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Herstory and Education of Deaf Women

Arlene B. Kelly
Gallaudet University

It is our language in every sense of the word.
We create it, we keep it alive, and it keeps us and our traditions alive.
--Barbara Marie Kannapell, 1989

Exactly one month before my December 2021 retirement from Gallaudet University after 33.5 luminous years there as a researcher at the Gallaudet Research Institute and later as a professor in the Department of Deaf Studies, Dr. Jody Cripps, SASLJ Editor, emailed me requesting a VP conversation. Very little did I know that it was to invite me to be the guest editor for this very special issue, *Deaf Women: Their Impact Everywhere* in tribute to three eminent Deaf women, Marie Jean “MP” Philip, Nathie Lee Marbury and Barbara Marie “Kanny” Kannapell.¹ This surely came as a great honor, and needless to say, I accepted the invitation immediately. This was a personal opportunity to celebrate these women, as well as a professional opportunity for other Deaf authors to make contributions to the Deaf Women’s literature by exploring, both directly and indirectly, how Marie’s, Nathie’s and Kanny’s advocacy work impact today’s world.

Marie, Nathie and Kanny were indeed pioneers, or better yet warrioresses, in every respect. Marie espoused biculturalism of American Sign Language (ASL) and English in educational settings, starting in Massachusetts and later globally; Nathie aimed to raise the bar for Black Deaf children in schools that she taught at with higher educational expectations through classroom teachings and storytelling; and Kanny pushed for use of ASL in classrooms with Deaf children as espoused in the quotation above. I consider myself very fortunate to have known each of these honorable women personally and these stories will be elaborated in my next guest editorial.

While America has always seemed to be monolingual, it actually has always been bilingual, or even multilingual, since its beginnings (Coleman, 2018). Aside from the English-speaking Pilgrims who arrived in the 17th century, countless immigrants brought their mother tongues to America (Skutnabb-Kanga & Phillipson, 1989; Webb, 2022). In addition, Indigenous people were already here in North America as well as in South America. However, early white settlers pushed for assimilation forcing both the Indigenous people and immigrants, for the most part, to abandon their mother tongues to adopt English (Rumbaut, 2015; Webb, 2022).

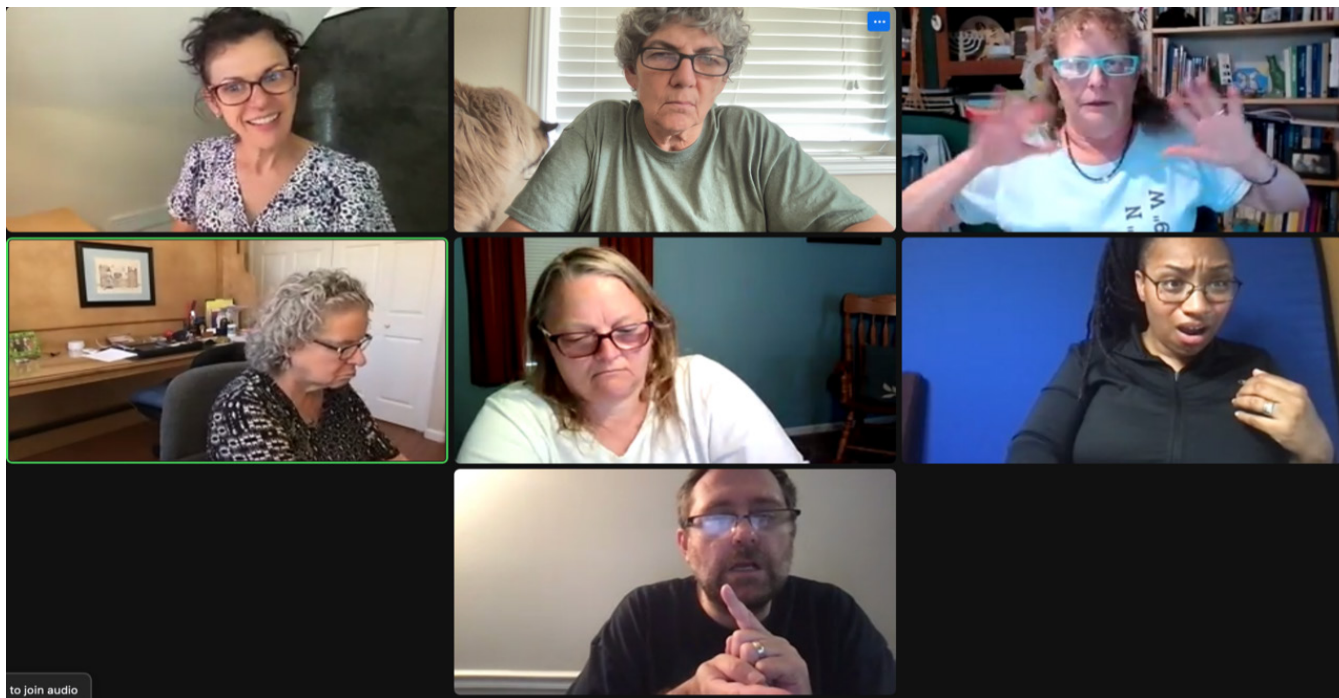
On the other hand, sign language emerged from a convergence of several sources: homemade signs, Martha’s Vineyard Signs, Wampanoag sign language and Laurent Clerc’s *langue des signes française* or LSF (Groce, 1985; Romm, 2015). This became prevalent in schools for the Deaf until the 1880 Milan Congress that voted to ban signing in the classrooms for Deaf children (Gannon, 1981; Gertz and Boudreault, 2015). A tidal wave of suppression ensued and oralism rose in the United States (Baynton, 1996) and in Canada (Carbin, 1996).

It was not until 1965 when this sign language was finally identified as a *bona fide* language by three eminent researchers: Dr. William C. Stokoe; Dr. Dorothy Sueko Casterline; and Dr. Carl Croneberg (Stokoe et al., 1965). However, both America and Deaf America were slow in accepting this new concept. For too long, Deaf Americans internalized that sign language was subordinate to English and lacked linguistic principles. In time, Kanny, studying for her doctorate in sociolinguistics at Georgetown University, came to see the importance of embracing ASL and English as two languages. Also, Marie and Nathie pushed for bilingualism in the classroom in their own ways.

¹ The author knew these women as more than colleagues and considered them as friends and will use their first names or nicknames for the remainder of the guest editorial.

There are thirteen Deaf authors and nine articles in all for this special journal. Four will be in the first issue - 6.1, and the remaining five in the second issue - 6.2. It gives me great pride to report with great pride that the authors represent diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, ability and countries of origin. It is noted that one of the authors is male. He submitted his manuscript that was intriguing to me as the guest editor because it addressed the situation of Deaf Iranian women, thus with a global nature.

At one point, after e-communicating with some of the authors who admitted to having a hard time getting started, or continuing, with their writings, I decided to host a virtual writing retreat in May 2022. Responses to the invitation were incredible. Sensing much inspiration among the authors in attendance at this first virtual writing retreat, two more retreats were held in the following month. This also developed a sense of community, in which further information and resources were exchanged openly and amiably. Personal memories of Marie, Nathie and Kanny were also candidly shared at these retreats. The photo below is of the second writing retreat which Cripps joined:



Top row: Genie Gertz; MJ Bienvenu; Arlene B. Kelly.
Middle row: Vicki Hurwitz; Pam Conley; Niesha Washington-Shepard.
Bottom row: Jody Cripps.
Photo courtesy of Arlene B. Kelly.

Because of the immense volume of articles, it was decided to split this special issue into two sub-issues. The first issue focuses on Herstory and education pertaining to Deaf Women. The second issue spotlights individual Deaf Women who were agents of change, including tributes to Marie, Nathie and Kanny.

While the focus of this special issue is on Deaf Women and bilingualism advocacy, subtopics vary widely among the contributing authors. As this special issue recognizes the three honorees, it is also learned how their work influenced various areas, not necessarily in this order, of language and communication choices, Deaf Studies, Deaf Women's Studies, Deaf education, Indigenous Studies, museums and research, and Deaf art.

Because there remains a dearth of literature about the Deaf woman's experiences as elaborated in both the "Sticking Up" and "According to the Indigenous Ways" articles in the first issue, this special issue is published with hopes that all the articles herein will be utilized in classrooms, either Deaf or hearing. Additionally, these articles can be expanded through further research, raising more awareness about the roles and experiences of Deaf women on a global level. The last two articles are more about providing resources and understanding about how Deaf Women Studies came into being. In the following section, each article in this issue will be summarized as well as sharing my perspectives as an expert in the field of Deaf Women Studies.

Contributing Authors and their Works

Dr. Kathy Jankowski delves into the roles that Deaf American women played in promoting Deaf children's sign language rights in an era of the oral-only movement during the 19th century. Their roles and strategies in promoting Deaf children's language rights, while often overlooked, are explored in depth, especially in an era that was lacking in authentic scientific or linguistic research of sign language. This is indeed an eye-opener to see how these Deaf women were vigilant in spite of the lack of research on the positive impact of sign language on Deaf children's literacy at the time. While this article focuses on American education, it is shared with hopes that educators in other countries as well as Deaf Women's Studies scholars take note of these strategies, and become inspired and fortified to promote Deaf children's rights in their own countries.

Dr. Melanie McKay-Cody promotes attention to the Indigenous communities, particularly Deaf and hard of hearing women and their allies such as Deaf-parented Indigenous women and hearing Indigenous women. This attention can enlighten both Euro-centric women's organizations as well as Deaf women's organizations to empower Indigenous Deaf women through alliance-ship. In doing so, Cody uses the illustration of braiding of Deaf and hard of hearing Indigenous women, Deaf-parented Indigenous women and hearing indigenous women to promote language, professionals and advocacy. Such work also includes collaborating with hearing parents of Deaf children to learn and use ASL. This article would be enlightening in American Indian Studies, American Indian Deaf Studies and Deaf Studies courses.

Dr. Genie Gertz, Dr. Arlene B. Kelly and Vicki Hurwitz, who founded the Deaf Women's Studies at their respective institutes of higher education, discuss the development and growth of this particular discipline and how it has heightened consciousness and motivated other Deaf women to pursue their goals. Understanding the differences that gender makes in Deaf people's economic, social, and political lives has been made possible through these courses. Despite the gains made in the thirty years since the field's foundation, they discuss the ongoing paucity of resources in the field of Deaf Women's Studies. The authors hope that this article will motivate an explosion of academic literature pertaining to Deaf women.

Meredith Peruzzi describes the journey of planning and developing an exhibition on Deaf women alongside the Deaf Women's Studies pioneers and other eminent women at Gallaudet University. The challenges and successes are elaborated in this essay. She also extols the benefits of using college student interns in this project. Finally, musings in hindsight on issues such as access to Braille and inclusion of women of color, among others, that should have been addressed are shared. This article would enlighten the ways of setting up a museum exhibition, albeit the omissions of accessibility and inclusion. Additionally, secondary and college students may be inspired to create such exhibitions as part of their academic journeys at their institutes.

All in all, this has been a truly incredible honor to work with each of the thirteen authors for about a year-and-a-half. Each author brought their own knowledge, insights, and inspiration to their writings. Also, there were some trying times as well as jubilant times on this shared journey. Trying times as we searched for resources aligned to specific subtopics. Jubilant times when we crossed the proverbial bridge by finally finding resources or new information. It is with hopes that you, as the reader, will find each article to be both enlightening and entertaining as well as being useful for your further studies or research.

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