



# First Person: MINDY

## Believing in Yourself

My experience growing up as a person who is deaf has been enriching. I have a successful career thanks to supportive parents who always treated me like a typical child. During my difficult times, they supported me wholeheartedly. Some parents of children who are deaf tend to be overprotective, but not my parents. They encouraged me to make my own decisions. I do not think that I would be as successful as I am today without them.

After my parents found out that I was deaf, they enrolled me in a preschool where I learned cued speech. A new teacher arrived and told my parents that Signing Exact English (SEE) would be more useful and social than cued speech. My parents then enrolled in sign language classes so that they could communicate with me.

In elementary school, I was in a self-contained room with other students who were deaf and a teacher who used SEE. I loved that environment. At the time that I was about to enter the sixth grade, I was faced with a decision. Did I want to attend the Alabama School for the Deaf or an integrated middle school? I do not remember how I decided, but I chose the local middle school. I was in culture shock. My classroom was full of thirty hearing students. I was the only student who was deaf in the entire grade. (There were a few other students who were deaf, but they were in different grades.) I had to rely on my interpreter for everything, so I became shyer and less outgoing than I was in elementary school. Many of my classmates learned to sign or fingerspell, but I still missed so much information vital to socialization. I remember walking through the hallways, and my interpreter would walk with me and tell me all kinds of gossip she heard. I was shocked; I had no idea what the students were talking about. As I entered high school, I became very unhappy. I noticed that high school students were more into cliques. I felt as though I did not belong.

At a summer camp for children who are deaf, a camp counselor told me about the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. I was interested, so I mentioned it to my parents. Of course, they said I was too young to be so far away. Yet the thought of attending this school stayed with me. I wrote a letter to Gallaudet asking for information about the school. They sent me a colorful, fancy brochure, and I was impressed. I brought it up once again with my parents, but they shrugged it off. I filled out the application anyway and asked them to sign the papers just in case.

I think my parents thought that I would change my mind if things got serious. When MSSD called my parents to come for an intake interview, they kept asking me if I really wanted to do this. I was determined as ever to go. We made the trip to MSSD, and I fell in love with the school immediately. Once again, however, I was in culture shock because I was not aware of the Deaf culture. The students made fun of my clothes, my makeup, and my use of SEE. I was bewildered by all of this. I eventually learned American Sign Language, which was the language of choice. A friend once charged me a penny every time I signed using SEE. I loved the social aspects of being at MSSD. Unlike my middle school, I was able to be involved in any activity that I wished. I was viewed as the "deaf" girl at my middle school, but at MSSD, I was looked at as "Usher syndrome" girl.

I am currently a counselor at a school for the deaf, where I have worked for the past eight years. I have had to face many obstacles as I moved to a town where I knew no one. I chose to face my challenges rather than staying home and believing that things would not work out for me. I still face challenges now as a person who is deaf-blind. I am not completely blind yet, but my vision is slowly deteriorating. I have learned how to use Grade 1 Braille, and I am currently learning Grade 2. I have also completed orientation and mobility training so that I can become somewhat independent in challenging areas such as heavy traffic. I have learned everything possible in order to be independent in case I lose my sight completely.

In the summer of 2006, I had a cochlear implant because of concerns about my safety in the future. I will need to depend upon environmental sounds if and when I lose my vision. I now enjoy hearing the birds sing and water running. When the audiologist turned on my cochlear implant, it was the strangest sensation. The first sounds I heard were my husband's voice and that of the audiologist. Then I entered the bathroom. I did not realize that bathrooms were so noisy! Funny, I always thought that bathrooms were silent. After I got home, I noticed that flushing toilets even had a sound, so I was incredulous of that. I had never heard those sounds until I received my implant. It was one of the best decisions I ever made for myself.

I know I will face additional challenges as my vision deteriorates, but I have a wonderful support system consisting of my husband, family, and friends. I am confident that I will be able to overcome whatever obstacles come my way.