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STATE OF DEAFNESS

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I have the interesting assignment this evening of describing the State of Deafness, and I am very tempted to describe it as a state of mind and let it go at that.

Seriously, though, it seems to me that before one can describe where we are, we need to take a look at where we were. To do this, one does not have to go back very far. Prior to the 1960's, we had nothing. Deaf people were cast in the role of recipients of whatever crumbs the powers that be were willing to provide. Rehabilitation counselors either had no interest in or no belief in the need for establishing lines of communication with their deaf clients. Assistance was minimal. Training opportunities were haphazard at best with only Gallaudet College available for any post-secondary education of any kind.

A deaf client seeking rehabilitation could only be trained in facilities which were not geared to his needs and more often than not had no idea of what was involved, much less the personnel needed to provide training for deaf clients. The only advocate the deaf had in government was Boyce Williams in the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. Consumer input was a joke and the organizations of the deaf were functioning mainly on a holding level — seeking more to prevent the further eroding of what rights and privileges the deaf had rather than aiming at securing for the deaf all those rights and privileges inherent in first-class citizenship. At the same time, organizations for the deaf were more concerned with what they felt the needs of the deaf were than they were with the deaf people themselves. This, of course, was before the age of consumer involvement and before the providers of service were aware that the most effective programs were those that developed from the joint planning by the provider and the recipient of such services.

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It was in 1960 that Stahl Butler of Michigan first proposed the novel idea that deaf people had rights and ought not settle for less from our government than that available to every other citizen in the United States. This created an unbelievable uproar reminiscent of that which developed over the additional income tax exemption. For years — perhaps I should say generations — the deaf have been nurtured on “independence and self-sufficiency” by their teachers. We have been taught that we should stand on our own feet, asking nothing from anyone but the opportunity to work. In some instances the leaders in the deaf community felt that we should be grateful for the small blessings and accept unquestioningly whatever favors we were granted for what they were — favors.

However there were Young Turks then and a growing feeling among the deaf community that it was high time that we stop apologizing for being alive and start acting like we were real live human beings with needs and goals that were no different from those of the general population, albeit the means for meeting the needs or reaching those goals might be different.

Basically deaf people wanted and needed some simple things:

1. Freedom of choice;
2. Equal protection under the law;
3. More realistic enforcement of the protection inherent in our constitution.

These three items cover a horrendous number of sins and in a sense represent every human endeavor imaginable.

Under freedom of choice, for example, is not only methods of communication but also education and educational facilities. In 1964 Gallaudet College celebrated its 100th anniversary as the first and only post-secondary educational facility serving the deaf in the Nation. There have been, and probably always will be scattered instances wherein individual students braved the impersonal atmosphere of large universities completely on their own, either unassisted or getting minimal aid from fellow students under arrangements made by themselves. Today we not only have another major educational facility in the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester but also burgeoning programs at California State University at Northridge as well as a proliferation of community college programs, a few such as St. Paul Technical Vocational Institute and Seattle Community College are supported by SRS and many others are getting their aid from Vocational Education funds. This is not really as good as it sounds. In some cases Vocational Education funds have created programs that are inadequately prepared to meet the needs of deaf students and have diluted other programs to such a degree that services cannot honestly be said to be of high quality. Still, the student has a choice. Or should I say “had” a choice? There seems to be, if not a trend, an inclination to restrict this choice and require the students to at least begin their post-secondary training in their home states. The present administration’s avowed policy of eliminating

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financial grants in favor of direct loans could conceivably restore this freedom but more likely, if this policy takes effect, will restrict severely the number of students taking post-secondary courses and in so doing push the deaf community down to the level of its European counterparts — safe in the arms of social welfare. It should be stressed that the practices of VR and the educational opportunities made available through VR are the main differences between the achievements of the deaf community of America and that anywhere else in the world. Somehow this must be preserved. It is being threatened today and we can expect to face further threats in the future.

The second point — Equal protection under the law — should be illuminating. If you are black, Indian, Spanish or any kind of non-English speaking citizen you are entitled to special services and assistance. Non-English speaking residents are entitled to the services of interpreters in all courts in the land. It is illegal to refuse to hire a person because he or she is black or a member of an ethnic minority. At many levels of government there is active interest in seeing to it that the upward mobility of minorities is enhanced. These are acts of law, but if you are only deaf you are out of luck. There is a growing trend today to recognize, at least, the fact that the deaf person is not getting this protection. More and more states are adopting laws providing for interpreters in criminal courts and, to a more limited degree, in civil courts as well. However, less than half the states have such laws and even fewer actually can be depended on to apply the law without prompting.

With respect to interpreting, however, we can at least note that we have made tremendous progress in improving this service. Time was when an interpreter was defined as someone who knew American Sign Language and could hear. These were the only criteria and it is probably only a miracle that more deaf people did not suffer from the results of incompetent interpreting services, especially in court. Today there is a Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. We also have a certification program that has made a beginning at attempting to determine the competency of people who interpret for the deaf. And there is great emphasis on training and improving one's skills. To a limited extent interpreters have truly become professionals. That sounds bad — what I am trying to say now is that a number of interpreters are now able to secure full-time employment which to me is "professional". Unfortunately, we have a long way to go. There are few formal training programs for interpreters; and the employment opportunities are not what they should be. We have not fully convinced all DVR's that interpreting assistance is not only a legitimate expense in a client's rehabilitation but such services could very well mean the difference between the client's success or failure. We have yet to see the schools for the deaf establish positions on their staffs for interpreters — persons whose primary responsibility is interpreting. It is ironic that with all the applause and all the agreement that interpreting is a highly skilled profession, those institutions which have a major role in shaping a deaf person's destiny continue to rely on "non-professionals" for interpreting

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chores. Undoubtedly it is most desirable for teachers and rehabilitation counselors to be able to communicate directly with their students or clients. But there is a difference between communicating and interpreting. Teachers should be teachers — not interpreters. We will not see a real growth in professionalization until this is accepted and acted upon. Nor will the deaf person really be fully protected until he can have interpreting services in the myriad situations that occur in day-to-day living.

Such interpreting services are needed to assist deaf parents in consultations with school authorities with respect to their hearing children's progress or lack of progress. We need assistance in hospitals and other medical situations to insure that the deaf patient gets adequate and effective medical care.

Since we are talking about "equal protection under the law," it might be interesting to speculate on the responsibilities of hospitals and/or doctors and nurses if the failure of their deaf patient to properly understand results in death or permanent disability.

The third point: More realistic enforcement of the protection inherent in our Constitution. Daily we are faced with expressions such as "freedom of speech," "the right to face one's accuser and know what is being said against one." There are also inherent rights which are just now being put into formal form with the development of programs geared to the needs of the individual client.

We have none of these. Our educational system is geared to serve hearing children. We patch it here and there to use with the deaf child. But by no stretch of imagination could what we have be called "adequate". I do not believe it is necessary to cite studies that show the gap between the education attainments of the deaf child and his hearing peer runs from 3-5 grades and is widening steadily. Nor do I feel it necessary to point out that unless one takes "freedom of speech" literally, we have no freedom of expression. We are still battling for the right to use methods of communication other than speech in educational settings. We still face persistent attempts to ban programs using the language of signs on television. We do not get interpreters in police stations or on the scene for traffic violations. While we have equal rights to police and fire protection, we have no way of summoning help when needed. Nor do we have places for those deaf people who are trainable but cannot benefit from normal programs. These are not special requests. They are only the things that are available to people who can hear, the poorest as well as the richest.

What do we have really? As I mentioned, we have some excellent post-secondary educational programs. We have an increasing awareness in the rehabilitation field of the needs of deaf clients for clear communication and an understanding of rehabilitation goals. We have some excellent special programs turning out specialized products specifically geared to our needs. CSUN's Leadership Training Program is one. NYU's Deafness Research &

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Training Center is another. The NAD's Communicative Skills Program is a third. We have today a fair number of new organizations such as the Professional Rehabilitation Workers with the Adult Deaf, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and the International Association of Parents of Deaf Children to work with and for deaf people. The NAD itself has become both sophisticated and influential in promoting the interests of its members. There are captioned films and captioned TV and some extensive developments in the area of telecommunications that are opening new worlds for deaf people. In a nutshell, you might say "we never had it so good!"

But before anyone breaks an arm patting himself on the back let me note that we are following "normal" patterns in which the rich get richer and the poor get food stamps. Our programs provide ample opportunities for deaf clients at the post-secondary levels, which is to say those who need help the least are getting the most. I am not, incidentally, implying that post-secondary education is not desperately needed. It is. But what of the man with a 3rd grade reading level or the functional illiterate with no communicative skills? Where do we send multiply handicapped youths and adults — particularly the emotionally disturbed? Nowhere — I have dozens of letters from distraught parents pleading for a place for their emotionally disturbed young adults. To quote one letter, "There appears to be no place in the country where one can send a deaf person over 21 who needs more education and training." And there isn't.

These past three days have forced me to face the fact that I have "turned professional" and in preparing this paper have swept many problems under the rug in hopes that if I ignored them they will go away. It was gratifying to note that the theme of the PRWAD Conference (Feb. 12-15) was on Severely Handicapped Deaf Persons. It indicated to me that we feel we have licked enough of our minor problems so that we are now ready to attack some of the major ones. But as a consumer I would be less than candid if I did not say I was reminded of the proverbial little boy in a graveyard whistling to keep his courage up. We have no systematic plan for attacking the problem — only scattered areas where minimal needs are being met. The conference also forced me to face the issue of the multiple variations in manual communication which have reached such proportions that it is no easy matter for deaf people from one part of the country to understand those from another.

We are also using "Total Communication" as Dr. Hammersmith's Magic Elixir for all human ills. And adopting too widely the philosophy that everything that ails the deaf community will be cured by taking 2 tablespoons of total communication daily.

In this entire nation there are less than a dozen mental health programs that can and do serve deaf people. There are even fewer half-way houses to help those people who are mentally restored make the transition from institutionalization back to normal living. In the area of mental health there are thousands of deaf people in institutions — some whose only fault is being

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deaf and some who originally were only deaf but now are real mental cases. We have a PRWAD and the PRWAD has 1,100 members of which approximately 400 are VR Counselors — that is 8 to a state — or if you like it better, one counselor for every 500 prevocationally deaf persons. That isn't doing so great. In addition, the trend toward "decentralization" hits us where we are weakest. Unlike other handicapped people our consumer groups are not — I would not want to say "well organized" because I think the State Associations do wonders with what little they have. We are well organized but we have no resources at the state level to compete effectively for our fair share of the state's resources. In many ways it could be said that we appear to be on the threshold of total disaster. Those Federally sponsored programs such as CSUN, TVI, SCC, Langley-Porter, the NAD's Communicative Skills Program, the COSD, etc. have all been or are being phased out of existence. From all indications deafness is not only a low priority Federal item but the shift to state programs will endanger all of our better programs that cannot operate successfully as State activities. These include most post-secondary programs now Federally funded.

Obviously, we are not really in a position to sit back and tell each other how wonderful we are. I have tried to touch on both sides of the coin and present a realistic appraisal of the State of Deafness today. What I have failed to mention 'til now are what I feel are possible "saving graces". These graces, I believe, if we exploit them to the best of our ability, are what will stem the tide.

First of these is that we are reaching out into the larger world for help. We are enlisting forces not solely or even primarily concerned with deafness to help us. This Congress is an example. The NRA's commitment to work with and for the deaf through its task force is another. The NRA has been around for quite some time but only in recent years has its interest grown to its present status. We have parents, professionals and consumers not only concerned but willing to do what they can to rectify the situation and as you can see today, willing to come and learn how to do it better. We have professionals today such as NYU's Deafness Research & Training Center who are responsive to the needs of deaf people as the deaf themselves see their needs — this is evidenced in the Model State Plan which will be considered here tomorrow. With such a team I cannot help but revert to my native origins and holler "Wait 'Til Next Year" — the official slogan of the Original Brooklyn Bums!

Tuesday night I had the doubtful pleasure of joining the ranks of many people who sat in an audience and heard someone else give his speech. This was when Dale Williamson was discussing what has been done in Region 9. I don't mind that he did so. What really bugs me is that his remarks sounded so much better than mine.