DEAFHOOD FOUNDATION'S POSITION PAPER ON NAMING DEAF PEOPLE

WRITTEN WITH ASSISTANCE FROM JENNY CANTRELL

We at the Deafhood Foundation recognize the right of Deaf people to exist on Earth and in a vibrant diverse community. Deaf people come from all walks of life in every possible sense of the word. Deaf people's journeys toward self-actualization widely varies among individuals. We embrace every person and their journey, collectively honoring and cherishing them.

Our use of the capitalized term Deaf is inclusive, welcomes and encompasses all kinds of backgrounds and experiences, including and not limited to varying ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, school backgrounds, and languages. In the past, people have used the term Deaf to specify those who meet a certain mold of Deaf person. We are moving away from that model by expanding the use of Deaf to apply to all kinds of Deaf people. We happily acknowledge that every single person in our community is a valued and valid member of humanity. Every person has many different identities of his or her own, and every one of you reading this is precious.

You are part of our community. Yes, you.

It doesn't matter if you were raised with or without signing, if you were mainstreamed or went to a Deaf school, who your parents were, where or if you went to college, or where you work now. You are part of us.

More importantly, the use of capitalized Deaf also denotes a recognition that all Deaf children in the world have the natural birthright to Deaf culture, their signed languages and a healthy Deaf identity. The Deaf education, whether misguided or deliberately

designed by audists, has caused thousands upon thousands of Deaf children growing up deprived of their birthright to our language and our culture.

The Deafhood Foundation celebrates Deafkind by recognizing and endorsing the use of capital D for all of our people in the same way other ethnic groups capitalize the labels they use to describe themselves.

We do not support the use of d/Deaf to indicate who is culturally Deaf and who is not.

That creates artificial divisions in our community. The time for perpetuating those divisions in different ways, including the terms and labels we use, such as “Not Deaf enough” and “Too Deaf” are over. It is past time to come together and wholeheartedly accept the entire spectrum of Deaf people as Deaf.

It is for this reason that we do not use the term hard-of-hearing. We recognize that this stance is controversial for a variety of reasons. This position is not intended to exclude anyone who self-identifies as hard-of-hearing. If you consider yourself one of us, you are part of our community.

An important distinction must be made between our rejection of terms and behaviors that oppress and the rejection of individuals. We cannot endorse rejection of individuals because we come from a position of love for the community and we cherish everyone in our community. The blame for the divisions within our community can be laid at the doors of the system of privilege and power. In our culture and in most of the world’s cultures, power and status are conferred on those who hear and speak. If one has some hearing, speaking ability, and/or lipreading ability, one gains access to some of that power and status. It is then to be expected that within this system of privilege, Deaf babies who have some hearing would quickly be labeled hard-of-hearing by doctors and

audiologists. It is also to be expected that Deaf children who develop some speech abilities would be heavily praised and encouraged by their families, speech teachers, teachers, and by people they encounter in their daily lives. It should not be surprising that they would internalize the idea that having some hearing and being able to speak is superior and, indeed, desirable. What's more, it should not be surprising that other Deaf children who lack access to some of this privilege and power would also internalize this idea as well.

The system exists to keep power in the hands of those who have it.

It serves their purpose to keep Deaf people divided and segregating ourselves into small, exclusive groups, for when we are squabbling, judging each other, and not accepting of each other, we cannot organize and demand our rightful place in the pantheon of humanity. The use of the terms hard-of-hearing and d/Deaf benefit those in power and keep us powerless.

The Deafhood Foundation chooses, instead, to focus on the whole person rather than on hearing, speaking ability, or lipreading ability. We reject the premise that hearing and speaking indicates higher intelligence, status, abilities, et cetera. Once again, there is a clear difference between rejecting what the system would have us believe and rejecting individuals. We do not and will not reject individuals who self-identify as something other than Deaf, yet we remain steadfast and clear in our Deaf-centered worldview. That worldview requires us to challenge the system as well as audist statements and behaviors. This is necessary because every single one of us in the community has been adversely impacted by the system to the point where we have thought, said, and done audist things.

We, the Deafhood Foundation, embrace each person, recognizing their dignity by not allowing the system to define their worth.

The Deafhood Foundation acknowledges that identity is a marvelously complex topic and we honor the different facets of one's identity. However, to discuss identity, we need to recognize that in many ways, our identity is shaped by the system of privileges, as outlined above when we discussed the internalization of the societal value that to hear and speak allows an individual greater access to power and privilege. The same is true for disenfranchised minority groups, such as women, People of Color (POC), Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people (LGBT), and People with Disabilities (PWD). We recognize that light-skinned people of color, for example, experience less racism and discrimination than their darker-skinned brothers and sisters because of the system. Many women are paid less than men doing the exact similar job, which impacts their individual and collective economic power. Gay and lesbian people are still not allowed to marry in many parts of the world, which denies them many other rights. Deaf people have more difficulty getting work and opportunities for advancement are limited. These examples barely scratch the surface of discrimination and oppression. Racism, sexism, audism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and many more -isms influence our experience, both by direct experience of them and by seeing then internalizing statements and behaviors that reflect the devastating power of oppression.

This paper aims to focus on what it means to be Deaf, but it would be hypocritical to ignore the layers of identity that we all carry with us and that our fellow Deaf people carry with them.

These, and other, -isms also inform the Deaf experience and we recognize and honor that reality.

We empathize with those who may find comfort in their hearing and ability to speak and who feel that it is an important part of their identity. The idea of self-identifying as Deaf may represent going against what they've been told all of their lives and a loss of status and privilege. It cannot be emphasized enough that this is absolutely not an either/or dichotomy. They have nothing to lose. They can retain everything they already have and cherish while gaining so much more, including a new community, a new culture, and a new language. We embrace and honor people who are questioning their identity and those who have not yet identified with Deaf culture and signed languages, and we invite them to be our allies.

Deafhood is a journey, a process.

It requires dialogue and deep reflection over a long period of time. We have faith that our community is ready to put aside our artificial divisions, honor our differences, examine our thoughts, statements, and actions, and work together for the betterment of all Deafkind. We believe that we as a community will be able to question our assumptions, the various institutions (e.g. governments, financial, educational and medical) and why things are the way they are.

Our community needs healing now.

We trust that we, as a community, are collectively working toward healing the damage inflicted on us by the system while rejoicing in the beautiful gifts that Deafkind has given us and to the world, including signed languages and a different way of being human.

© 2017 Deafhood Foundation – All Rights Reserved