# DEAFHOOD FOUNDATION ON ACTIVISM AND #WPSDOPPRESSION AND #WPSDPROUD

[Description of scene: Marvin Miller, a white man with goatee beard wearing a solid gray collared shirt with sleeves folded up quarter of the way, sitting on a bench under shade of trees with partial sunlight that constantly moves throughout the video.] [Text on lower left: Marvin Miller, Board Member]

Deafhood Foundation board has seen several significant examples of Deaf activism pop up including Audism Free America and their frequent rallies, Deaf Grassroots Movement and their admirable first Deaf Protest at the White House, and now the hunger strike at the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (WPSD) with #WPSDHungerStrike and #WPSDOppression.

Also, the local Deaf community came up with #WPSDProud in response to the hunger strike. [Marvin nods affirmatively].

We would like to discuss the word, “Activism”. The Deaf community’s experience with activism hasn’t been an easy one. Uncomfortable, actually. We lack self-confidence. Often this term brings feelings of embarrassment or the idea of our people behaving badly or inappropriately. We are quick to criticize our people for not following the steps or the “proper protocols” and many things.

The Deafhood Foundation board recognizes the need for greater activism in our community. We must act. We must take a stand. All Deaf children including hard of hearing children all over the world need and access to… just those two? No, more than that, their natural birthright.

Deafhood Foundation recognizes all Deaf children’s birthright to what? Natural sign language. In America, this would mean American Sign Language. For Black Deaf

children, it would mean Black ASL. For Native Deaf American, it would mean their own sign language of their people. This goes for all kinds of Deaf people and we must honor their languages. Just languages?

No, there's more. Deaf culture. Not just that but DeafBlind, Deafdisabled and their respective cultures must be embraced and included along with their collective knowledge and stories and values. Just that two?

No, there's more. Healthy identity. Identity? Yes, this is critical for all Deaf, DeafBlind, Deafdisabled, and Deaf people of color, their identities are of equal importance, recognition and worthy of respect and reverence.

These three things that each Deaf child needs in their lives also mean they need Deaf adult role models lining up with their identity, such as DeafBlind child would need an adult DeafBlind teacher and so forth.

In addition to this, Deaf Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer (LGBTQ) children and their identities also must be respected and celebrated.

With that, the Deafhood Foundation board is very pleased with Gallaudet University's recent selection of Bobbi Cordano as their next president of the University. With her emphasis on bilingualism, recognition of Deaf culture and the need for open dialogue within the community on what these things mean to each of us and bringing us closer to a shared vision going forward.

The board is also excited by the fact that Bobbi Cordon is the first openly Lesbian to be President, and this sends a positive message to all LGBTQA Deaf, DeafBlind and Deafdisabled children that they, too, can grow up and be successful like Cordano.

We recognize that activism by its very nature a disruptive action that interrupts the very machinery of the system from going forward “business as usual” with the typical messages we’ve seen for a long time: parental choice, individualized approaches with Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and so forth which requires meeting each child’s need.

We have seen how the system works and by focusing on the individuals, the system ignores the collective nature of the Deaf community which includes a wide natural variety of people including DeafBlind, Deafdisabled, Deaf people of color and Deaf LGBTQA. Within our community, we share a lot in common with shared languages, cultures and knowledge and values passed on from one generation to another.

So this emphasis on individuals is not okay.

We are keenly aware that “parent’s choice” is so entrenched in the system today that believes each parent can choose items from a menu like oral-only approach, signed English, cued speech, or ASL. With that, oftentimes ASL takes the backseat and comes in last or as an afterthought.

I’ve been teaching Deafhood classes for almost five years and the journey has been so inspiring because these classes have a powerful, paradigm-shifting impact on our people’s consciousness. I’ve asked each of them whether they truly support the idea that a parent can choose an oral-only approach for a Deaf child with a strict ban on ASL, Deaf culture and setting up barriers between the child and our community?

Not one. Not a single one agreed that this should be available as an option. Wait! This is from Deaf people of all walks of life including those who grew up orally, mainstreamed alone, mainstreamed with others, Deaf residential schools and those with hearing and

Deaf parents. All kinds! And none of them think the option of banning ASL and Deaf culture should exist. This cannot be a choice.

With that self-examination and analysis, we've come to an important conclusion that I'm proposing we use the capitalized "D"eaf for all of Deaf people instead of using both lowercase d and capitalized D in order to differentiate between those who are culturally Deaf and those who are not. No. With capitalization of Deaf brings within it the true recognition that all Deaf and hard of hearing children have a natural birthright to ASL, Deaf Culture, healthy identity and being a part of the Deaf community. The prevailing system run by the schools, educators, specialists like audiologists and speech pathologists, surgeons and so forth have been too successful in preventing untold numbers of Deaf, DeafBlind, Deafdisabled or intersecting identities from their natural birthright. This was taken from them.

We must see that this isn't the Deaf people's fault that they grew up without their birthright and that we all are unique and collectively, we have a lot to offer and to teach the world. This is what capitalizing all Deaf does.

Naturally, there will be a lot of our people who do not share the feeling of being part of our community and of course, we can not force them to change their thinking. We can continue to invite them, share our language and culture with them and hope that one day they will join the family of our beautiful people.

So with the identity being recognized along with principles we have outlined that affirms our existence and our experience, the board fully supports bilingual education approach. In theory, an individualized approach would mean everyone gets what they

want including getting full and rich ASL instruction. This never happens in reality. ASL and Deaf culture suffer as a result.

With activism, is it a bad word? Should we be concerned about our attitude and approaches? It's important to realize that all marginalized and oppressed groups have made positive changes in the world through activism and civil disobedience. Whenever an unjust law, rule or policy is in place, we must stand up and say, “No.” “Enough.”

Activism can range from using diplomatic approach meetings with legislators and rule makers and decision makers to letter writing campaigns, to rallies and marches, to sit-ins and yes, even hunger strikes. Hunger strikes has been an activist tool used in many groups including women suffragette movement with Alice S. Paul leading the way in late 1910’s, and these women had to go on hunger strike in order to expose brutal treatment they received while being wrongly imprisoned. With this exposure, the politics in Washington shifted and the vote for women’s right to vote finally passed. You can watch this story in a movie called, “Iron Jawed Angels”. The movie is a powerful and moving experience. Also, you can watch another movie, “Gandhi”, where you will see hunger strikes employed for the cause there.

Any change doesn’t happen easily. This includes Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement and the LGBT rights movement also.

This work isn’t easy. Why? What we see happening at the WPSD with hunger strikers standing up for the principled cause, and the Deaf community there reacted with bewilderment and confusion with many declaring their support and love for the school. Many of them work at the school and they believe these problems can be changed over time. This creates friction and conflict and frustration for all.

The board wants you all to know that we fully support the Deaf community there, we fully support the hunger strikers and their cause and we also fully support the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. All of them!

We want to see all of you to recognize the value in this process and sit down and discuss this to the best of your ability. We are very concerned about the health of hunger strikers since its now 25th or 26th day, and with each passing day, the threat to their lives increases and the possibility of permanent damage to their health increases rapidly.

We want you all to discuss and debate this. We hope you can set aside personal issues and focus on what is possible and work around what is not possible. The point is to sit down and talk about this. As a community. Together.

The Deaf community has been oppressed for a long time. Wait… Deaf? Most people would think of white Deaf people. No, not only that. Deafdisabled, DeafBlind, Deaf people of color and Deaf LGBTQ people — all of us experience severe oppression and more privileged Deaf people do oppress marginalized Deaf people within our community. This is painful. Very painful.

When we experience oppression, we feel deflated. Our self confidence falls through the floor. So any time anyone in our community stands up for our rights, we should try and support this person despite our concerns or misgivings. If we truly have concerns, then we should try to share the feedback with the activist in private.

The most important point here is that all of our hearts are in the right place — we all want what is best for Deaf children today. Even the current administrators at the school

think their current program and policy serves in the best interests of children today. We all want what is best for our children, period.

As we re examine our lives, our principles and our consciousness, we begin to realize the dangers of systematic audism and the messages it broadcasts about our people daily including “Parent’s choice”. That’s profoundly dangerous message.

Yet, the idea we can disagree or dispute with “parent’s choice” is so dangerous in itself because this criticism would go against the very American ideas of liberty, freedom and choices for all. This makes this fight all more difficult. We are keenly aware of that. This becomes more critical that we continue to process the issues we’ve covered thus far and discuss how we can best move forward for all Deaf children.

Back to these main points, we all want what’s best for all of our children. We believe we have more in common than what separates us. The process of having a dialogue is a key step in moving forward.

Now if we were to pan out and gain a much bigger, nationwide and worldwide picture away from what’s happening at Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, we will see that this picture is a scary one. Truly scary.

We learned of deaf mice being cured with genetic therapy last month. Just a month ago!

[Video of Reuters website with headline “Deaf mice cured with gene therapy” and video of Deaf kids drumming and other images of genetic therapy process.]

Whoa. There hasn’t been a serious debate on ethical and moral aspects of this genetic achievement. Is it okay for the world to erase the Deaf people, our language and Deaf culture off from the face of earth?

[Video cuts to a black background quote screen, “The simple fact is that if {American Deaf culture} could be reliably wiped out, it will be a good thing to wipe out.” — Dr Merzenich, Amercian Psychological Association with source being credited to Ladd, 2003, page 160.]
That debate hasn’t happened. Yet, the march towards that future continues in eagerness and excitement.

[Video cuts to gold color background with “Death of Deafness? Join the dialogue” by Deafness Research Foundation.]
All of that happening and we’re reacting slowly, “No… No…”

We’re telling you that we must train our people in activism and train ourselves in how to change the system for better ranging from diplomatic approaches to standing up and disrupting, interrupting the system machinery from continuing to operate and forcing necessary dialogue.

If we don’t do that soon, the future will be too unbearable to think about.

We truly love and value the Deaf community and we value ASL and Deaf culture and healthy identity for all. All of our Deaf children have their birthright that must be respected. All of us should be able to lovingly interact with our parents, family members and community at large through ASL and this would mean the children themselves will feel respected, loved, valued and truly belong.

We hope you will join us and support this important process and foster necessary dialogue which includes future activism by our people. We should support all of that through positive encouragement, private feedback if need be so we can inspire many of our people to stand up for what is right and what is just. This includes our wonderful grassroots Deaf community who has bravely stood up for what we all believe in: equality and justice for all. We applaud them all!

We need more activism by our people. When this happens, we will see our world change for better!

Thank you.

[Smiling. Nods]  Fade to black to:
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