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EDHI Conference

03.20.18

1:35 ET

Who am I? A Deaf Identity Crisis

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>>ANITA DOWD: My name is Anita Dowd, and I'm from Kentucky ‑‑ hello? Y'all have to give me feedback if I get too loud or not loud enough, okay? I'm Anita Dowd and I'm a profoundly deaf adult and I'm the mom of two daughters with a hearing loss. I want to talk to you a little bit about the deaf identity crisis. This is not working really well so we may have to fake it. It's probably not a good sign when a presenter starts with a disclaimer but I have a couple: One is I'm severely ADD so I have cheat sheets! If I don't, we will probably be talking about chocolate or goats or things like that, I don't know.   
(Laughter.)

The other is that it's very important to me that you guys understand that this is my story, and I have no intentions of offending anybody, but I have to tell the truth, I have to tell it as I know it and I can't sugar coat anything because then it will be meaningless. So if you get offended I apologize. I'm typically one of those that does everything that goes out of my way to not offend anybody. So I don't have a doctorate, I don't have all kinds of statistics or data or research to show you here. I have my story that's based on almost fifty years of being profoundly deaf. 40‑some years of being exposed to and interacting with individuals that are deaf or hard of hearing that have hearing aids, don't have hearing aids, sign or they don't sign. 26 years of being a parent of children with a hearing loss, 28 years of working in the field and it comes with a lot of dialogue that I have had with these deaf or hard of hearing individuals that I've worked with or interacted with on some level. Some people call me nosy, I like to consider it I have an inquiring mind and I want to know, I want to learn so I ask a lot of questions.

We all know that self‑identity ‑‑ hold on. Self‑identity is important to all of our kids regardless if they have a hearing loss or not. Our self‑identity is how we see ourselves and our relationship to the world. It can be based on physical attributes, our interests, our hobbies, our kills, what we do, all kinds of things and if I talk about my identity I will probably tell you I'm an old, goofy, white, chunky, goat‑loving advocate.

That's at least how I see myself. It's really important that we have a positive self‑identity. When it comes to our deaf identity there are a thousands a thousand people that can give you a definition of self‑identity but my dings is how we see ourselves, how we relate to the world around us as a person with a hearing loss. It's the same thing as self‑identity and then you add the fact that we have a hearing loss. It's important that we have a positive deaf identity, too. This is not working. There is a slide, it's skipping that, and it's a picture of me, that's probably why it's skipping it!   
(Laughter.)

But I want to tell you as quickly as I can about my story. I was the typical deaf child born to a hearing familiar. My hearing loss was not detected until I was about nine years old. Up to that point I had been labeled "bad," I didn't listen, I didn't pay attention, I didn't follow the rules, all those kinds of things. I didn't take notes in class. I think the biggest reason why my hearing loss went undetected for so long is because I attended a small parochial school and when I say small at one point there was two of us in the fourth grade. So the student‑to‑teacher ratio was like 1 to 2, 1 to 4, so it was easier for me to get by. I had no idea everything didn't hear like I did. Obviously I had more hearing at that point than I do now but it was is diagnosed. We were referred to a specialist. He refused to give me hearing aids, he said I was too young and wouldn't wear them and remember this is back a few years ago.   
(Laughter.)

Things are different now. Hopefully much better. While I was in the parochial school I did okay. Once I went into the public school system and that student‑teacher ratio increased, I was lost! We're not given a manual any more than parents are. I didn't get a back to that told me how to be a deaf kid. I was the only kid in my entire district that had a hearing loss. So from the time I entered first grade to the day I graduated I was the only one. They didn't know what to do with me so I sat in the front row, did the best I could. I had some friends but I never had peers. I was ever in a class where I could say to friends, I was in class is my hearing aid didn't work and the boy I like was sitting behind me and I can't go back to English class, I couldn't say that to friends, I never had anybody like me, my hearing friends wouldn't understand that. I understood after I became an adult how that affected me negatively when I was growing up. I went through high school, I decided that or actual I didn't decide but somebody contacted us and said hey, did you want to go to Gallaudet University? I was like, what's that? It's a liberal arts university for deaf and hard of hearing, really? Yes, I want to go! I took the entrance exam, passed, and the whole time I'm thinking finally I'm going to be with my people! I knew my ABCs, and that's it. I got to Gallaudet University and I realized, wasn't going to happen. I was expecting my people to flock to me and welcome me! Welcome me home! They told me, why are you here? You talk, you don't sign, you think like a hearing person. Then I realized, okay, I'm not hearing enough, and I'm not deaf enough. So what am I? And it was a struggle. I found a counselor on campus and had to go through that. But, you know, all of the sudden, somebody rained on my parade, they burst my bubble, now I'm nobody! I'm not hearing and I'm not deaf! So I guess I'm going to be me.

It continued. I probably ‑‑ I guess maybe ‑‑ and this is one of the areas where I don't mean to be offensive but I was more hurt by the reaction from the deaf community than I was ‑‑ because I could blame the hearing community's actions on ignorance, but I didn't really have anything to excuse the deaf community's actions and it was totally not what I expected. So the reason I tell this story is because I want to bring attention to something you never hear discussed. I am hearing homes! At 52 I've made my own damn home, okay? For children it's different. The most important thing for a child is belonging. We belong to our family, to our friends, our church family. Kids like me don't belong! And that's difficult. So our self‑identity is crappy and our deaf identity is crappy and I don't say this to scare you but I say this because you need to be aware of this. I don't think it's going to go away. I do think it will improve somewhat especially if some of the sessions that I have been to, if people paid attention and take that information home with them, it's going to help. Right now 95% of all deaf or hard of hearing children are born to hearing families. 75 to 85% are currently mainstreamed in public schools. Some of these kids are out there by themselves like I was. They're never exposed to deaf kids, they never have true peers, they never hear anything about deaf adults. Everybody that they interact with is as clueless as they are, for the most part. The only people that I interacted with until I went to Gallaudet University in relation to my hearing loss was doctors, that's it! So how do I create an identity for myself when hearing loss is foreign to me, deaf culture is foreign to me. If somebody told me the word "deaf culture" when I was in high school, I would be like, huh? They weren't on TV, they didn't dance with stars when I was a kid, you know? I never had that sense of belonging. So taking these two facts here into consideration is huge. And it's important for you guys to know, for parents and service providers, regardless of how well we communicate, with our friends, the people at school, our teachers, our grandparents, regardless of how well we can speak, regardless of how well we can hear with amplification we are not hearing people! And we never will be. Every!

At some point in our life we realize that. Some people realize it when they're young, some don't realize it until they're a teenager, some may even be an adult before it hits them, oh my God, I'm not a hearing person. Didn't hit me until I was at Gallaudet, you know? Expect that. It's going to happen. Okay? And sadly, often people don't talk about it. Because who do you talk to about that? If your parents don't know anything about it, teachers don't know anything about it, and your friends don't know anything about it, who do you go to? 1‑800‑deaf‑ identity, you know?   
(Chuckles.)

Or when we talk about things like this, it makes us feel like we're feeling sorry for ourselves and nobody wants to be viewed that way. Couple of other things. I'm going to check on my time. This was originally an hour and a half presentation so I had to cut it down.

Looking at the other things that cause a problem if I can get it to pop up here, labels. Okay? I think these labels are self‑explanatory. If somebody sees a label up here they don't understand, let me know, I will be happy to elaborate, but your Deaf, your deaf, your hearing impaired, hearing‑enabled. It's skipping another one. I'm pulling up a picture of labels ‑‑ no. Oh, God!   
(Chuckles.)

I'm used to a touch screen. Okay. Looking at that label down there, do you see anything? Does anybody jump out at you? Boundaries. And boundaries equal limits. Okay? I don't like labels. Because they put limits on me. Nobody should have limits. That's just my opinion. I've got plenty of them but I don't want anybody else to put 'em on me, okay?   
(Chuckles.)

But if I can get this to move, and it's not going to. Well, I don't know where the guy is.

>> I text to get IT to come.

>>ANITA DOWD: Okay, thank you. I'm going to break it down, make it simpler. These are the labels that are taught in universities, deaf education programs, deaf history and things like that, Deaf and deaf, how many people here are familiar with that? Most everybody. I don't like big D and little d. That puts limits on me and that puts expectations on me. I'm not ashamed of my hearing loss. I don't feel like I need to be fixed. I consider myself deaf. Deaf people, big D deaf it's okay I'm going to wing it, it's a PowerPoint and it's not scrolling. Big D Deaf tell me I'm hard of hearing, little d deaf tell me I'm deaf. I call myself cursive D!   
(Laughter.)

Because you know what? In one situation I'm dig D Deaf, in another situation I'm little d deaf. It's not my fault that I was born to a hearing family and I wasn't born profoundly deaf, it was progressive. It progressed quickly. You know, all of these things have nothing to do with choices that I made. That's just the way it was.

Sometimes I feel like I'm wrong or bad when these labels ‑‑ that's fine. Now they tell me! I'm almost done!   
(Laughter.)

Where were you 15 minutes ago!

>> Waiting for you to call me!

>>ANITA DOWD: Somebody came in.

>> I take phone calls.

>>ANITA DOWD: Why didn't somebody in here tell me, made me look ignorant up here, it ain't workin'!

>> The scroll bar?

>>ANITA DOWD: You're going to have to stand up here, I just got 10 more minutes, 10 more minutes!   
(Laughter.)

>> This one?

>>ANITA DOWD: Right here, okay. Nope, that one, all right, you can go now.

>> I can stand and look pretty.

>>ANITA DOWD: You can go!   
(Laughter.)

This is really hard, people don't realize, and I'm talking hearing people, deaf people, professional people, hard of hearing people, what this does to people. I'm proud to be able to say I'm both! But I don't want you to limit me to one or the other. You know? Labels just whoa! Labels are arbitrary, you know? Just ‑‑ one person, like I say, they'll tell me I'm hard of hearing because I speak. The other person will tell me I'm deaf because I sign. You know, who says which words are right? Which ones are wrong? Different people use different terms, depending on what they've been exposed to or what they personally think.

So labels are limiting, they come with expectations, and if I'm big D I must do this if I'm little d I have to do this. It comes with ‑‑ they're arbitrary and then sometimes there's attitudes involved. Not specifically with the big D and little d but with modes of communication. When I say ‑‑ well, is one better than the other? Is one of these labels better than the other? Most of us in here don't think so. But when you talk to professionals who ‑‑ and not all professionals but there are many professionals who are so steeped in their method, they're so passionate about that, that they view it as superior to other methods. And this trickles down to the parents sometimes. I have seen parents that have worked so hard to get their child to where they needed to be and it was successful, and they've started to feel superior to other parents who have made other choices. This also trickles down to the kids. The kids sometimes feel superior to each other, you know? Well, I can speak! Well, I can sign! You know, it's just ‑‑ we don't need that. We don't need those superior attitudes, because, one is not better than the other. One is not right and one is not wrong, they are. They just are.

Really the next slide, whether it comes up or not, what do we do about it? First of all, be careful with your labels. Don't put so much weight on them, you know? I mean, labels are necessary, we label everything in life, I can't say don't every put a label on anybody, that's ridiculous but just be careful with them. Be careful ‑‑ sometimes they can be a burden. When your child is old enough to discuss these things, talk about them. Talk about these things. When they're old enough and they realize that they can't hear, ask! Ask them how they feel about that. You will not be able to respond to them as a peer would be able to but still keep in mind it's going to happen at some point, kind of watch for it, if it happens, there is nothing wrong with addressing it. Expose your kids to deaf or hard of hearing peers. Peers that are the same as them and peers that are different than them. As often as you can. It's not easy, I work two jobs, I have a kid in the band and sometimes I just want to sit down and cry because I'm so old and so tired, it's not easy, especially if you live in a rural area and there is not any! Get involved with your Hands & Voices chapter if you have one in your state. Any other kind of organization and go to those event so that your kid can be exposed to other kids that have hearing loss, kids that sign, kids that speak, kids that do both. Expose them to all methods of communication, just like Karen said, I preach filling up the toolbox, simply because in the grand scheme of things, if you're being looking at a bar graph or whatever you would call that, look at a big, long stick, over hear you got this many people, 100% ASL, only ASL never utter another word. Over hear you got this many people that speak, fluently, clearly, intelligible, and hear well enough that they never have to ask anybody to repeat themselves. In the middle you have the rest of us! We confuse everybody, okay? But that's the reality! There are so many of us, this works in this situation and this works in this situation.

If I only have one tool, what if it doesn't work for that situation, you know? So regardless of what people tell you, stop thinking in that either/or way. Preach and preach either this or that. Folks I've been signing with my kids since they were born, they never shut up, okay? Trust me. It's not either or. And let me see. Make sure I didn't forget anything.

By allowing kids to work with peers doesn't mean you have to expose them to the schools for the Deaf. There are all kinds of websites and blogs and places for deaf or hard of hearing teens, there are deaf or hard of hearing adults that you can show your kids. Start slowly, but this exposure allows them to determine who they are. I know I'm not that, maybe I'm that! And they get exposed to help find their own identity, their identity as someone with a hearing loss. The last thing I have is a poem I wrote and I don't have it memorized and I left it in my folder, hey, it's my third day here, too, okay!

Some will say I have to choose because if I don't I'm bound to lose. Choose to speak or choose to sign you can't do both, that's as nine! Research says this way is best. So be like us and don't trust the rest!

If you take that path, you're gonna fail but be like me and you will do well. Don't be like them, they're not enough and the life they lead is far too rough. If you choose that, you won't fit in, you're bound to fail, you cannot win.

I am the expert and I know the law if you question me you've got some gall. Stop! I'm sick to death of all your words, your petty war is for the birds. You don't know me, my tale my life, my joy, my pain, my success or my strife. How can you say what works for me and discount my facts, just let me be. Your way it works for some but not all, still you force your choice now who's got gall. To speak and sign, that is my choice. My hands and my mouth are both my voice.

Don't limit me with your short‑sighted views, I don't want to be labeled and in fact I refuse. I refuse the old adage of its either/or, for I am quite worthy and deserve so much more. That's for your kids!   
(Applause.)

No time for questions? I will be out in the hall. I like to talk. Thank you!

(End of presentation.)

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