

We See You, Sis: Editor's Pick



# DEAF PRIDE

SARA JESSICK USES HER VOICE AND TALENTS TO ADVOCATE FOR HERSELF AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE D/DEAF COMMUNITY.

BY DIANE R. PAYLOR | PHOTO BY KYLENE WHITE

There's a noticeable intentionality in Sara Jessick's voice as she explains there are various terms within the Disability community to describe individuals with hearing-loss.

"You can say Deaf (with a capital D) which refers to Deaf culture and community, or can be when someone has hearing loss and uses ASL (American Sign Language) to communicate, or a mix of signing and voice. There is deaf with a lowercase d [indicating] audiological status and maybe your primary use of language is voice. There's also d/Deaf which references a cross between hearing loss and Deaf culture and somewhat mixed voice and ASL usage. I am d/Deaf."

Born with profound bilateral (both ears) hearing loss, the 28-year-old native of Green Bay, WI says her parents didn't learn of her deafness until she was 2 years old. "They were noticing that I would respond to lower frequencies," she says. "I'd respond to my dad's voice but not my mom's because hers is higher."

Sara says her parents believed she would have an easier time assimilating as a deaf child if verbal language was her primary source of communication so she grew up taking speech courses, using devices and learning to lip read instead of signing. She says she has some thought-provoking observations about having been raised this way. "Of course, most people can't really tell that I am deaf until I tell them," Sara says. But she does wish she had become proficient with ASL. "I can sort of understand it, but wish I'd grown up with it," she admits.

Sara appreciates the technological advances that have been made so it's easier for the d/Deaf community to communicate but accessibility is still a major issue — especially in the workplace. Prior to joining the *Today's Woman* team as Senior Graphic Designer, Sara says she noticed several potential employers were ill-prepared and failed to have captions enabled for her interviews despite their websites touting diversity, equity and inclusion statements. "A lot of community DEI statements are about race and equal opportunity but the verbiage [rarely mentions] people with disabilities." She adds, "It's interesting because the Disabled community is the largest in the world."

Even with the prevalence of accessibility issues, Sara doesn't see being d/Deaf as a liability. "It's not something to be pitied or looked down upon," she says. Besides, she adds, being d/Deaf is merely a different way to experience the world.

Having grown up in a large, music-loving family (she's one of 10 kids), Sara was able to cultivate her musical interests and was drawn to several instruments including the electric guitar, flute, piano, cello, and drums. "My adaptation to listening and enjoying music is playing barefoot so I can feel the vibrations in the ground and my body."

Sara says the sensations she feels carries through visually as well. "As someone who doesn't have any hearing without my hearing aids, the way for me to process and understand information is with visual, heightened clarity," she says. She initially thought about pursuing a psychology degree at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, but a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design made much more sense.

Since graduating in 2016, she has been actively working as a graphic designer and has been in her position with *Today's Woman* for almost a year. She says she enjoys the job because she gets to work for a company "that truly believes in inclusion for everyone." Plus, it allows her to tap into her creative genius on the daily.

"Graphic design is about consolidating information" she says. "I can take concepts, colors, and different ideas and put them on a page for people to experience. It isn't completely dependent on sound, interaction or anything like that."