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MJ Bienvenu  
*Gallaudet University*

Jessica Meehan  
*Marie Philip School at the Learning Center for the Deaf*

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# A TRIBUTE TO MARIE JEAN PHILIP

**MJ BIENVENU**  
*Gallaudet University*

**JESSICA MEEHAN**  
*Marie Philip School at the  
Learning Center for the Deaf*

A Deaf trailblazer by the name of Marie Jean Philip —hereafter MP—made her way into the world in Worcester, Massachusetts, on April 20, 1953. During Philip’s brief, but abundant life, her advocacy for American Sign Language (ASL) and English bilingualism and biculturalism would take root in and transform Deaf education, nationwide and overseas. A high school graduation photo of MP is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Marie Jean Philip.  
(1953 - 1997)  
Photo courtesy of the Philip Family.

MP had the extraordinary prestige of being known by five name signs, which she joked about as a matter of fact. However, many people remembered MP with one particular name sign as shown in Figure 2.

The authors of this paper—hereafter MJ and Jessica—are honored to be penning this tribute to a beloved friend and aunt respectively. For MJ, their relationship dated back to 1969 when they first attended Gallaudet College (now University). They became fast friends, probably because they were among the youngest freshmen. Both MJ and Marie Jean Philip or MP lived at Fowler Hall where they were across the hall from each other. The second year, they were roommates. MJ recalls that she was almost the opposite of MP. MJ was tall while MP was short. MJ was messy while MP was neat. MJ was the baby of the family while MP was the oldest, meaning that she was more responsible (which she was). Those differences did not matter as MJ and MP were pals and they could chat all day long.



Figure 2: MP's name sign as produced by Jessica Meehan.  
(<https://youtu.be/Bx7x5yf2QLI>)

For Jessica, their relationship dated back to 1984, when Jessica was born, and MP became an adoring aunt. Jessica's earliest memories of her aunt include sitting on her lap and attending to her signing from reading a variety of books. Because Jessica showed signs of interest in pictures and words at such a young age, MP was delighted to pass down her bookworm gene to her niece and deluged her with books at every possible opportunity. What was important during that time was that MP advocated the idea of promoting English literacy through ASL. Reading and signing a book to Deaf children should be something to pursue according to MP. Jessica thus grew up in a language-rich environment in which she was nurtured with ASL and English literacy, with her aunt serving as a vital guide. Figure 3 shows MP reading a book to her niece Jessica and nephew Jonah.



Figure 3: MP reading a book to her niece and nephew.  
Photo courtesy of the Philip Family.

Understanding that Jessica is Deaf, she feels most fortunate having MP as her aunt when it comes to her language and literacy needs. During the 1980s, many people believed that English was all that mattered. The spoken language should dictate teaching methods for Deaf children and would have an exclusive position in Deaf education. MP was opposed to all of that and did all in her power to protect her niece and nephew. MP was equally protective of all other Deaf children. She engaged in research by videotaping her niece responding to ASL cues within diverse environments, such as responding to shoulder taps, stomping on the living room floor and eye tracking her family's signs around the dinner table. These videos were shown in MP's classes and lectures to help bolster her arguments that Deaf children's native language acquisition necessitated ASL.

### **EARLY YEARS OF EDUCATION**

For MP's early education background, it is important to know a bit of history with her Deaf parents who endured and survived oral education.<sup>1</sup> Her father was a student at Clarke School in Northampton, Massachusetts which is well-known for pursuing strict oralism. Back then, Massachusetts had a reputation in the American Deaf community for being a strongly oral state when it comes to Deaf education. However, MP's father was fortunate to learn signs outside the oral school when he was young, through sports and deaf clubs. MP's mother attended Beverly School for the Deaf where signing was also forbidden. She learned signs after leaving the school in the 8th grade. MP's mother shared many stories that students would be punished, often severely because they signed.

MP's parents faced a dilemma when their daughter reached school age. Clarke School was the closest to where they lived. MP's parents decided to give this school a try. MP (1996, p. 1) recollected her visit to Clarke school with her parents as follows:

Before we went [for a visit], my mother warned me not to sign[,] but to speak the best I could. Well, you know how children are: they have no concept of time. Two hours felt like all day and I was sitting there fidgeting... I lost my patience and signed[,] "Daddy?" [Then,] the people at Clarke School said, "We're sorry, but we can't accept your daughter. First, because she uses sign language, and second, because she uses fingerspelling, and, third, because she's underage. [The children have] to be at least four years and six months old." Well, I was four years and five months.

MP's parents were unsure where to send her next, but they tried the American School for the Deaf (ASD), a signing school that is located in Connecticut. MP had an aunt and cousin, her father's sister and her mother's brother, attending the school as students, and learning through ASL, so MP's parents trusted that ASD was the right place for MP. The fact that MP's parents never went to a signing school themselves was a factor. Her parents did not know what to expect about their daughter's education if she attended the signing school. The experience that MP had in getting into ASD and how she benefitted is reflected in her comments as follows:

My parents didn't know whether to wait a year to send me to [another] school or to send me to [ASD] in West Hartford, Connecticut, where my aunt was attending at that time. They finally decided on the ASD. When I came home a week later... I couldn't wait to tell them everything... and about all the friends I had made. It really hit my parents. [Their] friend had a Deaf child who went to Clarke School. [She] would come home and all she could say was "mother, father," and here I was chattering away. I even tried to correct my parents' signing... After that they decided I should stay at the ASD. [My two sisters and I] went to the ASD (Philip, 1996, p. 1).

The mention that MP made about having two sisters enrolling in ASD indicates that she had a sizable Deaf family. Figure 4 shows a photo of MP with her close-knit family that was taken some years later.

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<sup>1</sup> Oral education occurred when signed language was once banned from schools for the deaf all over the United States and Canada (e.g., Baynton, 1996; Burch, 2004; Carbin, 1996; Moores, 2001).



Figure 4: The Philip family. Front row - left to right, Doris (mother) John (father) Jonah (nephew)  
Back row - left to right, Violet (aunt), Carl (uncle-in-law), MP, Sue (sister),  
John (former brother-in-law), Jessica (niece), and Joan (sister).  
Photo courtesy of the Philip Family.

## COLLEGE DAYS

MP graduated ASD in 1969 and she made a beeline to Gallaudet College (now University). After leaving Gallaudet, and followed by a short stay in Florida with friends, she moved back to Massachusetts and was awarded her Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics and a minor in Cultural Anthropology from Northeastern University in 1984. The fact that MP attended an all-hearing higher education institution and received a degree there is noteworthy. During the 1960s and 1970s, many deaf students believed that going to Gallaudet was their only choice for higher education. MP did not think that way at all. She wanted to learn about the 'larger world of hearing people' the best she could. This urge to learn more about the larger hearing world began at Gallaudet. When attending Gallaudet, MP was attracted to the student exchange program there. MP shared her experience and her strong urgency to learn more about the hearing world as follows:

I went [to] Gallaudet in 1969 and during my junior year, Gallaudet established its first exchange program with Oberlin College [in Ohio and I applied]. I wasn't even sure why I wanted to do it except from curiosity about how the "other side" lived and because it was a challenge... The other students asked, "Are you nuts?" "You're going to school with all those hearing people?" "You know you'll have no interpreters?" "Why do you want to do that?" I told them, "I don't know. Maybe it's because my family's Deaf and I've always lived in the Deaf world" (Philip, 1996, p. 1).

MJ remembers MP's fearless spirit quite well. With two friends, MP and MJ drove to Oberlin during wintertime so she could observe the college and the dormitory she would live in. MJ was so exhausted from driving all night in heavy snow that she slept all day, missing how MP reacted to the college. However, MJ remembers that MP was excited about her upcoming experience in a non-Deaf college, and MJ was worried for her. MP recalled how her parents reacted to her decision to study at Oberlin and what she learned from attending the college as follows:

My parents felt the same way. They wondered why I wanted to make my life difficult when I already had a good thing going... I found the cafeteria [at Oberlin] and it really hit me. Growing up, we had always signed during meals and afterwards we'd sit and argue and talk politics and [about] what was



going on at the club and everything. But at Oberlin, the cafeteria had everybody sitting prim and proper and I didn't see even one hand moving (Philip, 1996, p. 1).

What is interesting is that some hearing students at Oberlin learned how to sign for two weeks in anticipation of MP's arrival.<sup>2</sup> At the table reserved for those students, MP said "Hi" to them and they spelled "Hi" back, and they introduced themselves in awkward fingerspelling. That was the first experience that MP had with new signers. The other relevant experience with Oberlin that MP shared is:

For the rest of the semester, I just sat there in classes without any interpreters [and] ... look[ed] at other students' notes and I was just getting by the best I could. When I talked to [the] hearing signers, I realized they were [scared] about the experience [of meeting a Deaf person], which puzzled me. I knew I would be scared to come to a hearing college; I didn't realize that they were scared, too. You know, so many Deaf people figure that hearing people have everything so they shouldn't be afraid of [us]. Of course, it was difficult for me to communicate with [them] and [understand] their feelings, but [afterwards] I realized that they were afraid of me... [From that, communication improved and] I came to understand we're all human. That changed my perspective of hearing people (Philip, 1996, p. 1).

According to MJ, MP's experience at Oberlin would guide her on the path of esteemed relations with hearing people and colleagues. Since she understood the urgency of bringing both Deaf and hearing cultures together to bridge many emotional and educational breaches, she was able to help attune hearing parents and educators to Deaf students' linguistic and cultural needs. The cross-cultural experiences that MP had at Oberlin impacted the rest of her life as evident in her career.

## PROFESSIONAL YEARS

In 1975, MP was employed as a research assistant at Northeastern University (NU) in Boston under Professor Harlan Lane who was among the leading scholars in the field of ASL/Deaf Studies. MP was proud of being part of the research team with Dr. Lane and with Ella Mae Lentz who went on to become one of the nation's most preeminent ASL poets. MP became involved in helping form one of the first ASL programs in the country, which continues to be up and running as an academic major and minor at NU. The ASL program's inception at NU really sparked her interest in teaching about the language and studying cultures.

MP found time to work busily out in the community, and she became influential in the 1989 ASL bill signing with then Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts. ASL was accepted as a foreign language and given stature in the Massachusetts public school system. MP also worked with other people to standardize ASL instruction in Massachusetts colleges. By working to have ASL taught in the education system, she was helping to ingrain awareness and dignity of the language outside of the Deaf community, an indispensable step in bilingualism-biculturalism relations in the wider world.

At the time, when MP started teaching ASL/Deaf Studies courses at NU, she found herself traveling and giving lectures at conferences here in the U.S. and several countries, including Japan, France, Italy, and El Salvador. Wherever she went, people flocked to learn and work with her, and she undeniably won the love and respect of many. MP was affectionately given a name sign that is international (and makes up one of the five name signs that she had as mentioned earlier). Understanding that MP had the strong tendency to sit with her legs crossed, Figure 5 shows MP's **CROSSED-LEGS** name sign.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Worthy of noting is that formal ASL instruction is best described as either non-existent or rare during the time of MP attending Oberlin. The fact that some students found a way to learn how to sign is surprising. It was more recently that ASL instruction became part of the higher education curriculum and so many hearing students are taking ASL coursework these days (see Rosen, 2017 for the history of ASL instruction in the United States).

<sup>3</sup> Readers are encouraged to read Sam Supalla's *The Book of Name Signs* (1990) that covers the history and tradition of name signs in the American Deaf community. The first name sign introduced in this article for MP includes the fingerspelled handshapes M and P that represent the initials of her English name and become part of an "arbitrary" signed form. MP's **CROSSED-LEGS** name sign is "descriptive" meaning that it refers to a person's appearance or characteristic, which is more commonplace for the Deaf communities abroad.



Figure 5: MP's international name sign as produced by Jessica Meehan.  
(<https://youtu.be/l-Naywj3SgY>)

When MJ met MP in Poitiers, France in 1991 for a conference, she learned a couple of things. One is about MP having an international name, which described her perfectly. The other is that MP was so comfortable learning other signed languages and cultures. This includes learning and using International Sign (see Rosenstock & Napier, 2016 and Supalla & Webb, 1995 for more information on this sign system that Deaf people use to communicate with each other when they do not share a common signed language).

Jessica remembers this time well, because her aunt was always out of the country and she and her family were getting postcards from Japan, France, or England, in her elegant, flowing script about what she had seen and what she was doing. When she came back, she always brought gifts for her and her brother. Figure 6 shows MP visiting the exotic land of Egypt.



Figure 6: MP at the Pyramids with her friends.  
Photo courtesy of the Philip Family.

MP excelled at confronting and removing the cynical convictions and misjudgments encompassing Deaf people's language. MP saw that ASL curricula in schools would help society change in its attitudes towards Deaf people. If hearing people are learning and using ASL, something must be good about this language, right? What was important to MP was that with the improving social attitudes towards ASL, the Deaf youth would no longer think that they are linguistically inferior. MP was strong on Deaf people gaining ASL ownership that includes having full communication capacity as signers (just like for hearing people being speakers). These ideas were progressive for the time and MP integrated these concepts in her courses at NU and in her presentations throughout the country and the world.

MP was known for being candid and talking about her beloved family as part of her discourse with the public. MP would use her own parents' experiences in oral education as a focal point. The stories shared are part of MP's strategy to shed light on lies and shortcomings of spoken language only ideology for the education of deaf children. The point that MP made is that despite the extensive oral or speech training her parents had received, they still deflected to and sustained ASL throughout their lives, showing that the language was naturally theirs. She went on to assert that future generations of Deaf children deserved the same respect for their own language of ASL, and that prohibiting them from such a right, signified severe linguistic deprivation with emotional and social ramifications and diminished quality of life.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, MP extolled the grassroots experiences of her parents. Serving as an example, her father, despite never completing eighth grade, was a treasured member of the Worcester Deaf community. MP was sensitive to the fact that many members in the Deaf community may not be highly fluent in ASL like they should (when they had to wait until much later in life in learning their native language, for example). MP expected respect for all those Deaf community members who frequently had difficult childhood experiences and may not have received a good education. Growing up in a Deaf family and knowing the stories that her parents shared about the menace of oral education played an important role in shaping MP into who she was and what she fought for.

It becomes clear at this point that MP was a New Englander, but it did not prevent her from having an affiliation with Hollywood. MP was interviewed in a film that was nominated for a 1981 Academy Award in the Documentary Short Film category, *See What I Say*. While *Chariots of Fire* was taking home the Best Picture Award and Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn were winning Best Actor and Best Actress for their performances in *On Golden Pond*, MP was right up there on the list of Academy Award film contenders.

In *See What I Say*, MP talked about her Deaf family, her work at NU, lack of accessibility for Deaf people, hearing people's attitudes towards them, and how both cultures could find a middle ground in much more accepting ways. She also emphasized the validity of Deaf Culture<sup>5</sup> and the impending discovery of ASL as a legitimate language, and how it was elevating the way of life for Deaf people.

That MP was speaking out about her people's circumstances as early as 1981 really speaks to how potent, how passionate her advocacy was becoming. MP said of the movie nomination: "Finding out about [it] was so surprising, exciting, and hopeful. I hope seeing the film will help hearing people accept deaf people as we are. Because it does show that deaf people can do the job" (Wilson, 1982, p. 1). MP's insistence on protecting ASL from being relegated to a status of "broken English" as it was perceived by many and influencing people to adopt a new, humanistic awareness of Deaf people's language and culture was a goal she would work towards all her life.

While working at NU, MP experienced a fateful turn in her career. She received a contract by The Learning Center for Deaf Children (TLC), a school located in Framingham, Massachusetts. Warren Schwab, founder of the school, wanted MP to come on board to talk about ASL/Deaf education reform and to consult to the teachers and school administrators on how to teach Deaf children. MP soon became the first Bilingual-Bicultural (BiBi) co-coordinator of the school with Dr. Anita Small, discussing Deaf Culture and conducting groundbreaking research in the legitimacy of ASL and English bilingualism and how these aspects needed to come to the forefront of Deaf education.

With MP's help, there were huge intellectual and emotional shifts in attitudes and mindsets of Deaf and hearing alike at TLC. MP advanced the movement by providing lectures, workshops, and training about bilingual literacy and dual cultures with differing stakeholders such as the school employees and parents. MP helped faculty, staff, and school administrators evaluate their personal values and confront issues of oppression and majority/minority politics and experiences within TLC's educational system and shared cultures.

MP was also a master storyteller. She would sit cross-legged, telling many delightful anecdotes from her life to young children, or stories from books, exemplifying bilingualism in school literacy activities. She led many Deaf role models, storytellers, and community advocates to the school to illuminate ASL literacy and talent as a way of instilling a loving deference to their culture and building a sense of Deaf pride.

As the Bi-Bi coordinator, MP helped make changes in the school that no other school had done such as hiring a Deaf person, Nancy Vincent, to work as the Parent Infant Program Coordinator. This was utterly paramount because MP knew this would be most likely the first time non-Deaf parents met a Deaf adult, and this was crucial

4 See Hall et al., (2019), Murray et al., (2021), and Humphries et al. (2012) for most recent discussion on signed language deprivation issues with Deaf children.

5 See Padden (1980) and Rutherford (1988) for further discussion on the validity of Deaf Culture.



to helping build connection between the hearing parent and the deaf baby and bringing two languages and cultures together.

Educators flew in from places as far away as Japan, France, Chile, and South Africa to learn from MP and went back to spearhead their own programs. Deaf schools in the U.S., such as Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma came to TLC to assess the emerging Bi-Bi approach. Collaborators from California School for the Deaf, Fremont, and Indiana School for the Deaf came to work with MP, and to exchange bilingual teaching methods and bicultural interaction discourse. That was the peak of her career. She would grow greatly in demand for her talent, expertise, and leadership, and become nationally and internationally famed.

Readers are encouraged to view the video *Bilingual-Bicultural Movement at The Learning Center for the Deaf* below. There are numerous segments where MP shows up talking about the reform that took place at the school. Her important work in the bilingual-bicultural movement at the Learning Center for the Deaf is also documented in print by her<sup>6</sup> and also by her with Dr. Anita Small<sup>7</sup>.

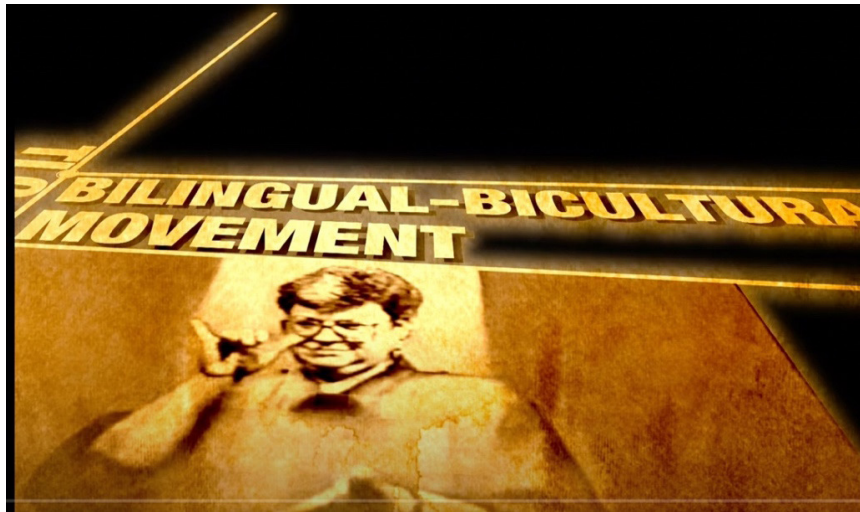


Figure 4: *Bilingual-Bicultural Movement at The Learning Center for the Deaf*

Photo: Open Source – YouTube (Carey M. Ballard, “Bilingual-Bicultural Movement at The Learning Center for the Deaf,” streamed on September 24, 2018, YouTube video, 30:04 min, <https://youtu.be/5l6jUOmBBVs>)

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND FINAL DAYS

MP was studying in a combined Master’s degree and Ph.D. program involving language literacy, culture, and Deaf studies in Deaf Education at Boston University in the Fall of 1997 when her life was devastatingly cut by a pulmonary embolism at the age of 44.

One thing that should be remembered about MP is—her books and how deeply she was into reading! MJ recalls one time she picked MP up from the airport for a short stay with a bag that was almost impossible to pick up, prompting MJ to ask what made it so heavy and MP opening the bag to show that it was full of books.

For Jessica, books were an enormous connection to her aunt. They debated books, they went to bookstores together, and when Jessica slept over, they would share a bed, reading late into the night. After her death, her family, friends and MJ looked around in her apartment. On her bookshelves, there were three rows of books, books behind books, to fit what she had, even cookbooks! Like MJ has said before: MP did not like to cook, but she still had a collection of cookbooks! If MJ isn’t mistaken —the family had to pack 50 boxes for her books.

MP’s death would shatter the hearts of Deaf and hearing people all over the world. She left a legacy as a Deaf trailblazer on bilingualism, understanding Deaf culture and ASL. Hundreds upon hundreds of people from across the country and world made sure to show for her funeral and undoubtedly could never forget the long line waiting to sympathize with the family. Northeastern University created the National Marie Jean Philip ASL Poetry,

6 See Philip (1992).

7 See Philip and Small (1992).

ASL Storytelling and Deaf Art Competition in 1997.<sup>8</sup> The Learning Center named their new Elementary School the Marie Jean Philip Elementary Building in 2002. In Spring 2015, The Learning Center for the Deaf announced that beginning in Fall 2015, the Pre-K-12th grade program would be named the Marie Philip School.<sup>9</sup> Since 2002, Gallaudet's Department of Deaf Studies has given the Marie J. Philip Award annually to an accomplished graduating Deaf Studies major.

### A LEADER UNFORGOTTEN

An unshakeable icon within the Deaf community, Marie Jean Philip was a pioneer in the bilingual-bicultural movement, and an unforgettably legendary advocate for the education of Deaf children around the world. She loved children, and they loved her back. Here at home, MP was a beloved teacher, mediator, counselor, and friend. She broke untouched ground in mediating two cultures and the field of bilingual instruction, especially at TLC. Her awards and the school's name change are proof of the work of MP as a trailblazer. The Deaf-Hearing World lost a luminous, gifted leader, but she planted so many seeds that kept her work alive. As her colleague Bob Hoffmeister (who was a professor at Boston University) said in a tribute, MP gave so many Deaf people a sense of renewal about themselves, their identities as Deaf persons, and a newfound claim to pride about their language and culture that none of them had been able to find in anyone or anywhere else.<sup>10</sup> In MP, they found it, and a quarter-century later, they have been unable to forget.

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10 Hoffmeister's tribute to MP can be seen at <https://www.tlcldeaf.org/about/tribute-marie-jean-philip>.

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