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EDITORIAL: HAWAII: A METAPHOR FOR DEAFNESS?

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I was recently speaking with a colleague at my university about the experience of professionals in deafness. My colleague, an expert qualitative researcher, knows very little about the field of deafness. As she read through transcripts of interviews with a variety of mental health professionals working with deaf people, she commented that the participants all sounded like they were very isolated. It seemed to her that deafness professionals function as islands, feeling alone and disconnected from something larger. In this particular situation, data also revealed that some of the participants appeared to contradict themselves. They indicated that they wanted colleagues and they desired more deafness focused opportunities for professional development. However, they also indicated that there was something empowering about being unique and separate. They implied that other mental health professionals can only look in but few are ever welcomed into the group.

It reminded me of Hawaii in that it is separated from the mainland and, like very few states, it once functioned for many years independently. Mental health professionals outside of deafness are like tourists who visit the island. They might get a glimpse inside and what they see may intrigue them. However, their entrance into the society of deafness professionals is likely to be met with some consternation. Individuals who are deaf along with hearing professionals in our field are often guarded when an outsider attempts entry. Rites of passage, typically sign language fluency or a degree from Gallaudet, are required to gain entry. This practice serves to protect the field and those whom we serve. Yet, this practice may also have consequences that are rarely addressed in the literature.

At the present time I live and work in Houston, Texas. Although we have a warm and semi-tropical climate, Houston is nothing like Hawaii. Professionals in deafness are often difficult to locate in Houston, the fourth largest city in the United States. When I seek out a professional in deafness, I often call upon colleagues who are able to facilitate the connection. Sometimes, professional associations, such as ADARA, serve as the conduit for connections. This is an unfortunate situation as our modern, high-tech society is overwhelmed

with information but underwhelmed with deafness resources. Every time we look in a new direction it seems we are stimulated with video and print media. Hearing people are also constantly inundated with audio media as those in marketing attempt to garner our attention. Yet, much like Hawaii, professionals working in deafness still complain about feeling disconnected from others. I wonder what it would be like if I needed a deafness resource or deafness professional and I did not have the connections I currently have. Luterman (2004) identified feelings of isolation among hearing parents who have a deaf child with additional disabilities. Taylor (1999) also identified themes of isolation in deaf minorities. Mangrubang (2005) found that science teachers working with deaf students feel isolation and tend to leave the profession prematurely. Clearly, the sense of collegueship and connection is still lacking in our field.

Perhaps connecting deafness professionals together is as complex as connecting Hawaii to the mainland. Although the feat may appear insurmountable, I hope we never give up trying. Regarding making connections, I am compelled to give recognition to colleagues at the Gallaudet Research Institute and the counseling department at Gallaudet. Dr. Linda Lytle led the project to create a mental health and deafness resource directory. A link to the directory is on the home page of the counseling department's website and can be accessed under "resources" at <http://counseling.gallaudet.edu>. The directory is a valuable tool for individuals, both deaf and hearing, to gain information about mental health services for deaf people.

It would be worthwhile to see more work like this in the future. For example, perhaps one of the large telecommunications companies that profits greatly from video relay services will be willing to create a web-based deaf yellow pages. A resource like this would be a valuable tool to connect those in need with resources. I am sure many readers have other ideas to create a feeling of community in a field that can be so isolating. These ideas should be brought into the open and shared in the spirit of improving access to services. Databases such as the new mental health directory serve as resources for both deaf people and hearing individuals who work with deaf people. Accurate sources of information serve to reduce frustration and ensure access. I believe this is the type of work that helps Hawaii feel more connected to the mainland.

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