



Violence in Deaf Culture: My Story, My Voice

I am a survivor of domestic violence. I also am Deaf. Domestic violence is an aggressive behavior within the home, typically involving the violent abuse of a spouse or partner. It can come in many forms: physical, mental, verbal, and emotional abuse. Most commonly, domestic violence is targeted against women. I am sharing my story as a survivor because of my time in Vera House, which is a shelter for battered women. My time at Vera House fired my passion to correlate my personal experience and informative research to raise awareness by educating others about the unique needs of Deaf domestic violence survivors. I hope that my story will awaken the hearing community to the fact that Deaf victims need allies on their side to make a change for Deaf domestic violence survivors.

Often in the world of Deaf Culture, it's not the silence of our voices that is deafening; it's the silence of actions that speak the loudest because violence is a "hidden" problem in the Deaf community at large.

(L. Valentine, March 8th, 2014)

Introduction

I am Deaf. I also am a survivor of domestic violence. Domestic violence is aggressive behavior within the home, typically involving the violent abuse of a spouse or partner. It can come in many forms: physical, mental, verbal, and emotional abuse.

Most commonly, domestic violence is targeted against women. Ninety-two percent of women surveyed list reducing domestic violence and sexual assault as their top concern (Domestic violence statistics, 2014). I am sharing my story as a survivor because of my time in Vera House, which is a shelter for battered women. My time at Vera House fired my passion to correlate my personal experience and informative research to raise awareness by educating others about the unique needs of Deaf domestic violence survivors. I want to help their voices to be heard. The statistics I found did not reveal the percentages of domestic violence survivors who are Deaf. However, domestic violence occurs every day: “Every nine seconds in the US a woman is assaulted or beaten” (Domestic Violence Statistics, 2014).

Domestic violence information is very accessible in the hearing community where there is a common awareness; hearing individuals are able to seek refuge with support, resources, and access to communication within their reach. This is not the case for Deaf women. Too little information is available for these survivors, and the lack of studies regarding the needs of these women makes them and their needs invisible. The Deaf community

within the domestic violence support system spends too much time educating the hearing providers on the victims' unique communication and cultural needs, rather than sharing their abusive experiences and receiving help to overcome their issues for their mental health and wellness needs (Domestic violence within the Deaf community, 2014).

My Story

I was married for twenty years. I thought I had a fairy tale marriage because I had married my childhood crush. We knew each other since elementary school. However, we lost contact because we both moved away from our hometown. We reconnected after eleven years when we both moved back to our hometown, where we met at a Deaf fundraiser event. We chatted briefly, exchanged phone numbers, and started dating in the summer of 1991. We were married in the spring of 1992. It was the happiest day of my life, but at the same time, I felt in my gut that I may have made a mistake. I thought I was lucky because he wanted me and loved me. Most guys I had dated were hearing; he was the first Deaf person that I dated. The communication was smooth and easier than dating a hearing guy. I was only twenty-four years old

and was naïve about the ideology of a perfect marriage. I wanted a white picket fence, a big house, and a large family. I did not know what I was in for. It was like I was in a spider's web that coiled slowly until the web got bigger and bigger.

I felt trapped with no awareness of the signs that led me to realize I married the wrong man. There were many detours, and our stormy relationship was like a roller coaster. Even though I was never raped by my husband, I felt violated in many ways because of his treatment toward me. Brownmiller (1975), a renowned scholar who writes on gender and violence, captures how I felt about our marriage and how I want to raise our daughters:

As I see it, the problem is not that polarized role playing (man as doer; woman as bystander) and exaggerated portrayals of the female body as passive sex object are simply 'demeaning' to women's dignity and self-conception, or that such portrayals fail to provide positive role models for young girls, but that cultural sexism is a conscious form of female degradation designed to boost the male ego by offering 'proof' of his native superiority (and of female inferiority) everywhere he looks (pg. 389).

I often had to look good for my husband so he could brag to say, "I

have a hot, beautiful, and thin wife." He presented me as a trophy and never looked at me as a woman who was worthy of love and attention.

I looked back on our twenty years of marriage and tried to remember the first sign of things going wrong. It was in May of 1993. It was my husband's birthday; and I was so excited with a cake, card, and a gift. My husband came home from the bank and was delighted to see me. We greeted each other with a kiss and talked briefly about how our day went. He then saw the surprise and appreciated that I took the time to celebrate his birthday. My husband opened the card which said, "Daddy to be and happy birthday." His expression suddenly changed from happy to angry. I realized he was not happy about us having a baby, and I did not like what I saw. As my belly took the form of looking very pregnant, my husband rejected me. He did not embrace me as a beautiful wife, because I was not thin anymore. After his rejection, I began to wilt like a dying flower, feeling unwanted and unloved, with no hope of redeeming our once blissful marriage. After our first daughter was born, I dived into the role of motherhood with joy and focused all my energy on her because my husband was not interested in me or being the father to our

daughter. That was my first cue about his true nature, but I had no support and felt no love from him. I thought maybe our marriage would get better and he would get over it. His resentment toward me grew, and I never knew why he resented me or what I did to make him turn away from being my husband. I was afraid to voice how I felt because I had no college degree, no income, and no job to be able to take care of our daughter or myself. So I stayed. I had no awareness of domestic violence in the Deaf community; I had no education about the patterns, cycles, and the signs of domestic violence.

When our daughter was three years old my husband decided to go back to college to obtain his bachelor's degree. He did this because he felt he was not going anywhere with his bank job where he worked for three years without a raise or a promotion. I, as a dutiful wife, supported him and encouraged him to pursue his dreams to get his degree. I was pregnant again with twins, and this time, he was okay with the pregnancy. He spent so much time in his studies and at the library at college, that he was only home in time for dinner. I was always busy at home being a mommy to our three year old daughter and being pregnant with

twins, and I resumed the role that a good wife would. Our twin daughters were born at 25 weeks. Both of them weighted only two pounds and one ounce. One daughter died two weeks later on Thanksgiving in 1997. I was heartbroken but had no emotional support from my husband. My mom and stepdad stayed with me at my house the night my daughter died. That was my second cue to realize that my husband was not there for me. He was absent and emotionless. He spent all of his time focused on his studies or in the library. During the five months that our second daughter was in the hospital, he visited her maybe four or five times. I visited her twice every day for five months until we brought her home on Easter weekend of 1998.

I was becoming a restless mom at home and wanted something more from my life. I told my husband that I wanted to return to college and obtain my bachelor's degree in social work. My husband was not supportive and made comments, such as, "You are not smart like me," and "Who will take care of our daughters?" I ignored his remarks and applied to college without his approval. I only lasted one semester. I then dropped in and out of colleges five times because of his continual emotional and mental abuse. He used

our children to pressure me to stay home, saying, “We can’t take turns watching the girls, and we can’t afford daycare.” I believed him when he said I was not smart and a failure as a wife, mother, and student. I felt worthless, unloved, and unimportant. I could not share my problems with my Deaf friends because we were well known in the Deaf community. He was intelligent, charming, and distorted anything I said to make himself look good. He was a narcissist who was all about himself.

In Deaf culture, an abusive partner uses tactics of isolation to make the significant other feel alone, and the victim has no support, because the partner can read the victim’s pager or watch videophone conversations. The partner also controls which Deaf friends the significant other talks to and removes him or her from the Deaf community to isolate him or her. The partner demands the significant other discuss issues with the partner before discussing issues with others in the Deaf community in the fear that the significant other will reveal problems in her or his relationship. Also, the partner tells the significant other that no one will believe him or her because the partner is well respected in the Deaf community. If the significant other

tries to leave the abusive partner, the partner tells him or her that the shelter will not accept him or her because she/he is Deaf. This gives the abusive partner the power to keep the significant other with him or her in fear of feeling unloved and unwanted (Reis, 2007).

I fell into this trap of abuse because of the imbalance in power between myself and my husband. As the years went by, I let myself go. I gained weight, did not care whether I lived or died, and had no resources or awareness of support groups for Deaf domestic violence for women. I felt hopeless, was in a very dark place, and suffered from major depression. I had nothing to look forward to except the love of my children, which kept me going. I did not want anyone to know my affliction with my crumbling marriage, so I put up a front, smiled, and pretended that we were a happy and strong ideal Deaf couple in our Deaf community. I wanted to be the ‘perfect’ wife who could hold everything together. It was 1999, and I should have seen the third cue coming, but I was naïve and passive. I had my first job at a school for the Deaf in Texas as a teacher assistant. I never saw my paychecks. All of my checks went straight into my husband’s bank

account. I never learned how to pay the bills or how to use online banking. My husband often said, "I think it is better if I take care of the bills; you will spend it in wrong places and you are not good with math." Again, I had feelings of worthlessness, uselessness, and unimportance. I did not want to argue with him, because when I did, he would not stop until he won the argument. So I just let my husband control our finances as a way to save the peace in our house for our daughters.

I spent fourteen years accepting my husband's power over me. I thought it was normal and he was the man of the house. In my blind love, I was willing to do anything for him and loved him despite how he made me feel. I believed that I had no way out of the marriage, my only option being to try to do anything I could to make him happy; even try to change my looks and my weight. I did everything for him to make him love me. He got his power knowing I was vulnerable. An abusive partner uses the Deaf community or school as a reason why the significant other has to stay with him or her to support their Deaf children. It is very common for Deaf parents to put a guilt trip on their partner by stating they have to look good for the community and save face for their Deaf children

and portray the "perfect Deaf family." The partner also uses prestige as a leader or position of power in the Deaf community to discredit the significant other's story about the violence (Domestic Violence Within the Deaf Community, 2011).

Things kind of went along in our lives. In 2001, we were living in Frederick, Maryland. We both had jobs and bought our first townhouse. I was a teacher assistant at school for the Deaf, but again, I did not see my paychecks. I loved my job; I made friends and enjoyed working with special needs Deaf students. I loved the idea of balancing my motherhood and work and felt better about myself than I had in a long time. A few friends I made at work sensed I was not really happy, but I never told anyone how I was treated at home. I kept it all to myself. But I felt like I was dying inside. I felt hopeless and in a dark place in my life with my marriage. I wanted love like other people. I was starved for attention and wanted to feel worthy of something. This was the first time I actually thought about leaving my husband. I began asking general questions about how Deaf women can seek help with house payments, what programs they have available, and how I might seek a way out of the marriage.

Friends started to suspect why I was asking questions, but I quickly covered this up by saying my questions were to help a friend. I was not educated or aware of any domestic violence services for Deaf culture. Typical of abuse in the Deaf community, my husband took my social security checks to make sure I was trapped in the relationship. I also worried that he would spread rumors about me to ruin my reputation. This is very common in the Deaf community, especially when working in Deaf schools. This prevents the significant other from obtaining a job and helps keep him or her at home. Similar to my circumstances, this gives the abusive partner full control of knowing that the significant other cannot get help or socialize with other people (Reis, 2007).

I became pregnant with our third daughter in 2004. I felt even more trapped in my marriage. I could not take care of three children, along with the house payment, car payment, other bills, and food on my small income alone. My husband decided to quit his job without my knowledge or any discussion. I experienced my first physical abuse when I was seven months pregnant because my husband found out I was trying to seek information to leave him. I was shocked. I never thought that his

mistreatment of me would escalate to physical abuse. When he quit his job, he realized that we could not afford the house payment anymore, and we had to sell our house and relocate to our hometown in Alabama. This made me happy because it meant moving closer to my mom and other family members. Upon returning to Alabama, we stayed with my mom while we looked for a house. After three months of house hunting, we bought a gorgeous 2,070 square foot home with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, formal dining and living room, a fireplace with built in shelves, a good sized kitchen, and a huge garage that was transformed into a playroom for my daughters, plus a Jacuzzi and beautiful enclosed porch in the front of the house. I felt we were finally living the dream I had wanted for so long, but I realized that a big house would not bring me happiness. During the three years that we lived there, our marriage began to deteriorate quickly with constant arguments and more physical abuse. Every time I attempted to leave him, he would promise to change. I had not reached out to anyone or told anyone about the ugly truth of how my husband treated me. He told me all the time, that if I left him, no man would want me. I thought no one would believe my story.

On a horrible night in the fall of 2005 he tried to stab me with a knife, and I screamed. Our two oldest daughters heard and ran out to see what the noise was all about. My oldest daughter called the police, but I told her to hang up, and I called my mom to see if we could stay at her house. The police did show up anyway, but I was ashamed and did not request an interpreter because it was a small, closely knit Deaf community, and I did not want what happened to us to spread in the Deaf community. My hesitation to get help illustrates the many barriers that exist for domestic violence survivors, particularly among Deaf victims negotiating help in a hearing world, and it shows some of the coercive threats that a Deaf abuser exerts over a victim. A Deaf person using American Sign Language can use many forms of intimidation to make the abused victim afraid. The abusive partner uses gestures, facial expression or exaggerated signs, but denies any aggressive behavior by justifying it as part of Deaf language. Another common example of this aggressive behavior is pounding on the table or door, and floor stomping if the victim looks away, but hearing culture often misses or misreads these abuse signals (Reis, 2007).

Once at my mom's house, my mom learned the truth about my marriage and my many years of abuse. She was very supportive and said we could stay at her house as long as we wanted. That is when I realized that I was not at fault and I did not deserve my abusive relationship. Still, after living with my mom for several months, I began to miss my husband and the life we had together. I was afraid to be alone with no job, no degree, or income. I returned home with him and our daughters, but our oldest daughter refused to move back in with us and stayed with my mom. There are many reasons why Deaf women like me are likely to stay in an abusive relationship. Often in Deaf communities, people attended the same Deaf school or mainstream programs; they know each other as a second family. When a Deaf woman is abused, the information she shares will spread like a fire and it is impossible to water down the truth (Leigh, 1999). As a result, Deaf victims often keep the abuse to themselves to protect their and their partner's reputation, to avoid grapevines or embarrassment, and to prevent the possibility that the Deaf community would not believe a victim's story (Bartle, 2007). Like many victims of abuse, Deaf women remain loyal. They

often love their men and can communicate with them in sign language. A Deaf couple shares the same culture and values and a victim is afraid that if she leaves her abuser, she will lose this familiar form of communication. She may also fear that if she seeks help outside of her comfort zone, that no domestic violence program will understand or relate to her because of lack of communication and knowledge of sign language (Reis, 2007).

Many Deaf women are afraid to report abuse to police officers because of law enforcement's lack of knowledge of sign language and the need to request a sign language interpreter. As a Deaf woman, this causes fear and intimidation. When the Deaf woman reports or tries to explain abuse to hearing police officers, the officers often explain in brief details and dismiss the severity of the situation, because it takes a lot of time, patience, and effort to explain the abuse. This is often because of ignorance of Deaf culture among police officers and their lack of understanding and knowledge of the unique needs of Deaf individuals. Also, many Deaf women do not hold college degrees or have a good paying job. They often depend on their live-in boyfriend, partner, or

spouse for additional support, and thus, feel trapped and hopeless with no way out of the relationship (Domestic violence within the Deaf community, 2014). As my own circumstances evolved, I began to feel that living in Alabama was not doing us any good. The resources for the small Deaf community were limited in job opportunities and the public school system in Alabama was not great. I ran into an old high school best friend who was in town for a Christmas party and she began to tell me about Rochester, New York; how the Deaf community was huge with many Deaf resources. I told my husband about Rochester and thought maybe it would be a good change for us. I thought the environment would improve our marriage and we would have better opportunities for jobs. For once, he researched and agreed with me. I thought was a good sign.

I flew to Rochester in June of 2008, and I stayed with my friend for a month while my husband and daughters stayed behind to finish school and sell our house. I went job hunting and apartment hunting as well. I found a job cleaning houses where I was living. I felt free for a month without my husband mentally, emotionally, and physically abusing me. My friend sensed

that I was unhappy. I was shocked that she kind of knew this, and I spilled my whole story to her. She was the first friend I told the truth about my marriage. She believed me when no one else in my hometown did, and she renewed my courage, which I never knew I had. One month later, my husband and children joined me in Rochester, and we moved into the apartment I rented. I left my house cleaning job because I had to be at home taking care of my daughters. My oldest daughter returned to Alabama to live with my mom because she hated her dad for constantly treating me badly. After we sold our house in Alabama, I began to tell my husband about my unhappiness and suggested that we live apart. For the first time I felt in control and wanted my life back, but he still powered over me.

Many friends encouraged me and pushed me to go back to college, but I was afraid I would fail. I kept rewinding my husband's words, "You will not amount to anything, you are stupid in math and you won't succeed like me." My feeling of unworthiness persisted, but I decided to try school again, and in 2009 I enrolled at Monroe Community College. I was juggling motherhood and being a full time student, but to my surprise, I made the Dean's list. This lit

my fire to continue with school, and I was determined to obtain my degree. Being on the Dean's list gave me self-esteem, and finally, I realized I was smart after all. Many examples in my own life illustrate ways an abusive partner makes fun of their significant other's language or English skills, making the other person feel small and not smart. This gives the partner a superior feeling of being the smart one. Another example is when the abusive partner puts his or her partner down by saying he or she is acting "hearing" because the significant other is not fluent in American Sign Language or does not have a strong identity as a Deaf person (Reis, 2007).

Once I began to take courses in social work at college, I began to realize there are programs for domestic violence survivors. But I still did not know who to contact or where to seek information on how to receive help. I learned a lot about signs, read books, and heard stories from many hearing women through interpreters in classrooms. I simply did not want to face the truth that I was in a domestic violence relationship. I did not want to be one of those women. Also, I thought I was the only Deaf woman who was a victim of domestic violence, because I had not heard other Deaf women talk about it

or share their stories. Therefore, I kept my secret in the dark and only a few people knew about my marriage. Even if I did tell, I feared that the Deaf community would not believe me because in public, my husband was very charming and intelligent. A week after Easter in 2012, one night after the girls were in bed, my husband flew off the handle because he found out that I was telling a few friends about our marriage and how he treated me. He threw me against the wall and tried to choke me. He said, "You are not going to take the girls with you, and stop telling everyone lies about me and get out of my house!" I cried and said, "I will be a good wife if you let me stay with the girls, please I do not want them to think I left them." He replied, "You should have thought of that," and pushed me out of the apartment and locked the door. I spent two weeks staying with a hearing friend that I met at college, depressed, hopeless, and feeling empty without my daughters. I did not know what to do or how to seek help until I spoke to an advisor whom I admired and looked up to. She gave me a number to contact at Vera's House, a shelter for battered women. Initially, I was afraid and did not want to go to Vera's House, because I did not know what to expect. But I gradually changed my mind

because I needed to get my life together and get my girls back.

To my surprise, Vera's House was nice. They provided food, a place to stay, offered support groups, art therapy, and counseling. Yet I still felt isolated, alone, and without support, because all the women there were hearing. I had to request an interpreter for support groups and house activities. I spent more time educating hearing sponsors about my needs than I did talking about my experiences and how domestic violence affected my life and the life of my children. This is a common problem for many Deaf women. Also, Deaf women are afraid to leave behind links to Deaf forms of communication such as videophone, visual alarm clocks, alert light systems, and other needed equipment. These devices offer comfort, familiarity, and protection at home, and a connection to the outside world. If Deaf women have the courage to leave, they do not want to stay at the shelter because of lack of communication and support systems they need, which can increase feelings of isolation. It is hard for Deaf women to interact with hearing women who do not use or understand sign language.

When my husband learned that I was able to get resources and programs to

help me get a fresh start, I got my daughters back. He realized that I was empowering myself with education, knowledge, support from families and friends, and that I would not return to him. By September 2012, I was ready to move forward with a new chapter in my life. In July 2012, my daughters and I moved into a two bedroom apartment in Brockport. I was afraid that I would not know how to pay the bills or take care of my two daughters, but I learned how to set up my own banking account, pay my bills online, and manage my money. It was a struggle, but I realized that I was capable of doing many things without needing my ex-husband, and that I could take care of myself and my daughters. My daughters and I did not have much, but we were happier being free from the abusive environment, and I finally was able to give my girls a stable home life. Even though I was happy, had my children back, and had a fresh start, I still felt something was missing in my life, because I had no connection with other Deaf women facing similar circumstances as my own.

In overcoming my own challenges, I learned that there was an organization for Deaf women in domestic violence situations, Advocacy for Deaf Victims of Domestic Violence, located in Rochester, New York. However, there

still is not a shelter for the Deaf women. Hopefully someday that will happen. I started attending their fundraiser events, I shared my story, I met other Deaf women, and I came full circle, feeling whole again. Advocacy for Deaf Victims of Domestic Violence formed an alliance with Vera's House in Syracuse, and they started to work together to raise awareness of Deaf domestic violence victims' needs and educate the hearing community to provide the same help and services to Deaf people that are provide to hearing people. My story, my voice, is being heard, but it will take more than my voice to make a social change for Deaf women in the domestic violence community, for them to have fully accessible services and equality with hearing people. Awareness by educating others about the unique needs of Deaf domestic violence survivors is a start to help Deaf voices to be heard.

Power and Control

In hearing culture, "feminist theory focuses on power, on gender, and on the structure of relationships in a male-dominated, patriarchal culture" (Levy, 2008, p. 21). Audism is the notion that one is superior based on the ability to hear. Audism tactics frequently used by hearing people can subvert Deaf

people, because hearing people have “hearing privilege.” From the hearing culture, women are oppressed by men because men have “male privilege.” Men control women from political, legal, and economic systems. This makes it easier for men to get away with abusive behaviors because of gender role expectations in society. The social attitudes of sexism are very common toward women. Masculinity is the norm for men; they are expected to be dominant, strong, and in control while women are expected to be submissive and passive. In domestic violence situations, the power dynamics of gender differences also exist between the differences of the Deaf and hearing communities, although the specific privileges are different. Deaf and hearing women are all affected by patriarchy, class structures, and individual issues; however, Deaf women also experience additional and unique problems when they are confronted with domestic violence (Rossana, Reis, 2007).

For Deaf domestic violence survivors, hearing people often can oppress Deaf people through power and control common to hearing culture. “Hearing privilege” can come into play if the Deaf woman is married to a hearing man. A hearing husband,

partner, or boyfriend might take advantage of the Deaf woman by not allowing their hearing children to use sign language. The hearing husband can take advantage of the system, which is not fully accessible to Deaf people. For example, a legal hearing regarding restraining orders can get postponed because there are no interpreters available. A hearing husband may not tell his partner when people try to call her, or he may intentionally leave her out in a social gathering with hearing people. A hearing husband might put the Deaf woman down by saying she is no good because she is Deaf. Another issue is family members who take advantage of the Deaf person. Deaf women and men do not have the power to say what they want because the hearing people can distort their stories and take advantage of that power. The hearing partner can tell hearing children that Deaf culture is worthless and that hearing culture is better and also use the children against the victim by not allowing the children to use sign language to communicate with the Deaf parent (Reis, 2007). Often in systems within a community, such as courts, police officers and legal professionals are uneducated about the needs of Deaf clients and cannot help create better outcomes for their

situations. For instance, they are not aware that by the law, courts, officers, and professionals are required to hire certified interpreters instead of using the Deaf person's family members for hearing word translation. Sometimes, family members lie and say they are an expert at sign language to get paid for the job, but in reality, they take advantage of Deaf victims (Reis, 2007).

Deaf Resources

Social resources for Deaf domestic abuse victims have improved immensely by recognizing the Deaf community's accountability on raising awareness and educating the hearing community. The Deaf community provides information on how to make a difference in the Deaf community by providing better exposure and awareness in the media, increasing service providers; educating government, justice systems and law enforcement in Deaf education; and creating hearing allies. There are many ways that Deaf domestic violence victims can receive better support and resources to help them move forward with their new life. Some of the essential areas that need to be emphasized in order to better meet the unique needs of the Deaf women are worth highlighting (Family and Community Services, n.d.).

Society needs to “recognize the social media, television, print and any forms of media to educate (not glorify) about the dynamics and consequences of violence experienced by Deaf, Deaf-blind, and signing people” (Whyte & Eposito, 2011, pp. 25- 29). It is vital that the media provides access to captioning, subtitles, American Sign Language, and visual representation for Deaf clients. Service providers need to make a social change through advocacy to make their Deaf clients feel comfortable and safe sharing information and not violate trust. This would include necessary services such as mental health professionals, interpreters' agencies, social security services, and vocational rehabilitation services. It is important that service providers ensure interventions are culturally and linguistically appropriate and embrace Deaf-centered approaches. Deaf clients need to feel understood and able to relate to others without having to educate hearing people about what the Deaf victims need. Service providers need to utilize local referral resources and treatments for the abusers by providing necessary forms of communications to assure abusers receive treatment and rehabilitation. The Deaf community could be better served by a government providing

secure funding for Deaf domestic/sexual violence services and providing training to all the staff and managers to recognize the signs of domestic violence in Deaf culture. Also, the government needs to enforce laws to protect Deaf survivors and impose serious consequences to the perpetrators. In the light of the justice system and law enforcement, the biggest issue is to root out audism and bias toward Deaf clients and ensure that all the information and resources are confidential. Also, state and federal government programs such as rape crisis and abuse resources must make everything that is available for hearing survivors such as phone services and victim hotline equally accessible for Deaf survivors and ensure that the Deaf have the ability to walk into police stations without barriers. Deaf victims do not realize that they do need hearing allies in their corner, since hearing is the majority population. Having a hearing ally is essential; it provides the survivor with a supporter/friend who does not make a Deaf client feel helpless. To build these bridges, allies need to be educated about the unique issues that Deaf clients experience in domestic violence situations. Allies need to be encouraged to learn sign language. Hearing people need to stop using

“hearing privilege” and seek equality with Deaf people (Reis, 2007).

Deaf people need to refrain from judgments and labeling domestic violence inappropriately. For example, it is wrong to say abuse is between the abuser and abused victim and not the community’s business. And it is problematic to enable hierarchical status of an abuser, such as a Deaf community leader, as a reason to prevent the survivor’s safety and welfare. Members of the Deaf community need to support peace and oppose violence; instead, they often take sides or remain neutral. This causes a Deaf victim’s confusion about who to trust, because she does not know whose side people are on, hers or the abuser. The Deaf community needs to use peer support to help prevent and stop violence, and to ask the victims if they need help instead of being bystanders. Very often when there is a Deaf social gathering, Deaf people often start gossiping and backstabbing. Violent and controlling behaviors are not acceptable; people need to make it clear that it is a violence free environment. People need to stop enabling the abusers and place responsibility with them instead of blaming and judging the victims for staying with the abuser. An important tool in domestic violence

situations is to respect the victims and refrain from gossiping and starting rumors.

Achieving unity in Deaf education settings requires ongoing Deaf-centered professional development for teachers, educators, faculty, and staff. With more training, the Deaf community can better respond to domestic violence in students' lives. They should provide a Deaf-centered violence prevention program, offer conflict resolution, and promote communication skills in Deaf and mainstream programs and model those skills. Schools should offer and address bullying and dating violence to help people recognize the signs of abuse and prevent them from tolerating abusive relationships (Garvin & Jackson, 2003). Deaf education should also inform Deaf people about domestic violence, and offer sexual/violence seminars and courses in any Deaf-centered environment (Reis, 2007). The goal of human services is to help victims learn how to use critical thinking skills to help them develop healthy attitudes toward themselves. Human services professionals can help the client see irrational ways of thinking and encourage them to recognize and change to healthy relationships. They want the victims to realize that they deserve a much better life than the life

they had with the abuser, where they felt marginalized, unwanted and unloved. Human services also want to help the victims process the pros and cons of leaving their partners by evaluating risk factors and possible escape scenarios. The most common goal of human services is to provide clients' individual counseling, group support, housing assistance, job coaching, and help to live independently. Funds for job placement, transportation, and childcare assistance are critical (Martin, 2011). These important tools are essential in helping Deaf domestic violence survivors both know about abuses and have the means to access and live an abuse-free life.

My Voice

The valuable resources I received from Vera House provided me with excellent information, which helped me start a new life for myself and my children. The Vera House changed my life. Because of them, I was able to file for my divorce, obtain help from a housing assistance program, and receive services from vocational rehabilitation to earn a Bachelor degree in Women's and Gender Studies, so I can build a better future for myself and my family. Using my voice here, I hope

that I can raise awareness and educate the hearing community about the root issues in domestic violence that are represented in the Deaf community. My education has given me insight and provided me with unpredictable, eye-opening lessons and challenges. Many doors have opened for me so that I can now become part of something that I strongly believe in. I have the passion to make a difference in the Deaf community. The person I have become created a new perspective for me as a Deaf person and I have developed a

new-found respect for myself as a student, mom, woman, and feminist. My life has proven to be an enriching journey. I hope that others gain insight and understanding of the unique need of Deaf domestic violence survivors. They need to have the best services, programs, and tools to heal and move toward a positive future and live productive lives. While my story is filled with hope, there is still so much work to be done. Hearing culture is still the dominant obstacle for helping Deaf victims of abuse.

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