

OCALI | Podcast - Episode 2 Interview with Julie

TERESA Welcome to From My Perspective. This is OCALI Family Center's weekly podcast. Each week, **KOLBELT:** you'll hear from people with disabilities, their families, friends, and others in their lives. You'll hear about everyday life, their passions, their interests and opinions. You'll be inspired. You might laugh or cry. But most importantly, we hope you'll better understand what life is like from our perspective.

On today's podcast, I interview Julie. She is a deaf woman raising a deaf daughter. She'll tell us how it's different for her daughter growing up than it was for her, what her hopes are for her daughter's future, and what she's passionate about. Welcome to the podcast, Julie.

JULIE STEWART: Thank you. I'm really excited to be here.

TERESA: Great. Would you start just by describing who's in the room and how we're doing this?

JULIE: Sure, absolutely. OK, so I'm Julie. And I'm using ASL to communicate. And there are two interpreters in the room. That's who you hear voicing. They're providing access using spoken English. And I'm here with Theresa, who is sitting directly across from me.

TERESA: Thanks. And one of the things I've been asking people to do, Julie, is just to describe themselves in their own words.

JULIE: Describe myself in my own words? OK, hmm. I'm very laid back. I'm a curious person. I love continued learning, learning new things every day, especially about myself. And I like connecting people and having them tell me things about myself. I always want to have some kind of travel experience, nothing wild, but just seeing new things, seeing what I can contribute to in the world outside of myself.

TERESA: You have a daughter. Would you tell us a little bit about your daughter?

TERESA: Yes, my daughter's name is Tovah. She's 13 years old and she's deaf. She was born deaf. And she uses ASL and spoken English. Her reading level is wonderful. She's in eighth grade right now, in middle school in town. And she's just a cool chick.

TERESA: That's great. Thank you. What are some of your hopes and dreams for Tovah's future?

JULIE: I really want her to just take advantage of the world and know the world is hers to explore. So whatever she wants to be, I want her to go for it. I mean, I do expect her to have some

boundaries and barriers. There are barriers out there. But I want her, inside, to know how to interact in the world as a deaf person.

TERESA: And how do you think her experience growing up now might be different than maybe your experience was?

JULIE: Oh, yes, very different. Because growing up, I went to a mainstream school. That means I was in a school with hearing students and an interpreter. And I mean, it was really hard to get involved in activities and in sports. I really didn't. But my daughter, I mean, her school's a lot closer to home than mine was and she's really involved in activities and activities in the school. And I mean, she's a really active member in her community.

So growing up, my mother was deaf, but she was oral. So she only used spoken English. She didn't use sign language. And I taught my daughter sign language. So for me, it was hard to communicate with my family because I missed so much at family events. For my daughter, both of her parents are deaf, myself and my husband. So she had full access. So it was a very different experience for both of us.

Tovah's much more social with her family. And I wanted that for her. I mean, I communicate with my mom. I'm very close to my mom, but it's just not the same as my closeness with my daughter. Yeah.

TERESA: You've used a couple of terms. Would you tell people, when you say "oral" and some of the other terms that you've used, what you mean when you say those?

JULIE: "Oral" meaning if a deaf person or hard-of-hearing person grows up using spoken English only. In school, with their family, they only use spoken English and they know no sign language, that-- we would label them an oral student.

TERESA: What makes you happy when you think about Tovah?

JULIE: What makes me happy?

TERESA: Mhm.

JULIE: Oh, just seeing her interact with her friends. I mean, that really warms my heart, just all the emotional support that's there. I mean, she's becoming her own person, her own personality. She's quirky. That's her thing. But I'm so happy to say that. She is who she is.

TERESA: Are there things that you're concerned about for her, for her future?

JULIE: Recently, a concern did come up because my daughter really wants to become a zoologist. And I met one deaf woman. She just graduated from a college in a degree in biology and she wants to work for the zoo. And she put in an application and they said, sure, come in. We can do an internship. But the minute she let them know that, I will need an interpreter for my training, they said, oh, I'm sorry, we don't have an interpreter available or the internship's no longer available. So I really don't want my daughter to experience that.

So right now, I'm looking for resources. I mean, I have a lot of good resources that I'm sharing with this person to really help her get back in contact with the zoo. I mean, just provide an interpreter and the internship can happen. I mean, any hearing person can work with deaf people. I want to break down those barriers. And I really don't want Tovah to struggle with that.

TERESA: How do you think deafness has shaped your life, her life? It sounds like, I mean, your whole family's life?

JULIE: Well, thinking about it, on my father's side of the family, there's nobody deaf in any generation. But on my mother's side, my mother, my grandmother-- they were deaf, but they were oral. But on my dad's side, there's nobody who's deaf. I mean, I've had a positive experience. With their first grandchild, they were very supportive, very strongly advocating for him.

I mean, I think once I have two, three, or four grand-- once the family generations move on, they see the effect of deafness. Like, now I've grown up with sign language. Now I use that with my child. And back then, the earlier generations didn't. So I mean, I think as the time has gone on-- I don't know. I'm trying to think how deafness has really affected my family. I mean, well, they've just accepted it and moved on with life. There was no hesitation or negative reaction to it. I mean, it was just a part of life.

TERESA: You shared a video with us the other day, actually, that talked about deafness being a gift and not a loss. Has that been your experience?

JULIE: Yes, do you know what that means, deaf gain? Yes, I mean that term I think just showed up about three or four years ago. It's fairly new. But it's really inspiring positivity and the benefit of-- we like the term "hearing loss" because we think we haven't lost anything. You don't know what it feels like to be a hearing person, so you don't feel like you're at a loss.

So from my perspective, I mean, it's very different than the standard norm hearing person. I don't know how to phrase that, exactly. Well, growing up I never felt like, oh, I'm deaf. Darn. I'm missing something. I never felt that way. But as a teacher, I've seen some students who have traveled in from out of state to go to Ohio School for the Deaf and they say, no, I'm hearing. And I say, but you're using hearing aids and you're using sign language.

They haven't had a lot of support growing up. So as they are immersed in the deaf culture, they can develop that confidence and identity. So when kids or people realize that somebody's deaf and that that can be a good thing, it's a positive thing, once they're socialized around other deaf people and deaf culture, they're not missing any-- they can feel more confident in who they are and socialize that way. Yeah.

TERESA: What have been some of your proudest parenting moments as you watch Tovah?

JULIE: Oh my gosh. Let me think. Oh, let me think a minute. Oh my gosh. Tovah was involved in a movie. The movie had Michael Shannon in it as the main actor and Jessica Chastain. And it was filmed here in Ohio. And she was one of three actresses in it.

The first time it was shown in the Sundance Film Festival and we went to see it. Oh my gosh. It was amazing. It was a great experience. Well, the director said, Tovah can go up on the stage after the movie's over. And I said, OK. And I asked her. And she's a very shy child, but the moment they called her, she got right up there and went on stage. She was six years old at the time. And she went up there so proud and said, hi, with Jessica Chastain right next to her.

I mean, one of the first questions they asked the director was, where did you find her? She is amazing. That just touched me. I mean, I couldn't have been more proud. Just sharing the world-- sharing Tovah with the world, I mean, what an experience. I mean, that moment, I felt like people weren't looking at her as deaf first. They were seeing her for who she is. So that was really inspiring.

TERESA: We're all crying, for the people who can't see us. As a parent, has there been advice, direction, things that people have told you that have-- that's really helped you, some of the things that have been more helpful?

JULIE: I mean, I have high expectations for our kids. That was always really important when people said, don't think that those kids can't have goals. They need to be who they are.

TERESA: Would you give that same advice to other parents or are there other things you would tell parents?

JULIE: Some parents who are really hesitant, like, oh my kid's deaf. I don't know what to do. And you say, I mean, they chose you to be their parent. So this child knows that you can handle this situation. So it's really important to love your kids for who they are and have high expectations for your children.

TERESA: What are you passionate about, Julie?

JULIE: Oh. Oh, my passion. Well, I'm very passionate with deaf children and language accessibility. It doesn't matter if it's spoken English or sign language. I don't care. The goal is access to language. Because a lot of deaf children, they have a high tendency to miss what's happening. That incidental learning is missed so often. And they're not usually school-ready. So that is my passion, to get them school-ready, making sure all children have access to language so that they are ready for school, so they can really be who they are.

TERESA: Can you say a little bit more about what access is or would look like? I'm not sure everybody knows or would describe that the same way.

JULIE: OK, a perfect example would be the dinner table. You have your family sitting around. And 90% of deaf children are from hearing parents. So I mean, dinner time is so important. You're talking about your day and what everybody did. So if a child doesn't have access to that, you're missing that incidental conversation and you can't learn from other people during that time.

If you give access, that means that the parents make sure that the kid is looking when they're speaking, so they're making sure they're paying attention, whether that's sign language-- if the family signs, you make sure you have eye contact, because if their child is looking elsewhere, they're missing. Also, making sure that the child, if they use spoken English, make sure that eye contact really helps with their language development and learning from other people. I mean, you can learn from other people. You can learn the different perspectives and your thoughts on different views.

TERESA: Are there other things that we haven't talked about that you wish the world knew or you want to say?

JULIE: I mean, so far, I've been really excited to see people become more diverse. Especially with people with disabilities, I'm noticing that they're interacting more. And I'm really excited. It would be great if all people could see each other as equals. I mean, if we were all exactly the same, the world would be boring. We can't learn from each other.

But if there's diversity in different colors, religions, disabilities, and having that all intertwined together, we're learning from each other and we can learn about ourselves as well. So I mean, it's really an exciting time right now to see more diversity out there and seeing people with disabilities coming into our world and being socialized.

TERESA: Thanks so much for being here, Julie.

JULIE: Thank you for inviting me.