owner. The first theme was described as the deaf entrepreneur's pursuit of their passion with experience and skill. In this theme, the participants told of being passionate about something they wanted to do and described the importance of having past experience and skills to help them pursue their dreams. All the other five themes were connected to this central theme and in their own ways supported the theme as spokes to a

hub. The second theme told of the description of the deaf entrepreneur's running their enterprise through collaboration, networking, strategy and understanding of the market. In this theme, the use of different social networks was described in their experience. For some of these participants, the social networks contributed to their markets. The third theme described the deaf entrepreneurs' reflections on their identity as a deaf person and how it impacted their experience. In this theme, the participants reflected on whether their being deaf had any bearing on their being an entrepreneur. The fourth theme discussed the need for building bridges to the rest of the world using communication strategies as well as the different communication strategies used specifically by those people who were deaf. The fifth theme expanded on the entrepreneurs' need for having a support network. These support networks included family, friends, other business owners and other professionals. Lastly, the sixth theme illuminated the deaf entrepreneur's desire to make an impact in today's world. These essential themes were "sine qua non" to the experience. In other words, without these six essential themes, the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner would not be what it is. In this section, I will discuss these findings as they relate to the following areas: (a) the role of education and experience in entrepreneurship, (b) the role of social networks and support systems in entrepreneurship, and (c) the role of deaf identity and communication access in entrepreneurship. Figure 1 gives a visual representation of the six themes.

**The participants in the study experienced being deaf entrepreneurs/business owners by:**



**Figure 1. Six essential themes of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner.**

## **Discussion**

### **Topic I: The role of education and previous experience in entrepreneurship.**

Review of literature on minority entrepreneurship has shown that human capital and access to financial capital were two of the most important determinants of the entrepreneurial decision (Fairlie & Robb, 2008). The participants in this dissertation study described that previous work experience played an essential role in the development of their businesses. It has been suggested that other forms of human capital and business human capital – the owners' education level and prior work experience in a business whose goods and services were similar

to those provided by the owner's business are important determinants of business outcomes (Fairlie & Robb, 2008; Morris & Lewis, 1995). Prior work experience at a firm providing similar goods and services was likely to provide the owner with specific human capital that allows them to succeed in their venture. The owner may have acquired skills that are specific to a type of work or industry that are useful for starting and running a successful business. In Fairlie and Robb's (2008) study, the relationship between these forms of acquiring business human capital and business outcomes was strong. The deaf entrepreneurs in this dissertation study portrayed the need to have the experience and skills to pursue those passions in order for their organization to be considered as a legitimate business interest, especially in a predominantly hearing world. The idea of achieving legitimacy was also a common theme in minority literature.

In describing their experiences, the participants emphasized the need for knowledge and skill in the area in which the business is based. This was explained in their examples of how they acquired the necessary knowledge and skills through past education, previous jobs and experiences. Education has been found to be a major determinant of business ownership in literature. As an example, in one study, low levels of education obtained by blacks and Latinos were partly responsible for lower business ownership rate (Fairlie & Robb, 2008). Mexican-Americans have even lower levels of education than blacks, which translate to a limiting factor for business creation (Fairlie & Robb, 2008). The success of a business is likely to have been linked to the education level of the owner. One reason is that the general and the specific knowledge and skills acquired through formal education may be useful for running a business.

Previous knowledge plays a critical role in integration and accumulation of new knowledge, as well as integrating and adapting to new situations. Review of literature suggests

that an important determinant of entrepreneurial behavior was the individual's exposure to successful role models (Sequeira, Mueller & McGee, 2007; Morris & Lewis, 1995). Role models include parents, other family members, teachers, business associates and social acquaintances. These individuals demonstrate certain behaviors to the potential entrepreneurs such as risk-taking, tolerance for ambiguity, being proactive, etc. These behaviors may lead to the values needed to establish their ventures.

Literature review suggests that nascent entrepreneurs are motivated to expend effort towards the creation of a new venture because they believe this will lead to some desired outcomes. Expectancy theory is a dominant theoretical framework for explaining human motivation (Edelman, Brush, Manalova, & Greene, 2010). Expectancy theory assumes that action will be taken when the individual believes that his or her performance will lead to successful performance, which will bring certain outcomes. Expectancy theory is used in entrepreneurship research to describe the predictors of entrepreneurship as a discrete occupational choice (Gatewood E., Gatewood, K., Shaver, Powers, & Gartner, 2002; Vroom 1964). Entrepreneurial expectancy was positively and significantly associated with the expectation that the launch of the new venture may lead to desired outcomes. The findings follow previous literature, which show that entrepreneurs are motivated to start ventures to fulfill a need for self-realization. In the current dissertation study, the participants were driven by their desire to pursue their area of passion and were given the confidence to do so through their skills and experience. The typical deaf business owner who participated in the Pressman (1999) dissertation study on deaf entrepreneurs was similarly motivated by intrinsic factors other than financial factors. This included strong interest in the area of their small business as well as having already existing skills. Most of the people in this study used very little money to start



their own business (Pressman, 1999). This is parallel with the findings in this particular phenomenological study on deaf entrepreneurs. One of the essences of the experiences of being a deaf entrepreneur was that the participants had passion for the specific business that they were establishing. They were driven by the desire to excel in their area and money tended to be a secondary motivating factor.

Policies to promote entrepreneurship and business owners among disadvantaged groups are widespread. For example, there are currently more than 500 non-profit programs providing loans, training, or technical assistance to disadvantaged entrepreneurs (Aspen Institute in Fairlie & Robb, 2008). New demonstration programs by the US Department of Labor and SBA provide microenterprise training and assistance as well as microloans. The focus of many programs for minority and disadvantaged firms is on providing more access to financial capital (Fairlie & Robb, 2008). There is very little evidence that these programs or policies have focused their efforts on individuals in the deaf community. Most of the efforts have been focused on ethnic and woman populations. The deaf entrepreneurs in this phenomenological study have expressed concern that they were not able to find specific resources or programs that could help them get started with their business venture. As examples, the deaf entrepreneurs expressed looking into resources such as the Small Business Administration, SCORE, and other similar programs. Most of them found very little in the way of specific programs for deaf individuals or even disabled individuals. For those individuals who have taken advantage of these programs, it was usually a relatively difficult process because of access and cultural considerations as a deaf person.

While knowledge of such topics as creation of business plans is helpful, it is also recognized that the actual business will develop differently from the business plan and that entrepreneurs must not see the plan as rigid or inflexible. Indeed, to place too much emphasis on

the business plan may lead to an environment where entrepreneurs fear change and are unable or unwilling to be flexible in the face of a dynamic environment. Programs should focus on the skills, attributes and behaviors that help entrepreneurs to prosper. This was echoed in the sentiments expressed by the Deaf Entrepreneurs/Business Owners in the study and should be considered when considering implications from the study.

This subject also came up with those people who did not pursue their initial passion originally and they attributed their business failure to not finding the right business to pursue. Because the topic of “pursuing their passion with experience and skill” was a persistent theme among all of the deaf entrepreneurs in this study, it would be beneficial to explore this area further and to create strategies that will encourage more deaf people to pursue their area of passion with knowledge and skill if they are to establish a business.

### **Topic II: The role of networks and support systems in entrepreneurship.**

The participants in this dissertation study described the importance of networks and support systems as essential parts of the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. The networks and support systems were utilized by the deaf entrepreneur for a variety of purposes, including entry into markets; access to financial capital; and sharing of resources and psychological support. This theme is also strongly supported by existing literature in the area of the importance of social networks and support systems, especially in the minority entrepreneur literature.

Review of literature points to the concept of “ethnic enclaves” as a way for minority entrepreneurs to start their business. An ethnic enclave is an area, which retains some cultural distinction from a larger, surrounding area. Sometimes an entire city may have such a feel. Usually, the enclave revolves around businesses that are run by the members of the community.

The people participating in the enclaves may serve their own ethnic market and/or the general population. Ethnic enclaves include places like New York's Chinatown and San Francisco's Japantown. The enclave economic theory states that the spatial concentration of an ethnic group permits it to create its own business enterprises, thus speeding the economic progress of the group (Portes, 1987). It stresses that ethnic and racial minorities can make more rapid initial economic progress when they create an enclave economy. Some advantages are that it creates an increasingly successful group of entrepreneurs in the ethnic community and the ties of the ethnic community allow the owners to give their employees a better deal. It gives them a better chance of moving forward than they would have in the outside economy (Portes, 1987; Bates, 1997).

In the deaf community, this enclave is mostly virtual, and sometimes transnational, with most businesses occurring within the deaf community across physical boundaries, such as through the Internet, social networks, or through large community events such as trade shows. With the decline in the number of deaf people attending Deaf Clubs and traditional residential schools, large trade shows have become a way for deaf people to get together to socialize and to purchase goods and services. In July of 2010, 23,400 people from all over the world attended the DeafNation World Expo in Las Vegas. Anecdotal information suggests that a large number of businesses at the trade show were owned by deaf people. Due to the collective nature of the deaf community and the advent of new technology, the enclave is far reaching. The concept of marketing to the specific deaf community is a common one, and fits within the framework of ethnic enclaves. As an example, a small local deaf-owned construction and home repair business may cater only to the deaf population in communities where there are large numbers of deaf people.

While that is the case, many of the deaf entrepreneurs in the study remarked on the need to market their business outside of the deaf community. The main reasons cited during the study were attributed to the relative small size of the deaf community/market and the relative lack of purchasing power within the community. Some of the entrepreneurs expressed that they used the deaf community as a starting point to move forward with their enterprises. Review of literature on minority entrepreneurship also indicates that the size and composition of social networks were associated with self-employment. Ethnic enclaves represent one method for creating and facilitating entry into networks. Of particular importance is that locating in an ethnic enclave may provide a market for special products and services and access to co-ethnic labor (Fairlie & Robb, 2008; Bates, 1997). Fairlie and Woodruff (2010) found that Mexican-immigrant self-employment rates were higher in ethnic enclaves. Ethnic enclaves also facilitate the transmission of social and ethnic resources. In particular, ethnic enclaves create opportunities for would-be entrepreneurs by providing access to markets, labor and information. For example, the protected market hypothesis maintains that ethnic entrepreneurs often better serve the market of ethnic minorities by offering transactions in their own language and more efficiently responding to a group's tastes and demands (Bates, 1997).

Ethnic enclaves may explain why some ethnic groups have high rates of business ownership but enclaves can dampen opportunities for entrepreneurs by creating intense competition among co-ethnics (Bates, 2007). There were a few examples from the deaf entrepreneurs in this study, which touched on the fact that the deaf market may be too small for similar deaf-owned businesses to compete with one another. Participants in the current study discussed catering to the Deaf Community as a springboard to enter the market of the broader population. While ethnic enclaves offer ethnic entrepreneurs access to ethnic markets, relying on

the enclave as the sole source of demand can limit growth potential because of limited market size (Bates, 1997).

Walker, MacBride, and Vachon (1977) have defined a social network as the “set of personal contacts through which an individual maintains his social identity and receives emotional support, material and services, information and new social contacts” (p 35). In practice, that network consists of his/her family members, friends and acquaintances. Social networks are thought to provide two types of social support, emotional and material. The deaf entrepreneurs in the study described the value of relying on these social networks as part of their experience.

Social networks are often established through the identification of networks and network relationships, sometimes defined by the strength of ties between members in groups, repetitive group activity such as the frequency of meetings and other formal interactions as well as informal gatherings and other social activities and family relationships (Davidson & Honing, 2003). Having parents and/or close friends or neighbors in business, as well as encouragement from friends and family, was strongly associated with probability of entry into networks. It was found that social capital was important in predicting successful exploitation of business opportunities. Encouragement by friends and family was quite strongly linked with the pace of business growth activity (Davidson & Honing, 2003). As evidenced in this dissertation study, participants expressed the value of their social networks in sustaining them through their experience as entrepreneurs. The social network may be a source of venture capital, initial customers, information, and psychological support. It may be the critical factor that convinces someone to become an entrepreneur/ business owner (Allen, 2000).

The deaf entrepreneurs in this study also discussed the relatively difficult time they had in joining mainstreamed networks for entrepreneurs and business owners. Accesses to formal and informal networks were cited as the main issues. In an example in another study, ten out of the eleven respondents indicated “frustrations about missing out on networking opportunities”, wishing they could join ‘water cooler conversations and engage in every day conversations and jokes with their hearing non-signing colleagues (Kavin & Brown-Kurz, 2008). Networking challenges had a significance impact on the career experiences of deaf and hard of hearing professionals. In the same study, respondents discussed different strategies for acquiring missed information exchanged in the workplace. The respondents discussed the need to use these strategies to access the informal information loop in the office (Kavin & Brown-Kurz, 2008). This is consistent with the findings from Foster’s (1992) study which found that deaf and hard of hearing employees often experienced difficulty in engaging in social interactions, information networking opportunities and obtaining information through informal networks, which was often detrimental to the achievement of their long term career goals. This seemed to be a common thread in the deaf entrepreneurs’ challenges with networking with mainstreamed groups outside of the deaf community. Several examples pointed to the difficulty of joining groups such as a CEO-only group due to communications and cultural considerations.

As another example, Brush, Carter, Gatewood, Greene, and Hart (2004) noted that female entrepreneurs have access to different business and investment social networks than male entrepreneurs. Racial differences in networks may also contribute to the lack of success among black businesses. Previous research indicates that the size and composition of social networks is associated with self employment and that having close friends and neighbors in business and being a member of a business network are positively associated with outcomes among nascent

entrepreneurs. These networks may be especially important in providing financing, customers, technical assistance, role models and contracts. These same networks however are likely also to be useful for finding employment in the wage and salary sector creating a negative effect on self-employment (Davidson & Honing, 2003). This means that individuals may choose to seek employment through those networks, rather than continuing to sustain their own venture.

The participants in this study stressed the need for mentorship as a part of their experience. While not all of them had such mentors, the ones that had mentors, explained the importance of having mentors in the establishment of their businesses. They credited their mentors with helping them with business specific skills, as well providing them with valuable advice on how to cope in the business world as a business owner. In exploring one of her research questions, Pressman (1999) attempted to learn who were the key role models and mentors who helped these entrepreneurs to launch their own business. Asking the respondents who their mentors or role models were when they were growing up, 40% the respondents named family members. In helping to start the business, 46.5% of the respondents indicated “friend” and 24.4% of the respondents selected “family”. Foster and McLeod (2004) explored the role of mentoring relationships in the career development of successful deaf persons and found early mentors were for the most part, family members, followed by educators and school counselors. While the study focused on the general career development of deaf people, it also explored the importance of mentoring and providing a role model to deaf people, helping them to set high goals and being an advocate for their success (MacLeod & Foster, 2004). The authors found that having a mentor was a primary and persistent theme in their career success. They also concluded that it did not matter if the mentor was Deaf or Hearing; it was the mentoring experience that provided the value in the subjects’ career success.

Mentoring needs to play a larger role in the development of nascent deaf entrepreneurs. Mentoring opportunities may lead to the development of human and social capital required to develop a business. Mentoring support combined with information on the needs of entrepreneurs at specific times in their development may represent an efficient and effective support mechanism (Sullivan, 2000). It is suggested that the idea of having such formal programs be explored to increase the number of deaf entrepreneurs/business owners. As discussed earlier, increasing opportunities for the acquisition of human capital and business human capital should be viewed as vital goals for the development of deaf entrepreneurs. Policies to promote social networks, experience, mentoring, and educational attainment among business owners would be a good start.

### **Topic III: The role of deaf identity and communication access in entrepreneurship.**

Two significant themes arose in this dissertation study, which were both directly related to the experience of being a deaf person as an entrepreneur/business owner. The theme of “building bridges to the rest of the world using communication strategies” focused on the different ways that the deaf entrepreneur communicated with the rest of the world. The other theme, “reflecting on their identity as a deaf person and how it impacted their experience”, described the entrepreneur’s experience as a deaf person within the context of their being an entrepreneur. Both of these themes are discussed within the existing literature, which supports these themes. There were also several instances in which both themes intertwine and intersect.

The Deaf community has always been a communication-based community. The Deaf community is connected not through their disability, but through language and culture. This provides the powerful affective bond of belonging and collective political and social identity that binds the community together (Sacks, 1990; Schein, 1986; Lane, 1993). The Internet is enabling



D/deaf people to communicate information remotely for the first time without the need for mediation by hearing people. The Internet is changing the way face-to-face interactions occur because it supports visual forms of communications that make it possible for D/deaf people to have synchronous, remote communications with each other in sign language (Valentine & Skelton, 2009).

Technology has changed significantly over the last 20 years, making it more plausible for deaf people to communicate with their hearing counterparts. This has had an impact on their ability to network with other people. Until recently, Deaf people were largely limited to face-to-face contacts, and so their networks were limited in extent and were more likely to generate “strong ties” mostly between members in the Deaf community, but maybe not to outside the Deaf community. There have been new technological strides in technology with the personal computer, the Internet, cell phones, social media, etc. SMS, or text messaging, all of which allows contact between Deaf and hearing people on a level playing field so that it is not necessary to identify oneself as Deaf when communicating with others. In a text-based relationship, such as an online relationship or a text-based business contacts, it is no longer necessary for the other person to know about the interactants’ identity as a deaf person. Power and Power (2006) surveyed 172 deaf people about their preferences for communicating with hearing people. The results showed that only 35% of their deaf research subjects said they always identified themselves as Deaf and another 29% said that they “sometimes” did this. The study posed the idea of exploring their motivations for doing so.

Ironically, while the Internet is improving Deaf people's mobility within the hearing world, it does not appear to be increasing the integration of the Deaf community into mainstreamed society. They are not using the technology to initiate new relationships with

hearing people/communities that are taken off-line. Rather, many Deaf people are 'passing" as "hearing" on-line because the Internet makes it possible for users to manage if, and when they want to disclose their identities. In another published study, 40% of those participants who said they used the Internet reported that they deliberately conceal their D/deaf identity online whereas others described using email as a tool to inform hearing people how to communicate with deaf people (Valentine & Skelton, 2009). The Internet gives D/deaf people more options and therefore agency to function independently in hearing society, because it allows them to access everyday goods and services in the hearing world without the need for face-to-face contact with hearing people in off-line space where they encounter marginalization and discrimination. Accessing information and communicating online enables D/deaf people to choose if and when they want to disclose their D/deaf identity in the same way that other studies have showed that disabled people manage information about their impairments online (Seymour & Lupton, 2004). During the interviews, several deaf entrepreneurs expressed that they did not reveal that they were deaf in their communications with potential customers and other stakeholders. This subject represents an opportunity to explore this phenomenon further to generate new recommendations and ideas to improve this area of communications.

The use of technology to help in communication raises questions about improvements in technology itself and ways in which people might use and adapt them. The use of technology also presents questions about how these tools affects Deaf people's concepts of identity and community. While oral/aural based technologies such as the radio and the telephone have enabled hearing people to overcome long distances to communicate both one-to-one and one-to-many, and to develop stretched out networks, D/deaf people have been historically isolated from such communication opportunities. Historically, this has had a profound impact on D/deaf

people's educational and economic prospects, social welfare, and well-being. However, the Internet is now revolutionizing the way that face-to-face interactions can take place because it supports visual forms of communications (e.g. the use of web-cams and videophones) that, for the first time make it possible for Deaf people to communicate with each other in sign language across distances (Valentine & Skelton, 2008).

Deaf people's ability to participate in mainstream society online does not necessarily automatically translate into social inclusion in the offline hearing community. Rather than producing new norms to provide access for everyone, many mainstreamed websites actually reproduce hearing hegemony and control through their emphasis on written English and possibly through audio and video that are not accessible (Valentine & Skelton, 2009). There is reason to be optimistic. Senate Bill 3304 was signed by the President in December of 2010 in the United States, which will require better access to Internet based videos, websites and other online tools. Information in the Information Age is a fundamental tenet of citizenship – necessary for engagement with public services, civic participation, social inclusion and lifelong learning. By studying how deaf entrepreneurs to achieve parity with their peers through the use of technology, there is an opportunity to explore new ways in which emerging technologies will help further level the playing field.

Most of the participants in this study discussed some form of relay services. Many of them use video relay services in which they use an interpreter via a webcam to interpret their calls. For those who do not use sign language, text-based relay services are an option. However, text relay services are not popular with many D/deaf people because they are slow. Communication can only flow in one direction at a time so that the party receiving a message cannot interrupt or begin a response until the message has been completed. This can strip the

communication of emotion, nuance and spontaneity (Valentine & Skelton, 2009). This is verified by the fact that a number of the participants in this study state that they do not like using the traditional text relay services because they are slow. Also, several participants expressed concern that the video relay services were not necessarily the panacea they were seeking to provide equal access to the phone network. They expressed that these services were not always effective and in some cases, they have had to improvise. As an example, one person hired his own personal interpreter and communicated with his stakeholders by using his videophone to call the interpreter. The hired interpreter would then facilitate communication between the deaf person and the hearing person using a cell phone equipped with speakerphone capabilities.

As mentioned elsewhere in this study, I. King Jordan quoted, “Deaf people can do anything but hear”. In one of the subthemes of reflecting on their identity as a deaf person, the deaf entrepreneurs discussed how their being deaf was a competitive advantage in running their enterprise. The concept of “Deaf Gain”, in which the positive aspects of being deaf are considered, rather than the negative aspects is a new paradigm within the deaf studies field (Baumann, & Murray, 2010). Historically, people in our society have used language that is negative and deficit based, such as “hearing loss”, “hearing impairment”, “disabled”, and other similar terms. The concept of “Deaf Gain” turns that thinking around and creates opportunities to use the idea of being deaf as a positive resource, especially in areas of visual arts, architecture, and language. The reasoning is that Deaf people bring specific skills to the table, such as increased spatial cognition, speed of generating mental images, peripheral vision, cultural sensitivity and tactile acuity (Baumann, & Murray, 2010). Deaf people have perceived the world differently and that unique way of being is worth learning about. The deaf entrepreneurs in this study gave examples of how being deaf was a competitive advantage in their business. Some of

the entrepreneurs attributed to this to a special knowledge of a specific culture. Other entrepreneurs described that the cultural aspects of their being deaf enabled them to work with other cultures and that this was an advantage for them. As Greg outlined in his example of dealing with his Taiwanese manufacturers, he said that his being deaf was an advantage he had over his hearing competitors.

The concept of “Deaf Gain” provides us with insight for maximizing the potential of entrepreneurship in the deaf community. In what ways can the advantages of being deaf be utilized and how can this be translated to new business models? This is a brand new area ripe for future inquiry. There has been little scholarly research of the concept of “Deaf Gain”, because it is such a relatively new concept, so the concept within the context of deaf entrepreneurship is something worth exploring.

In the Pressman study (1999), the respondents were asked to share in their own words, their greatest challenges in starting their own business. Several commonalities emerged from their responses including, proving to hearing people that deaf people can run a business; advertising and marketing their services and products; developing networks and connections; communicating with hearing customers; developing both deaf and hearing customers; starting and running the business and; paper work and time management. With the exception of the last item, these commonalities were found in the current study as well.

The participants in this dissertation study described a number of experiences related to communication and the strategies they used to communicate with the rest of the world. In another study into the experience of deaf and hard of hearing managers, “Communication problems and strategies fell out as a primary theme” (MacLeod & Foster, 1996, p. 447). Communication difficulties ranked first among the list of issues brought forth by the deaf and

hard of hearing supervisors/managers in the survey (MacLeod & Foster, 1996). In today's society, it is taken for granted that most communications revolve around speaking and/or listening aurally and the activities of a deaf person may be limited in the workplace. Directive communications is the type of communications found in formal communication processes such as training, meetings, etc. Conversational or indirect communications is the communication that happens outside of the formal workplace situations, such as by the water cooler, in the hallway, during breaks. A lot of information is exchanged through indirect communications (Emerton et al., 1996). These informal communication channels have proven to help people advance in their careers and build strong trust with other employees (Foster, 1992). As Sacks (1990) reported in his book, most of the barriers that Deaf people face in today's world are primarily of a linguistic nature. The majority of problems encountered by deaf entrepreneurs who founded their business in marketing their services or products to the general public (non-deaf population); were related to their communication barriers (Harris, 1989). At that time, very few deaf business owners were able to generate additional sources of revenue to afford a full-time interpreter. Now, with the advent of telecommunications relay services and new technologies, these communication issues have been mitigated to some degree, as evidenced by the examples described in this dissertation. Access to networks outside of the deaf community is enhanced if the communication barriers are further reduced, therefore expanding opportunities for other deaf people to become entrepreneurs.

A number of the deaf entrepreneurs in this study mentioned that they did not feel supported by other members of the deaf community, particularly at the inception of their venture. Some of them mentioned the concept of the "crab theory", in this situation, when a deaf person becomes successful, and then the other deaf people in the collective group will try to bring them

back down into the proverbial “pot”. There is very little scholarly research that explains this phenomenon in the deaf community; however similar phenomena have been explained in other cultures, especially those that have collective societies. For example, there is the widespread phenomenon of the “tall poppy syndrome” in Australia and New Zealand, in which a person would be “cut down” if they try to rise above other people (Feather, 1993; Kirkwood, 2007). Additionally, a similar phenomenon has been found among high achieving Canadian women (Miller, 1997). Because of the lack of scholarly research into a similar phenomenon in the deaf community, it is recommended that formalized research efforts explore this area. Further research in this area could help shed light into this situation in the deaf community and create opportunities to remove some of the community-imposed and self-imposed barriers to success as deaf entrepreneurs.

In summary, findings from this study were explored within the context of existing literature. Discussed were findings relating to the role of education and previous experience in entrepreneurship and; the role of networks and support systems in entrepreneurship and; the role of deaf identity and communication access in entrepreneurship. The next section will cover the limitations of the study, explain implications of those findings and offer recommendations for future research.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are limitations to this study. It focused on the lived experience of 14 deaf entrepreneurs in five major locations in the US and cannot be considered a representative national sample. As a result, the findings should not be generalized. Rather, they should be understood as a composite portrait of those experiences of those interviewed. The goal of this study was to obtain thick, rich, descriptive data that could be analyzed thematically for common

themes and essences of the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur. The themes from the study may be explored for possible transferability of key concepts and other special population issues.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study have some far-reaching implications that are discussed below in the form of possible proposals for future practice. As stated earlier, the results are not meant to be generalized, but to serve as a starting point into some possible interpretations of the phenomenon of being deaf entrepreneurs. From the participants' comments and the researcher's interpretations, some possible general implications are explored. Some implications of this study include the establishment of training and development programs for nascent and experienced deaf entrepreneurs; the expansion or the creation of networking opportunities for deaf entrepreneurs; the creation of formalized mentoring networks specifically for deaf entrepreneurs within existing programs; the exploration of the use of technology to enhance entrepreneurial opportunities for deaf people; and the need for more opportunities to use deaf entrepreneurs as role models.

Organization development focuses on the process of capacity building for individuals, groups and organizations. Each entrepreneur in the study has started a business from scratch, building organizations of different sizes in different industries. The experience of the entrepreneur has an impact on the development of the organization in which they have led. Most of the entrepreneurs in this study talked about the need to grow their enterprise, therefore there is a need for capacity building. Through discussions of the implications from this study, ways to increase capacity in these organizations are explored. There are also implications for other fields, such as human resources and leadership development. As one example, by learning about



the experiences of the participants in the study, human resources professionals may gain knowledge about possible ways that deaf people use different communication strategies to deal with hearing people.

During the study, the participants talked at length about the need to acquire experience and skills while pursuing their passion. From those comments, it is proposed that programs targeting the deaf population be designed toward this end. While such programs may be challenging and costly to implement, there needs to be a shift in the emphasis of entrepreneurial programs away from writing business plans and finding capital and toward gaining related work experience that will help augment one's human capital. Potential entrepreneurs should be encouraged to find related work experience, especially in small business prior to launching new businesses. The work experience could be in a friend's or a relative's business or a similar business industry as the one for the business idea. Additionally, review of literature showed that prior work experience is one of the main factors considered in loan applications (US Small Business Administration, 2007a in Fairlie & Robb, 2008). A focused program that helps the potential entrepreneur to gain experience while receiving support from a mentor may be a good way to help the entrepreneur to get a head start in establishing his/her venture. A national database or clearinghouse could be created specifically for this purpose, in which budding entrepreneurs can seek opportunities in gaining this experience with the support of mentors. The intent of these focused programs would be to help the potential entrepreneur develop strategies and activities that will allow them to maximize the learning experience associated with the early part of the entrepreneurial process.

Secondary and post-secondary programs that are considering an entrepreneurial component to their programs for deaf students should consider creating mechanisms to allow

deaf students to gain experience in the field in which they are interested. For example, internships in smaller fledgling businesses will give students the opportunity to gain a variety of skills needed to establish a smaller business. Some post-secondary programs, such as the National Technical Institute for the Deaf require a paid internship experience to supplement their coursework. If funding is an issue with the smaller fledgling firms, a general fund could be established to provide stipends for internships. This will allow the student to gain a breadth and depth of experiences that will provide them with the experience in establishing their future ventures. These experiential programs, in the form of internships, may be complemented with intensive mentoring from the principals of the small business. This will allow students to gain experience in the many facets of running a business. The entrepreneurs in this study often remarked that gaining the skills needed to run a business was something that would have helped them to pursue their business interests more quickly.

Information from the participants in this study and review of literature points to the need for education on how to increase human capital, rather than a focus on just business plans. Organization development is concerned with the growth management of human potential and capacity in organizations. From a practical perspective, this may be an opportunity for interventions that helps to generate additional human capital in the entrepreneurs' organizations, especially as a response for those participants who explained the need to expand their businesses. This requires an additional emphasis on development of networks, how to overcome adversity, and how to parlay the deaf entrepreneurs' interests into a viable business. Comprehensive entrepreneurial training programs or a curriculum track might be considered for a much wider variety of disciplines. Instead of focusing on entrepreneur training programs within business programs, entrepreneurial training should be considered a track to supplement variety of

disciplines. For example, someone who is pursuing an interest in fine furniture making and wants to parlay that into a possible business, they may take a majority of their core classes in fine arts and furniture design and take entrepreneurial courses in a minor track. This will put the focus on the pursuit of their interest and sharpening their skills in that area of interest and then using the entrepreneurship courses to accelerate the process of establishing their business. From pedagogical and andragogical perspectives, there needs to be a focus on the experiential nature of entrepreneurship, such as providing a hands-on challenge to establish a small business venture during the course.

The entrepreneurs, in the study who were just starting out, or have had an established business for a number of years, discussed the need for more training to help them with their business. From those comments, a look should be considered the possibility of into shorter and more accelerated training programs. For example, accelerated programs and “boot camps” may be offered during the summer months along with opportunities for existing entrepreneurs to network with one another. Past programs such as the Merrill Lynch Entrepreneurship Leadership program offered by the Gallaudet Leadership Institute, were shorter programs that focused on the business development aspects of creating a venture. This specific program, due to lack of continuing funds, has been discontinued. A new training program could be created and special attention should be paid on the areas of study recommended by this study. Additionally, this ties in with the implications for networking, by way of creation of programs for deaf people who are at a different stage in life and are ready to establish ventures of their own. For example, if someone were to work for a number of years before deciding to set up a business, established networks can help pair up the appropriate mentor to help that person gain experience and knowledge.

The deaf entrepreneurs in this study expressed deep desire to network with other entrepreneurs, whether they are deaf or hearing. Organizations such as the National Deaf Business Institute (NDBI) and other programs could seek ways to create those networking opportunities. One option would be for NDBI or other organizations to find linkages with the appropriate entrepreneurship organization or network which will allow them to access to additional resources and possibly access to additional human and business capital. An example of such a mainstreamed network is the Entrepreneur's Organization (EO). Recently, Rochester Institute of Technology, through the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) established the first NTID President's Deaf Entrepreneur Roundtable. At the recent Roundtable in October of 2010, more than a dozen deaf entrepreneurs gathered to discuss issues regarding their entrepreneurial experience. One of the persistent themes at the conference was the need for better networking opportunities and the need for a clearinghouse where information may be shared with one another. Additional conferences could be established to explore this concept further and to create action plans for the establishment of networking opportunities for entrepreneurs who are deaf.

There are numerous implications for mentorship to be considered. Many of the deaf entrepreneurs in the study expressed their experiences and indicated that mentors have helped them or could have helped them. I think that specific programs for mentoring be established for nascent deaf entrepreneurs. As an example, a few large national programs provide related mentoring services for entrepreneurs. The SBA runs the Mentor-Protégé' program for disadvantaged firms under the auspices of the 8A Program. The program focuses on technical, management, and financial assistance in performing prime contracts through joint-venture arrangements. Another program is provided by the Service Corps of Retired Executives

(SCORE) (Fairlie & Robb, 2008). While formalized programs are available through SCORE, they are designed for the general population. A special program should be designed to fit the access and cultural needs of deaf entrepreneurs. By recruiting experienced deaf business owners, SCORE could match deaf individuals with other individuals (who may be deaf or hearing) to create those mentorship opportunities. Formalized networks such as the NDBI may be a source of referrals for the more formalized mentorship programs. In January of 2011, the President of the United States announced new initiatives targeted towards the generation of small business activity through “Start-Up America”. Programs focusing on mentoring were listed as one of the major ways to fill some of the gaps that nascent entrepreneurs are experiencing. We need to create mechanisms for our deaf individuals so that they have access to these initiatives. As an example, this study showed that the entrepreneurs benefited from having mentors, including those who were deaf and those who were hearing. A national database or clearinghouse could help match the nascent entrepreneur with an appropriate mentor, including those mentors who are deaf like themselves.

Further, this study has implications in focusing efforts into the exploration of existing and new technology to be used to improve the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. The participants in the study used a number of conventional technological strategies. At the same time, there have been new and creative applications of existing technologies that have been used by the deaf entrepreneurs in this study. It would be interesting and practical to explore future technologies to be used by this population as well as other deaf people seeking success in their respective fields. Partnering with technology companies may be useful in creating more opportunities for deaf people to enter their business and network and market outside the deaf community. The purpose of these partnerships is to determine future applications, such as the

instant captioning of video conferences, and other possible technologies. As examples, there are a number of telecommunications companies that focus on providing access for deaf and hard of hearing people, who may be interested in improving ways to provide more “functional equivalency” through enhancing their product offerings for deaf professionals. This is also an area ripe for research and development for universities and other research centers, which may be able to access grants through the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health and other grant-giving organizations. Ideally, organizations that focus on the concept of access or universal design would make a good home to look into this opportunity more closely. This area of inquiry has implications that reach much further than just deaf entrepreneurs/business owners. Improved technologies and access for deaf people may benefit people from all walks of life and to help them achieve parity with the rest of the world.

The 14 individuals in the study provided rich and descriptive data of their experience. Exploring the expansion of the concept of providing role models for younger deaf people and other people in marginalized groups may provide younger deaf people an incentive to want to own their own businesses. If younger deaf people are exposed to these role models, the impact will be profound. People can learn and be inspired by these combined stories of deaf entrepreneurs. The concept of a clearing house should not only be limited to the entrepreneurs for their own personal networking needs, but can be expanded to include groups such as schools and other groups.

The implications discussed in this study are mentioned with the idea of fostering more quality interventions to encourage entrepreneurship in the deaf community. Beyond the deaf community, there are also possible concepts that may be transferrable to other marginalized groups. With the increasing likelihood that entrepreneurship is becoming a more viable career

option for deaf people, especially after they have gained some experience in a field of study of which they are passionate, it is important that we explore these implications further and create concrete action steps in the right direction.

The Themes are connected to its general implications as represented by this chart:

**Table 2: Table of Themes and its General Implications**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>General Implications</b>
Theme I “Pursuing their Passion with Experience and Skill”	Training and development programs for nascent and experienced entrepreneurs.
Theme II “Building their Enterprise through Collaboration, Networking and a Deep Understanding of the Market”	Expansion or creation of networking opportunities.  The exploration into the role of access in networking.
Theme III “Reflecting on one’s identity as a deaf person and how it has impacted their experience”	Training and development programs for nascent and experienced entrepreneurs.  Expansion or creation of networking opportunities.
Theme IV “Building Bridges to the Rest of the World Using Communication Strategies”	The exploration of new technologies for access for deaf entrepreneurs.
Theme V “Support is an Essential Part of Being a Deaf Entrepreneur”	Expansion or creation of networking opportunities.  The creation of formalized mentoring networks within existing programs.
Theme VI “ The Desire to Make an Impact in Today’s World”	Exploring the need for more opportunities to use deaf entrepreneurs as role models.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research for this study was conducted by interviewing 14 deaf entrepreneurs/business owners in a variety of business interests. Because this is relatively new ground for research, there are numerous opportunities for future research. This study was an interpretivistic study using phenomenology as its methodology. The goal is not to generalize, but to explore the lived experiences of the deaf entrepreneurs and business owners who participated in the study. Therefore, more research is needed to learn more about the population of deaf entrepreneurs. There are gaps that were discussed in this study that warrants a more detailed look into some of the important factors into the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. Areas to explore for future research are: 1) the concept of ethnic enclaves or a “deaf economy” in the context of the deaf community 2) the role of networking and mentoring for entrepreneurial and career success among deaf people 3) the role of access in the search of funding and capital 4) the use of social media for networking for deaf people 5) the concept of motivating and success factors for deaf entrepreneurs 6) the role of inhibiting factors for success of deaf people, including the exploration of the “crab theory”, and 7) the use of technology for access purposes. There are overlaps between some of the areas of research as they support one another. For example, communication access in social networks and professional networks require further inquiry into the communication processes for deaf entrepreneurs. 8) Lastly, this study may be replicated with new deaf entrepreneurs and by conducting focus groups with deaf entrepreneurs. This may or may not yield new information into the insights of the experience of being a deaf entrepreneur.

1) It would be beneficial to explore the concept of “deaf markets” or “ethnic enclaves” in the deaf community. Economic studies have been conducted within minority ethnic enclaves



and it would be enlightening to look into the attributes of what the “deaf economy” looks like physically and metaphorically. As this study showed, some of these participants started off marketing to the deaf community and then expanded outside the community. The participants in the study discussed the concept of marketing to the deaf community and outside the deaf community. There is still a lot that we do not know about the “deaf economy”, and the subject of a “deaf economy” could be a focus of positivistic studies with a larger population of deaf entrepreneurs. The themes created from this study could be possibly used as constructs for a new survey instrument. As an example, surveys could be distributed to deaf business owners at events such as the Deaf Worldwide Expo in Las Vegas in 2012. Additionally, ethnographic studies into the “deaf economy” or “deaf ethnic enclaves” may help shed more light on this concept. From an organization development standpoint, this may help us understand the nature of the deaf community as an organization and as a distinctive culture.

The concept of “Deaf Gain” is a new one. Continued research can be conducted to explore the concept of “deaf gain” as an avenue for people in the deaf community to capitalize on the positive aspects of being deaf and parlay that into business and career opportunities. The concepts of ethnic enclaves and “deaf gain” may be possible entry points for deaf people to start up their business ventures.

2) Additional inquiry into the phenomenon of networking for deaf entrepreneurs would help provide additional insight for any deaf person who wishes to succeed in any field. There is little research in this area, therefore, there needs to be more research on support networks for career and business success. Analyses of networks among those successful deaf entrepreneurs may provide new information about the nature of these networks. This research needs to include the strength of the ties within the network and the impact that these networks have on the

actual businesses. For example, ways to network with other entrepreneurs in the general population should be explored.

3) Further research can be considered in the area of access to funding and capital for deaf entrepreneurs. Although this came up during this study, it may be beneficial to conduct more detailed studies in this area. Further research in this area may yield additional information regarding the specific needs for this population to access the various capital funding options such as lending institutions, angel investors, and venture capitalists. Based on this study, the barriers to this funding can be studied with the goal of identifying strategies for how these barriers and obstacles may be overcome.

4) There is a lot of description of networks for the deaf entrepreneurs in this study. To expand research efforts in this area, it would be beneficial to delve into more positivistic research on the use of social media networks for deaf entrepreneurs using a larger population sample. Social media includes the use of Internet based networks such as Twitter, Facebook, etc. Social media should be explored within the context of the deaf community and also for opportunities for networking outside the community.

5) There are existing models available for research in the area of motivation for minority entrepreneurs (Edelman et al., 2010; Sequeira et al., 2007). An appropriate research model needs to be considered to determine the motivating factors for deaf entrepreneurs. Also, it may be beneficial to look into the general deaf population to investigate the desire of deaf people to own a business and investigate why they have not pursued their business interests. This may offer additional insight into the motivating factors as well as some of the inhibiting factors in the establishment of enterprises.

6) In contrast, there is an opportunity to explore some of the factors inhibiting the success of deaf people, including entrepreneurs. This includes the self-identified idea of “the crab theory”, or syndrome. Research should not be limited to deaf entrepreneurs, as this topic could have implications for other deaf people who are working towards succeeding in their respective fields. Existing research such as the research in the phenomenon of “the tall poppy syndrome” should be used as a starting point to gain greater insight into the phenomenon of “crab theory” in the deaf community. Because of the cultural nature of this phenomenon, this area may be explored using an ethnographic research methodology.

7) Further research on the use of access technologies to overcome some of the existing challenges in the use of technologies may help offer additional insights. Even though technology has advanced, some of the new advances and their applications have not caught up to the needs of the deaf populations. As an example, when online videos became widespread, the deaf community was left behind because of the lack of captioning on the videos. Specifically, this could be executed through the research and development function at companies who already provide technologies for deaf people. Also, this could be explored within the traditional research institutions such as colleges and universities. The social aspect of existing and new technology may be investigated to further understand the phenomenon in more detail. It is one thing to come up with new applications, and it is another to explore the human element of these technologies. This will yield more information regarding whether or not the technology will actually help provide functional equivalency, especially in networking. This will help deaf entrepreneurs in exploring ways to achieving access to human capital, growing their markets outside of the deaf community and bringing down some of the barriers to success.

8) Finally, It is recommended that this study be replicated with different individuals or with a series of focus groups. Such studies could confirm the current findings and/or add more new information to the topic of deaf entrepreneurship. Also, with the possible changes in technology and societal attitudes, new insights may be gleaned in the area of deaf entrepreneurship.

### **Final Reflections**

As a deaf person, I was deeply affected by the illustrations provided by the entrepreneurs in the study. I knew a few of these individuals in the study and there were many others whom I met for the first time. Each of these participants was willing to open up and tell me stories that were very personal and sometimes painful. Deep inside, I knew that these individuals wanted to share their stories because they want to see other deaf people become successful in their walks of life.

When I was a very young child, I did not believe that opportunities to own a business actually existed for deaf people like me. As I got older, I started to meet more and more deaf people who were going into business for themselves. As I mentioned before, I had often wondered, “What made them tick?” and had wondered if anyone could set up a business if they set their mind to it. As I conducted the interviews, I realized that the answers were in front of me in the form of the lived experiences of these deaf individuals who actually converted their passion and skills into business interests. In putting myself in their shoes, I became more confident in my own abilities and became more confident that I can achieve what I want to do if I set my mind to it. As a deaf person, learning about the experiences was a profound experience. I remember when I established my consulting business; I felt overwhelmed and wondered what I

needed to do to get the business off the ground. The experiences are profound and they speak to the humanity, of which we are all a part. It is a very exciting time to be a deaf person.

If I personally had the information from this study when I had started my business, I think I would have done some things differently. If I had the data from this study, generally, I would have had a better understanding of my potential as a deaf person. After I completed the theme analysis, I had an opportunity to reflect on my own experience in establishing my consulting practice. I have found that the themes resonated with my own experience. For example, I reflected on my experience in networking with other people at the National Association of the Deaf convention and recalled how the words of another deaf entrepreneur provided me with the encouragement to establish my practice. There were also a number of new things I learned from this study. For example, it was a pleasant discovery to find that many of these individuals considered their being deaf as a competitive advantage. This helped me to see things in a new light. I am now considering the ways we can parlay our contributions in the form of a business interest, or as an asset that helps the business to stand out from the rest of the field. What has changed for me as a result of this study is that now I am less inclined to think that there are barriers to being a deaf entrepreneur/business owner. I am now convinced that a lot of these obstacles are either self-imposed or socially-imposed.

Additionally, the information from this study personally gives me the knowledge and the confidence to encourage other people to establish their ventures. Recently, I offered words of encouragement and wisdom to a deaf couple struggling to procure financing for their business concept on the west coast. I told them that if they were passionate about this idea, then to be persistent and to take advantage of their own existing networks. I realized that these were not my words of wisdom, but borrowed from the collective wisdom of those who participated in this

study. The power of phenomenological research is to explore the common themes that arise from a shared phenomenon and communicate that in the form of research.

The possibilities are limitless. Thanks to advances in society and technology, deaf people are now accomplishing a lot more in a greater variety of fields than the previous decades. Now, it is time for us to fine-tune the tools that will allow more deaf people to achieve their dreams and to overcome social and self-imposed barriers to success. I was reminded of a quote by Muhammad Yunus, founder/CEO of Grameen Bank, “Everybody is an entrepreneur, but many don’t have the opportunity to find that out”. It is my desire that we will give each person an opportunity to find out what their interests are and give them the means to pursue those dreams. It is then the power of potential is unlocked within all of us and we can do good in this world.

It is my desire that this study will generate more research and interest in the area of deaf entrepreneurship. I am confident that with the right direction, the right leadership, and the right home for this effort, we will see more and more deaf people who want to create their own destinies by pursuing their dreams. The way needs to be paved so that they can pursue their paths. One of the participants quoted something that stuck with me throughout the rest of the dissertation experience. He quoted, “the journey itself is the reward”. I have been blessed with this journey of discovery throughout the dissertation process and I have enjoyed it. To all who participated in this study, I am forever grateful for the lessons shared. It is your stories that will help inspire others.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

Dear Scot,

**Re: IRB Proposal # B10-189-02 - Exploring the Lived Experiences of Deaf Entrepreneurs  
and Small Business Owners - Expedited  
Researcher: W. Scot Atkins  
Advisor: Dr. Eleni Roulis**

### Full Approval Status

Your application for your proposed research involving human subjects has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of the University of St. Thomas and been given Full Approval Status. Your application has satisfied all of the criteria necessary for full status. This means that you may proceed with your research immediately. This is your official letter of approval.

Please place the IRB log number on all of your future correspondence regarding this protocol.

Please note that under IRB Policy principal investigators are required to report to the IRB for further review when changes in the research protocol increase the risks to the rights and welfare of human subjects involved in the study and /or I n the event of any adverse episode (e.g. actual harm, breach of confidentiality) involving human subjects.

Thank you for all of your work and for writing such a good proposal.

Please contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Best wishes as you begin your research.

Eleni

**Appendix B: Initial Email Message to Participants:**

As part of my requirements to complete my doctoral degree with the University of St. Thomas, I am doing a dissertation in the study of the lived experiences of Deaf Entrepreneurs and Business Owners. The overarching purpose of the study is to generate new knowledge in the area of entrepreneurship for Deaf people.

There is a severe shortage of scholarly research in the area of Deaf Entrepreneurship and Business Owners. This will be a phenomenological study, which will attempt to obtain answers to the fundamental question of “what is the lived experience of these Deaf entrepreneurs and Business Owners?” Interviews will be conducted with 8-15 Deaf Entrepreneurs and Business Owners and data will be qualitatively analyzed and coded to obtain the common themes and constructs of being a Deaf Entrepreneur and Business Owner.

Participants will be purposefully selected based on specific criteria. Each participant must be over the age of 18 years, meet the definition of Deaf as outlined by Crammatte (1968) and must have had at least 2 years of experience of being an entrepreneur or business owner.

Each participant will complete a very short demographic questionnaire, a consent form and be available for an interview that will take up to 2 hours. The interview will take place either at the participant’s place of employment or at another place of their choosing. I will be travelling to key cities in which there are ample numbers of participants for the study. A general list of starter questions will be available for the participants before the interview. All interviews will be videotaped for transcription purposes. The videotaped interviews are not for public use. If travel is not possible, interviews will be conducted through videophone technology and recorded. Confidentiality is ensured and names of participants/locations will be changed as not to reveal the identity of the participants.

Please let me know what questions you may have about the study.

**Appendix C: Participant Consent Form****CONSENT FORM****UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS****A Study into the Lived Experiences of Deaf Entrepreneurs and Business Owners****IRB Log# B10-189-02**

I am conducting a study about the lived experiences of Deaf Entrepreneurs. You were selected as a possible participant because you have been identified as a possible entrepreneur through the National Deaf Business Institute or through my own personal contacts. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Scot Atkins, doctoral student and Dr. Eleni Roulis, faculty advisor, University of St. Thomas.

**Background Information:**

This is a study into the lived experiences of Deaf Entrepreneurs. The overarching purpose of the study is to generate new knowledge in the area of entrepreneurship for Deaf people. This phenomenological study will attempt to obtain answers to the question of “What is the essence of their entrepreneurial experience?” Interviews will be conducted with 10-15 Deaf Entrepreneurs and rich, descriptive data will be analyzed and coded in order to identify common themes.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: You will complete a short demographic questionnaire, complete a consent form and be available for an interview that will take up to 2 hours. The interview will take place either at your place of employment or at another place of your choosing. All interviews will be video-recorded and transcribed. A general list of starter questions will be available for the participants. All interviews will be video recorded for transcription purposes. If travel is not possible, interviews will be conducted through videophone technology and recorded.

**Risks of Participating in the Study:** The study has several risks. There may be a possible invasion of privacy of subject or family. To minimize the risk, the investigator will provide an explanation and a disclaimer regarding the risks involved in this research. Investigator will also explain that names will be changed in the actual research and the participant will review the documents to ensure that all identifiers have been removed. This will also be part of the “member check” process. All names and specific names of companies, locations, etc will be changed to pseudonyms. You will have an opportunity to select your pseudonym.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The video recorded and textual data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the investigator's home and all data will be password protected on investigator's computer. Data with all original names and identifiable data will be destroyed after three (3) years of completion of study. Targeted date is May 30, 2014. All other de-identified data will be kept indefinitely.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the National Deaf Business Institute or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. After you have agreed to the interview and your interview has been recorded, the data will be used in the study. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

### **Contacts and Questions**

My name is Scot Atkins. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 585-286-5314 (VP/Voice). You may also contact my advisor Eleni Roulis at 651-962-5341. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns. **You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

### **Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I understand that my interviews will be video recorded and transcribed.

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**Signature of Study Participant**

---

**Date**

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**Print Name of Study Participant**

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**Signature of Researcher**

---

**Date**



## **Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

### **Starter Questions: A Study into the Lived Experiences of Deaf Entrepreneurs/Business Owners** **W. Scot Atkins**

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this study! There is very little data regarding the experience of deaf entrepreneurs/business owners. The goal for this study is to generate new knowledge in this area. The goal is not to generalize, but to identify key themes that could be explored in future studies. The interviewer will start off by verifying some general demographic information, such as how long you have been an entrepreneur, age, type of business, family status, etc. The interviewer will also be asking you to provide a pseudonym to protect your identity in the research study. These questions are meant to be starter questions and to start a conversation about your experience as a deaf entrepreneur. Additional follow up questions may be asked to get a full picture of your experiences. The goal is to obtain as much rich, descriptive data as possible to capture the “essence” of your experience.

#### **Primary Question:**

Tell me in detail about your experience as a “deaf entrepreneur/business owner”. What is it like to be a “deaf entrepreneur/business owner”?

#### **Possible Additional Questions:**

- Tell me about how your experience in starting your business. Tell me about the reasons for starting this business in the first place.
- Tell me about the joys of being a deaf entrepreneur. Tell me about some examples that best describe this experience.
- How did you learn to do what you are doing now?
- Tell me about the challenges and the barriers of being a deaf entrepreneur. Tell me some stories that best describe this experience.
- What has helped you in your journey as an entrepreneur?
- What kind of interaction do you have with your customers, employees, suppliers, vendors and other stakeholders?
- What happens in a “normal day” for you?
- Can you think of a time when you were at “your peak” or when you felt the most “alive” in your role? Tell a story that describes this experience.

The interviewer will ask you if you have any additional comments or questions. If there are none, the interviewer will give you a brief summary of the discussion and reiterate the confidential nature of this study and explain the next steps in this process.

An opportunity will be given to review any preliminary transcripts for accuracy of information. You will not be able to change your responses except for those that need to be corrected for accuracy.