



Marcella M. Meyer

Architect of Our Community Today

During the wee hours of May 26, 2009, a deaf woman in southern California, Marcella Mae Meyer, affectionately known as MMM, woke up with incredible chest pain. She called 9-1-1 for an ambulance and then paged two people—her granddaughter Andi Skelton and a close friend, John Arce—asking them to meet her at the hospital. Later that day, Marcella passed away due to a ruptured aortic aneurysm. She was 84 years old.

Not knowing Marcella, a reader may find this story rather ordinary, something that happens on a daily basis. However, this story is unique because this access to the 9-1-1 system and technological devices was made possible by Marcella herself, through many years of fighting, confronting, screaming and suing the system.

Since her death, Marcella has received many honors. *The Deaf Democrats* blog started the parade by running a special tribute titled “Marcella M. Meyer, the Last of True Deaf Warriors.” *The Los Angeles Times* ran two

Continued on the next page



Marcella was one of a kind; she will be greatly missed by those whose lives were forever changed. As a colleague and leader, working side by side, I am privileged having known her. A memory forever etched in my mind: a community event lobbying for a much needed change, the right thing to do for the Los Angeles deaf community at that time in spite of naysayers ... she cut to the chase, straightforward and to the point. Her modus operandi was "we will do it anyway with or without you!" She was a true warrior with a golden heart in the best interest of deaf people everywhere. I shall miss her.

—Bobbie Beth Scoggins

Continued from page 13

obituaries, one in the regular obituary section and another one as a feature story, published after her memorial service at the Greater Los Angeles Agency of the Deaf (GLAD). The Kansas City Star newspaper also ran an obituary.

On the day of her memorial service, the Los Angeles City Council proclaimed June 14th as Marcella M. Meyer Day. Shortly afterwards, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors closed its June 23rd meeting with a tribute to Marcella and issued a proclamation in her honor.

One cannot help but be amazed with all these public and private accolades. For someone who didn't acquire a general education diploma (GED) until her middle-aged years, it certainly is impressive to receive this recognition in the deaf, hard of hearing and hearing communities. What had Marcella done to deserve all this?

Marcella's accomplishments were many. She advocated for state legislation requiring telephone companies to distribute free TTYs and to have telephone rates reduced for deaf consumers. Also, she forced telephone companies to help fund state relay services by adding a special surcharge on all telephone bills. She demanded that the courts provide interpreters at all times to deaf and hard of hearing people. She was also well-known for the founding of the Greater Los Angeles Agency for the Deaf (GLAD) and the acquisition of the current facility at a historical landmark building. And she earned nationwide attention for winning a legal battle for the right to sit on a jury, after a court clerk called her "incompetent" for jury duty. Most of her accomplishments were copied by other states.

Probably the most enduring legacy left by Marcella was her impact on the sign language interpreting field. In the 1980s, she challenged the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) and its evaluation

system by creating a competitive model that was eventually adopted by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). The two organizations established the NAD-RID Task Force on the Interpreting Crisis, which later became the NAD-RID Council on Interpreting. Marcella served as one of several NAD representatives for several years. These efforts gave rise to the current NAD-RID National Interpreting Certificate (NIC) testing system.

The NAD organization enjoyed the benefits of Marcella M. Meyer's involvement and influence over the years. Marcella worked with the California Association of the Deaf (CAD) for a good number of years, including a two-term presidency. She would attend biennial NAD conventions as a delegate for CAD, and when GLAD became a NAD affiliate, she served as a delegate for GLAD. She also served on the task force for the NAD Fulton II ("Fulton Revisited") Conference in 1989 and was actively involved with the nationwide protest, led by the NAD, against a movie called *Calendar Girl* in 1993. She authored an article on "Services = Survival" in *A Kaleidoscope of Deaf America*, published by the NAD in 1989.

Those are some of Marcella's accomplishments, but this still doesn't give a full picture of exactly what propelled her on this life path. At her memorial service, attended by 350 people and featuring 12 speakers, several personal details about her life emerged, giving a new perspective about her and her work. Those details were some of the lesser known facts about her.

Life Before GLAD

Born in Kansas City, Missouri as the youngest of six children, Marcella became deaf at the age of six due to scarlet fever. She continued her education without the benefit of interpreters. She dropped out of high school during her sophomore year to take care of her ailing mother and never returned. Instead, she went to work on the war effort. Later she fell in love with and married an

A person is competent to act as a juror if he or she is:

... in possession of his or her natural faculties and of ordinary intelligence, provided that no person shall be deemed incompetent solely because of loss of sight in any degree or other disability ... — State Code of Civil Procedure



She's deaf and wants to serve

By **Mill Policzer**
Herald Examiner staff writer

On Oct. 9, Marcella Meyer, a 54-year-old Los Angeles woman, was, like many other area residents, called to appear for jury duty.

"I went to Municipal Court with my interpreter," Meyer said yesterday in court through an interpreter, "and the clerk asked if I had any objections to serving, and I said no."

An hour and a half later, however, a court official told Meyer her services as a juror would not be needed because she was deaf "and that deaf people are classified as incompetent."

But Meyer, who happens to be executive director of the Greater Los Angeles Council on Deafness Inc., wasn't about to take her rejection quietly.

The result of the incident was a unique hearing yesterday before Los Angeles Superior Court Judge David A. Thomas on Meyer's request for a preliminary injunction to force Los Angeles County to accept her services as a juror despite her handicap.

Clipping: October Herald Examiner

Marcella Meyer: Seeking the right of the deaf to jury duty.

Deaf/A-15, Col. 1

Herald Examiner Oct. 9, 1980

Air Force man. Following the end of the war, Marcella's husband was stationed at Travis AFB in northern California where she gave birth to two of her three daughters. Upon her husband's discharge from the military, they returned to Missouri where her third daughter was born.

Within one year, Marcella became a single mother due to her husband's alcohol abuse. He would splurge his paychecks on alcohol instead of rent and other necessities, causing the family to end up homeless several times. In 1955 Marcella married a deaf man from Kansas and suffered domestic violence throughout a seven-year marriage.

These two marriages put Marcella through some bitter experiences that would shape her world view and strengthen her resolve later in life. Also, she worked at many low-paying factory jobs, such as in dry cleaners and assembly lines, always the last hired and the first fired. She had no health care benefits, no paid vacations, and no child support and basically ended up raising her daughters as a single mother. Marcella refused to ask for any assistance from the state and considered this one of her greatest accomplishments, though she always fought to keep those services alive for those who needed them.

Continued on the next page

I recall an incident during a Fulton Revisited task force meeting of which both of us were part, where I had an argument with a white deaf member with regards to a race related issue and Marcella stood by me and gave a very blunt opinion that had even black me quite stunned as I had not ever met a white deaf person with the courage to take such a stand in a room of people where I was the only person of color. That endeared her to me and from then on she became my West Coast mom.

—Lindsay Dunn

As past CEO of several organizations, I received many tips from her on how to "stay above the water." She did it with humor and was fun to laugh with. I will miss her spirit and her "GUTSY" personality! Dear God, be ready, Marcella is gonna keep you busy! Amen.

—Barbara Jean "BJ" Wood

PHOTOS

previous page, top: Two photos of Marcella as a young woman.

this page: clipping from the Herald Examiner, October 9, 1980 with a story about her fight to serve on a jury.

Marcella was my dear friend and a tremendous influence on my life. I shall miss having someone who would tell me exactly what she thought regardless of the number of times I disagreed with her. I am grateful for the privilege of knowing such a classy lady.

—Bob Daniels



same time, she attended adult classes and earned a GED diploma. At one of the clubs for the deaf, she met her third husband, Lenny Meyer, who taught her how to drive a car. Together,

they became key players in creating GLAD as a service agency that grew to include several satellite agencies.

One issue still mired in controversy has to do with the founding of the Greater Los Angeles Council on Deafness (now called the Greater Los Angeles Agency for the Deaf, GLAD)—an issue that needs to be put to rest. One can look up the definition of the word “found” or “founding,” which means to originate or establish (something); create; set up, as a college.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the National Leadership Training Program (LTP) at California State University–Northridge trained educational administrators for secondary and post-secondary schools for the deaf. Marcella’s husband Lenny was one of these students, in the 1974-1975 class. For his thesis, Lenny wrote about the need to expand on *The Catalogue of Resources for the Deaf*

Continued from page 15

After both her parents passed away in the 1960s, Marcella decided to uproot her family and move to California, but she still had not learned how to drive a car. When her second daughter, Coleen, passed her driver’s license test, Marcella ordered Coleen to drive the family to California. At this point, because Marcella had gone through so much with both husbands and experienced many injustices and deprivations by society and the legal system, she vowed she would never allow any other deaf or hard of hearing person to undergo the same.

Fresh Start in California

Once in California, she got a job with Hughes Aircraft Company and started attending the Los Angeles Club for the Deaf and the Long Beach Club for the Deaf. In those days, the deaf clubs formed the backbone of the deaf community and its social life. At the



16 *As a leader and advocate, MMM was a rarity. There was nothing “elite” or high brow” about MMM. She simply had a “heart of gold.” Following in the spirit of an excerpt from the closing words of a poem written by Robert Frost, “two roads diverged in the woods and I chose the one less traveled by. And that made all the difference,” MMM trekked where few dared to go. She steadfastly pursued a vision for GLAD that broke down numerous barriers and evolved into a remarkable organization that serves deaf people from “all walks of life.”*

—Glenn Anderson

Marcella was one gutsy person, right up there with the female pioneers of history and not just among deaf women! She didn’t beat around the bush, got folks to pay attention to her – even when they didn’t like what she said. I loved her for her straightforwardness, honesty, and integrity. She not only gave back to her community in Los Angeles—she did so across the country including the NAD. Those of us who have had the privilege of knowing and working with her shall continue to carry on her spirit, honoring her magnificent social justice legacy. That twinkle in her eyes and hearty laughter will always be with me. Here’s to you, Marcella!

—Nancy J. Bloch

developed in 1971 by the Greater Los Angeles Council on Deafness (GLAD). At that time, the council consisted of agencies formed in 1969 consisting of deaf clubs, the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, churches, the university and other groups providing services to the deaf.

The Council saw the need for a service agency and approached the United Way organization to set up a venue. Marcella volunteered her time to greatly expand on the resource book, using a local United Way facility as a temporary office with one desk, one telephone and one TTY. United Way assigned an African-American man fresh from the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, Leo Mouton, to be Marcella's advisor. He became not only her mentor, but also her right-hand man for the rest of her career.

With his networking expertise and connections with city hall, county board of supervisors and the state capital, Leo taught Marcella how to secure a strong funding base to form GLAD as a service agency. When they started receiving "big bucks," Marcella eventually was hired as executive director, and she grabbed Leo from United Way to the new agency. With this story in mind,



MMM was a passionate advocate of the first order for all deaf people. She was equally a fearless and caring leader. For most of us, she was a special person to work with. She exuded matchless zeal and passion for life. She had a big heart, always with a ready smile and an infectious sense of humor. She made you feel welcome and appreciated. Such a great friend will never be forgotten. She will be sorely missed and always remembered for the great times we had together and for being such a genuine gentlelady. Rest in perfect peace, dear MMM—show a few tricks to the angels above and make them smile like you did with aplomb during your blessed stay on earth.

—Slemo Warigan

one can safely say that Marcella was the actual founder of the Greater Los Angeles Agency for the Deaf as we know it today.

Marcella also lived through times when women were expected to stay "in the background" but she defied this expectation throughout her life. She got very heavily involved in politics, both in deaf and hearing worlds. She also built her own financial independence through real estate investments, which was only a prelude to her building up GLAD in a spectacular fashion.

Marcella's legacy leaves us with the responsibility to keep pushing for access, promote ourselves upward and onward, to strengthen, align, and unify ourselves politically so as to be on par, if not above, our hearing peers. Salute to a woman leader in our Deaf History who made dreams come true, she believed in you and I as long as we believe it too.

—Sheri Ann Farinha

Continued on the next page



PHOTOS

*previous page, top: Marcella with her daughters—Coleen Ashly, Michele Balfe and Jamalee Plank
bottom: with Jane Fonda; with Sheri Ann Farinha*

*this page, top: Marcella giving a speech at the grand opening of the new GLAD building.
bottom: with actor Richard Thomas; with Leo Mouton*



Marcella at her retirement party.

Continued from page 17

Life Lessons from MMM

For all of Marcella's legacies, she leaves us with a couple of lessons.

1) Be involved with the hearing world. She often said we cannot afford any self-imposed isolation or separatism and we need to practice a very active form of biculturalism. She always emphasized our involvement because the hearing world was the place where laws were made, funds were allocated and public policies were created. Also, we have no choice but to be always vigilant in the hearing world to protect our community and our rights.

2) Show heart at all times. She never had any patience for half-hearted efforts, in spite of claims of being committed. Also, we need to be vigilant for the underdog and downtrodden person, regardless of gender, race, religion,

creed and sexual preference, who may need to be lifted, whether by mind, body or spirit. For her, "heart" meant total commitment and total dedication at all times, no matter what the cost.

The fact that Marcella was able to get emergency services during the morning hours of May 26th was a testimonial to her life's work in creating an environment to make our rights and access possible. She was the true architect behind our modern-day deaf community services. Thank you, Marcella M. Meyer! ☺



Christine "CB" Buchholz is a state commissioner for the New Mexico Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.