

The Eighth International CODA Conference

Recollections:
A Decade of CODA
The 10th Anniversary of CODA

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Toward the end of June before our camping trip up to Washington, I was in the midst of bathing my son and fretting the details of this speech. What did you really want to know? What did I really want to say? I am a worrier and I sweat the small stuff. Anyway, Erik was blissfully playing in the water and in his small hands he held his favorite bath toy – a green cup. Written on that cup was “CODA 1992 Family of Origin, Family of Choice.” Thank you New Orleans for a great conference, theme and a wonderful bath toy. It seems that in focusing on our original family we have created another family – CODA. I was struck as Erik fiddled with his cup about how CODA is now part of the daily fabric of my life. Even in the most routine, mundane chores, it manifests itself. He held a bit of CODA in his hands and had no idea of its effect on his mother’s life. Ten years ago I would never guessed this to happen. Ten years ago today I imagine I was strolling along a Santa Barbara beach hashing out plans with my significant other (now husband) about how I was going to make this organization fly. I had just finished graduate school and completed a research project on hearing children of Deaf parents. I knew others were as excited as I was about the idea of forming a group, but how would I pull it together? Today, I will take you on an abbreviated ten-year journey including the peaks and valleys along the way.

Most of you know that I am not a woman of many words. Public speaking used to be my nightmare. It is still not foremost on my list of pleasures. I won’t reveal number one on that list, but I will tell you it does involve peanut butter and chocolate. I do, however, love to write so I felt much better about drafting this speech in the form of a letter. This way I am more at ease and every one of you then owes me a letter. I begin with the typical

greeting but you need to help me out. I despise impersonal letters so after I open with “Dear ...” you need to say your name. I would prefer you to say it as your mother or father did years ago when they were calling you home to dinner or out from behind the closed bathroom door. OK we begin after the word, “Dear”. Ready – “Dear ...” Ah, the CODA symphony.

Ten years ago tomorrow would have been my father’s eighty-first birthday. He died at the age of sixty-eight and did not live to see the birth of CODA. He did see the rumblings and beginnings of my search for “Deaf roots”, if you will, and was quite amazed that his baby daughter now did want to sign hang out with Deaf people and study about Deaf culture. I don’t want you to misunderstand; I loved my parents, Deaf Godparents and family friends as well as the warm community gatherings. However, I was extremely uncomfortable with the hearing stares, comments and ignorance. But I was hearing...the CODA conundrum (part of eardrum?). As a result, I tried to fit in with “the others”. Even my blue-eyed, blonde haired sausage rolled flip and perky pom-pom dress didn’t make me feel right. Try as I might, and I did – student government, academic achiever – I still didn’t feel like one of “them”. This was not a conscious struggle at the time. I was just busy growing up. But in retrospect, I see my struggle to find a niche. I didn’t know the words Deaf culture, bilingual, bicultural or bi-bi as it is now known. I just knew home was different. At the end of my college years I began to be more curious about my background. After graduation and a period of international travel (found it interesting that I felt more at home in different cultures than in my own.) My theory is that it was acceptable to be an outsider there. I wasn’t supposed to feel that I fit in. Here at home, my hearing culture didn’t fit...need CODA tailor and didn’t know it. I joined the Peace Corps. Snoopy recruiters discovered my family background and my teaching credentials so they sent me off to the St. Lucia School for the Deaf in the West Indies. Working with Deaf people was not in my career plans but there I found something tugging at my heartstrings. I began to think about those people that took the time and care to teach my parents long ago. I also found something of myself in those children. There was a little bit of home in those Deaf hearts and I wanted more. After the Peace Corps I attended graduate school at Gallaudet, the alma mater of my parents. I expected to find “Deaf home” there and a place where I really fit. I found comfort, warmth, communication, controversy and knowledge. I found many things. I did not find home. If I didn’t fully fit into the hearing community or the Deaf community, where did I fit? This prompted research. I began to feel like an “auditory mulatto” researching my mixed root. I was a

bit of both, hearing and deaf, but fully neither. When I did my research with codas, the pieces of the puzzle began to fit together. I was most comfortable with codas. I don't want to imply that I am a misfit or socially deviant with hearing or Deaf people...only with codas! I am considered successful in my hearing life and have wonderful hearing friends. I also enjoy my local Deaf community and cherish those friendships that nurture my "Deaf" side. My point is that my comfort level is greatest with other codas. I feel that is what drives us to be together and maintain contact with each other. This doesn't mean I like or get along with all codas that I meet. For some reason I am more tolerant with this group and it now feels like part of my extended family. When I started the organization I did not know this would occur. What I thought would happen is that we would become a strong education/advocacy group for Deaf parent/hearing child families. We knew the need areas first hand and we were (and still are) a relatively untapped group of individuals scattered to the wind. A secondary outcome I'd hoped for was the benefit of interacting with other codas and knowing ourselves better. I quote the February 1984 newsletter, "How fortunate that we have an opportunity to work toward a common goal...while also finding personal reward in the fulfilling relationships that strengthen the ties of this organization. The fruits of our labor are not only in the ends but in the means as well." Over ten years there has been a reversal of priorities. When I first founded CODA, I was more intent upon working with others as an educator and advocate. I still do this, but I first work toward self-education and advocacy. The combination of both is a powerful tool in assisting us to reach our goals of self and family strength.

When I was at Gallaudet and did my research project I set out to do my survey with fifteen subjects on campus. My fifteen minute scheduled interviews went on for hours in some cases. I felt an internal chord touched in relaying stories with these codas. Our backgrounds were certainly not identical, but a common bond seemed to unite us. Upon completion of this project, I knew that I wanted to maintain contact with these individuals and also create a broader network with those I had not yet met. I decided that I would set up an organization and communicate via newsletter since our population was so scattered. I coined the name CODA – Children of Deaf Adults – based on musical terminology. My strong musical background was encouraged by my parents throughout my childhood. I recall practicing classical music pieces for the symphony orchestra and having conductors explain the term coda. In musical composition it is the concluding segment dependent upon the preceding musical development yet it is an altered

version of the original. In my eyes, I was the human analogy to this musical form. I wrote up a position paper, statement of purpose and an introductory newsletter. I sent it out to organizations and codas I knew and awaited the results. Response was slow but steady. Two things surprised me: 1) I received positive responses from distant shores such as Finland and the Netherlands and 2) I began to hear concerns from some people that we shouldn't organize. These were the first of many unanticipated events, joys and disappointments yet to come.

This gives you an overview of CODA's formation without a lot of the chronologic details. When I sat down to write this I debated whether I should take you on an historical journey or a more personalized one. I decided to combine both while emphasizing the latter. It is also difficult because some of you have heard the stories for years and for others it is all new. I am compromising here with some old, some new, some history, mostly reflections. If you want more facts, you can find details of our growth in newsletters proceedings and newcomers meetings. So I decided to forego the chronology and take the personalized route. With that in mind, I wanted to talk about some of the highs and lows along the way:

1. Conferences - Have you ever tried to explain to someone the glorious celebration that occurs here? I have a very difficult time putting it into words. I go back to an open generic letter I wrote for the newsletter after our first conference in 1986. It goes like this:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I wish we could be together to share the August conference stories. I'll try the next best thing – resurrecting the experience on paper. You can imagine the excitement of meeting so many others like myself. Of course there was diversity among us, but we discovered there are strong common threads that bind our unique tapestries. A family reunion spirit prevailed. We found “sisters and brothers” though most of us have never met before. I felt a sense of appreciation for this warm, close community that you unknowingly have passed on to our generation, as well.

There were moments when we discussed difficult times, painful experiences. These are symptomatic of all families. We found it problematic to ferret out that which was specific to deafness,

individual personality, socio-economic factors, etc. Our search was not of a scientist showcasing cause and effect under bell jars. Ours was a journey to a place where we could openly discuss our highs and lows with others sharing our frame of reference. We learned about bicultural identity, and how this affected children of parents using manual communication, oral communication, older generations of codas, younger codas, those from urban backgrounds, rural environments, the oldest sibling, the middle and youngest. We laughed at idiosyncrasies, confided secrets, spilled tears and expressed gratitude for our parentage.

Some deaf parents volunteered their time, attended sessions with interest and supported our first national gathering. Other deaf parents expressed dismay at our CODA calls for unification. They cited the negativity and complaining that their hearing offspring indulge in and feared a larger gathering would further incite negative feelings. Pain and negativity were expressed during our sessions. Gratitude and joy were also expressed throughout the weekend. Honesty superseded all. The entire CODA event was held in the spirit of truthful exploration and celebration of our heritage. The two goals of learning about our bicultural identity and learning more about ourselves were met. We made no attempt to squelch our emotions in pursuit of our goals. As more self-realized sons and daughters emerge, we strengthen the bonds with our parents. To paraphrase my closing remarks – during this weekend we felt pain, joy, frustration, laughter and sorrow, but it was an ultimate expression of our love.

So, Mom and Dad, I hope I have encapsulated the CODA conference weekend for you. Throughout, I know I have strengthened myself and my relationship with you. As I left the site and entered the freeway on-ramp, I was not only physically but also mentally mainstreaming myself back into society at large. Perhaps you used to think of me as a hearing child fully immersed in the hearing world. Now I know that part of me has always been misplaced. Neither the deaf nor hearing world was my refuge. I have now found a place among codas where I fit. I will continue the traversing of a trapeze artist between the Deaf

and hearing platforms. We now have a third option, the CODA platform. I thank you for encouraging me to reach that elevation. With Love,”

It is amazing that after ten years and eight conferences how much that letter still applies. I never imagined that CODA would have such a personal impact upon our lives. I figured we would do a lot, but not necessarily feel a lot. That may have been a carryover of the strategy we used to get through our childhoods or “mini-adulthoods” – I think is a better term. I am pleased it is not a tactic we use now. During conferences all of my senses are fully alert and that helps to create that annual peak experience.

2. International – I was overjoyed when I found other codas in the USA who shared my vision. I was astounded when I found codas in other countries that joined with us. What I experienced growing up was not a unique phenomenon. There was such comfort in finding this. I found it in my home country and I found it in distant Finland. I found a piece of myself in Ireland, Japan, Argentina and many more spots around the world. At our international meeting in Finland when I looked out over a sea of fifty beautiful coda faces of various shapes and colors representing 17 countries, I was so touched by the universality of our dream. As I entered the auditorium to begin the meeting I was so fearful and felt so small as the front of the room. It was one of those places where seats were tiered and I was sitting in the lowest chair in front of these towering rows of seats. I felt so small and scared but I had to at least try. It worked in the USA, would it work across the oceans? By the end of that meeting I felt like Alice in Wonderland when she grew so big she couldn't fit through the door. CODA did work both near and far.

3. People – Many of you have helped me immeasurably in a variety of task for the organization. I wanted to list your names out but that is an obvious impossibility. I do want you to know that I am so grateful for people I can trust and lean on instead of feeling like I am the only one who can do it. You know who you are and I want to acknowledge that your efforts have made a difference. I may have planted a seed with CODA but you are the ones who have fed and nurtured its growth.

4. Scholarship – If I were to drown in this boat tonight or die tomorrow, my life's dream would be fulfilled. Now I still want to dive on the Barrier Reef, travel on the Trans-Siberian Express and see my son graduate from nursery

school (yes, I am proud of my geriatric parenthood) but just knowing that we are a source of support to the young “codettes” is ultimately most rewarding and a legacy of which I am very proud. Five years ago, in honor of our birthday, we set up the annual scholarship with the whopping amount of \$300. Today, we have \$5,000 set aside for scholarships and I’m very honored that the award carries my name. My mother is a bit concerned, however, as she thinks one must be dead before named with such distinction.

5. Deaf Parents – I have been able to meet a group of wonderfully supportive Deaf parents. CODA is only part of the picture of our families. I am encouraged when I hear that Deaf parents are organizing and focusing on the unique nature of our families. This makes me feel part of an extended Deaf family which continues to grow long after our parents pass on.

I still have more highlights but at the risk of sounding too Pollyannaish, I’ll stop and throw in some low points. I have a few of those:

1. It has been most difficult to see pain caused by life’s changes. CODA does not direct any members’ decisions but it does provide a place for people to examine themselves honestly. This can bring about difficult but important changes. I know that the agony of living a lie is worse than the pain of honest change. Much like labor and delivery, the discomfort is difficult to watch but the product is worth the process. I tell myself these things and I know these things to be true but it still is difficult for me to see it in action.

2. CODA exists due to the untiring efforts of many people. There have, however, been occasions where members have volunteered to take on tasks and been unable to follow through. This is disappointing but very understandable when they call to explain. Others have volunteered and never follow through without explanation. This is not only disappointing, but also devastating. We are only as strong as our weakest link and this kind of irresponsibility does sabotage our strength. Let me take this moment for a commercial break with a guilt trip trailer. We really need and appreciate having volunteers for all of our working committees. If interested, you can contact any Board member for more information. If you do sign up for a task and find that you can’t follow up, please inform the Board so we can make alternate plans.

3. Our missing sisters and brothers, where are they? I look forward to meeting them someday. I'm also saddened by the fact that there are wonderful codas I have met that are now MIAs – missing in action or I call them MIAs – missing in inaction. I miss them, think of them and hope we will see them again.

4. My role in CODA is an interesting paradox. As Founder, I do appreciate compliments, constructive criticism or expressions of gratitude for my work over the last ten years. I will consider luxury automobiles, large cash gifts or condominiums if you are so inclined. What I really want most, however, is to be one of you, not set apart from you. I find that some codas do treat me differently, sometimes with undue reverence. It is embarrassing when you genuflect in my presence. People thank me for the changes in their lives when they really should be thanking themselves. I acknowledge that I have worked hard to create a place for us but you are the ones that do the internal work. Thank yourselves; thank me if you want, but then treat/abuse me as you would each other. I set up this organization so I could be part of you as a family group, not separated from you. Once you know me, I think you will be shocked at what you find. At least, that is what I am told. People think I am prim and proper and I've been known to be called "Miss Millie Two Shoes". Once you know me, you will find that barefoot-in-the-sand is my preference. Funny, it used to be that people meeting me for the first time would say, "Oh, I expected you to be older." They don't say that anymore. That's the downside of a ten-year anniversary, I guess.

5. My biggest disappointment is the belief in unfounded fears and myths floating around. I know you have heard the statement, "CODA, I don't need that." My response is always, "need what?" Further discussion usually reveals that this person doesn't know anything about our group other than hearsay, but they feel they can make a decision without experiencing it. The other one I love is, "CODA is only for people with problems." Does this really look like a psych ward? We are open to all codas regardless of personality profiles. Deaf parent bashing is another crime of which we are accused. Ironically, I find that CODA is a place where pride and strength in heritage are fostered rather than the opposite. This is not to say that anger or frustration are buried. All codas are encouraged to be honest in their exploration whether joyous or sad. I can understand how this could be misunderstood out of context but people need to know that CODA does not direct or dictate outcomes. We provide a place, a forum where codas can discuss, questions, challenge and affirm after circumstances with others of

like backgrounds. It is a place, not a propaganda tool. It is an option whether before there was none. It is disheartening that outside controversy should arise over our attempts to encourage positive change and opportunity.

Let me go back to my zippidee-doo-dah phase and end on a high note. I talked about life's changes being difficult to watch. I have also seen people soar to new heights. New love, marriage and children have resulted via CODA. I think one of our working committees could be the CODA dating and mating service – The CODA Love Connection. I can see the personals now, “SWF bi-bi (maybe another bi) is looking for hands-on love.” The possibilities are endless.

Another high point was receiving and continually viewing the Australian videotape, “Passport Without a Country”, which again reaffirms the international link of our lives. I am always moved when I hear our stories or read them in print, but to see and hear and read the coda tales on screen was a delightful bombardment of the sense and a valuable tool in teaching others.

Sitting down to write this speech was a pain in the butt, but it did afford me the opportunity to do some research. Reading through ten years of newsletters and many conference proceedings brought waves of nostalgia. I saw the change from my hand-lettered calligraphy on the newsletter masthead to the current computer generated graphics. Remember the little yellow Post-it notes I put in your newsletter when I was editor? I just couldn't bear to send things out without a personal note if time allowed. And the first conference – it cost \$35 for the weekend but you had to bring your own sheets. In those first newsletters you don't see an editor's name, committees or any of the organization structure. That's because it was just me. I wanted people to assume we had a large infrastructure because that would make us legitimate. It was similar to the Emerald City in the Wizard of Oz when they pulled back the curtain and found one little, old, bald man operating all those levers. In the beginning I felt like that little, old, bald man. It is wonderful now to have lots of little, old, bald men and women helping pull the levers that make this organization run.

Above all, the honesty and insight which result from our interaction is the most exciting part of CODA. After our third conference, I wrote the following, “The Third National Conference is now a pleasant memory. Each year I have arrived with a variety of emotions: excitement, hope, fear, anxiety, and anticipation. Each year I learn something new. It is not a

sensational revelation. It is more akin to a photograph becoming clearer in focus. The picture is tattered at the edges and the figures of my father, mother and sister and me are discernable but not in fine focus. As I gaze at my family portrait and the many others that have been shared with me, I see a nuclear family unit that braved the onslaught of an unknowing and/or insensitive hearing world. Our parents faced inequities routinely as “Children of a Lesser God”. Through young eyes we saw their struggle, heard the public’s flip remarks and shielded our parents, when possible, from this hearing world we were part of and yet were not part of. By virtue of our birthright, we became “grandchildren of a lesser God” (the title of my next book). Our national conference once again, was both a powerful and empowering experience. After departing, it is not uncommon to feel a sense of loss or letdown as we go back to our daily routine. This is difficult because even other local codas may not share in our enthusiasm as we attempt to bring back conference information... In the meantime when I yearn for a reminder of my CODA conference high; when I ponder questions, “Why CODA?”, I gently pick up my worn family photograph. I see more clearly the resonance in my young, blue eyes, the warm shine of my sister’s honey colored hair and the fine lines in the smooth texture of my mother’s and father’s graceful clasped hands.” It is these types of insights, inspiration, and magic that forever keep me attached to CODA.

I don’t find that I ever “graduate” from this experience. For those not at our CODA conference in Chicago – we had a prominent coda author tell us she had “graduated” and moved on. We do graduate from school but I don’t believe one “graduates” from life. Well, maybe the big commencement in the clouds; but until that time, I am constantly learning from other people, changing and altering my coda garment. This is what keeps CODA growing. We are open to one another and caring. We disagree but we don’t dissolve the threads that bind us. After our first conference in 1986, my closing remarks that were directed toward the variability of our group: “We want to make sure to keep ourselves open to all codas whether they sign or don’t sign...CODA is finally a place for all of us regardless of background. There are many strong common threads here, and yet each of your tapestries is very unique. We want to allow for this variability to strengthen our very fabric.” That was seven years ago, but along that line, in the beginning of this organization, I did provide the raw material – the fabric was made up of intertwined Deaf and hearing threads. You have all been the tailors, designing the garment, reshaping and mending as time and needs require.

Though the look of the organizational cloak may change, it is my hope our fabric will provide comfort and warmth.

In closing, I want to honor all members, newcomers and veteran Coda Klingons alike for your new found support or for your long term loyalty. You are the lifeblood of our pioneering organization that has changed the texture and weave of Deaf and hearing lives.

Last, my life's work is dedicated with ultimate love and respect to Evelyn Marguerite Short Brother and the late Alvin Richart Brother. Happy Birthday Dad and Happy Birthday CODA. Thank you.