

Shelley Mickle: First of all, I want to talk about how we met. We met as authors on a program here at the public library. I was a novelist, and you were invited to come as a poet and read your poetry. That was 25 years ago. I remember that so well because I was so impressed with you. And when you began reading your poetry, it was very clear that you are deaf. And your voice was not clear at that time, and yet now, over all these years, you are absolutely magic in the way that you communicate, such an inspiration. So, tell us a little bit. When did you first learn that you could not hear?

Ann Le Zotte: I can't remember when I realized I was deaf. I was born prematurely in 1969 in Long Island, New York. My mother had a difficult pregnancy. I was born six weeks early, and I had a number of birth defects. My lungs were too small, and I had trouble breathing. I was in the hospital on a respirator, and I also had deformed eardrums. My pulmonary disability was immediately obvious. My deafness was not as obvious. It took my parents and the doctors a while to realize that I was not hearing. As a matter of fact, when I was very young, I was misdiagnosed as autistic because I was a head banger. I would bang my head, not to harm myself, on a pillow, on the back of a chair, on the floor where everyone was sitting. And it was like working myself into a rhythm, a comfortable rhythm. And I think the reason I did this--I've learned since then it's a behavior common to both autistic children and under stimulated deaf children--was because I could not communicate with the outside world. So, I was creating this safe shell for myself by rocking and banging my head.

Shelley: Did you sign with your parents? When did you learn signing?

Ann: I didn't learn to sign until I was in elementary school, so it wasn't initially my language. I didn't understand that there was a formal sign language. To be honest, when I was young, I was so shut in and so distant, even though I lived in a good home, I had loving parents, I almost didn't realize that I was a human being like people around me, because communication is so essential to your identity.

Shelley: Exactly.

Ann: It was very difficult to go to public schools. Like I said, I was born in 1969. The American Disabilities Act wasn't passed until 1990 or '91. So, I didn't have what are called accommodations to learn. I had no interpreters in the classroom. It was more or less a sink or swim situation. I learned to lip read very well, as you know, because I wanted to understand what people were saying. I did go to a speech therapist an hour every day, and it was a slow, laborious and sometimes tortuous procedure.

Shelley: But what's so amazing to me about the way you speak--and now, I need to tell this to our listeners because you're not here to see what Anne is doing, but we're sitting behind these huge microphones in which she probably cannot see all of my lips move. <laughs> So, she's more magic than you might even think because she's reading my lips completely. And the irony is, we're going to have a tape of this interview, and she won't be able to hear it. So, this is a very special moment that I get to spend with her. Tell us a little bit about how you decided to be a poet.

Ann: Okay. Well, as far as schooling, I was very far behind. And then at a certain point, I realized I had to catch up if I wanted to make something of my life. And then, by the time I graduated high school, I had developed to the degree that when I applied to colleges, they saw some kind of possibility in me. I was accepted to Sarah Lawrence in New York on academic probation. But once I went there, I did well. And one of the reasons for that was it's a wonderful campus, very small classes, but I had this tremendous freedom of leaving my home town. And even though my friends and family and neighbors had been loving towards me, they always had preconceived notions of me as the deaf girl. And I was able to start a new life in a new place. My parents were incredibly supportive when I said I wanted to be a poet, and that's not something a lot of parents like to hear. But they valued the arts and poetry and writing, so I was lucky. I love poetry because of the abstraction. Because, like sign language, it doesn't necessarily follow the perfect rules and order of English prose. It gives me more freedom. I think also reading poetry and reciting it helped me to modulate and put emotion into my voice. I think that was key. I wanted to express myself, if I was feeling really happy or if I was feeling maybe sad and quiet, I wanted to be able to express that.

Shelley: Through poetry.

Ann: Through poetry.

Shelley: And now, you work as an adult in a library. How long have you worked as a librarian?

Ann: I worked as a librarian in my home town of Oyster Bay right out of college. It happened my mother worked in the Library of Science [ph?] at New York. Libraries are magical to me. I had very few refuges as a child, and one of them was our public library. Our library was very inclusive and was easily including in program. Even as a young child, even when I could not communicate, I participated in summer reading programs. I went to movies even without close captions. They included me as a child, and I felt safe and happy there. It's still something, now that I've worked in the Alachua County Library District for four years, it's something that's very important to me. And I work at a public service desk. I put myself in probably the most difficult situation of somebody with my disability. I try and stay calm and have a sense of humor, but mistakes often happen. It's difficult to read teenagers sometimes. And people with excessive facial hair, it's difficult with me. <laughs> .

Shelley: The bearded speaker.

Ann: But I do my best. And I find if I'm pleasant and calm, people are willing to repeat themselves or even write down for me what they're saying.

Shelley: I think it's really good for us because it makes us think and enunciate.

Ann: I hope that's true.

Shelley: It's made me a better speaker, I think, spending time with you.

Ann: Because of the hardship in my early life, I've always felt that my life is not just about myself. And while I enjoy having fun, and I go to work because I need it to sustain my life. Also I hope to educate people I meet, whether customers or patrons as we call them in the library, my coworkers, anybody I come across. I hope I have.

Shelley: Well, what are you proudest of, of your life at this point?

Ann: Writing this poem. <laughs> I'm proud that he keep growing. The things I do in the library, the outreach work I do, the way I serve people, I'm constantly trying to stretch the boundaries and doing things I never imagined I would be capable of doing. Helen Keller's insecurity is a superstition. And I think of that often. So, not to remain safe and secure but to push myself out there. And sometimes, it doesn't work, but often it does.