

# Through Deaf Eyes

## Discussion Guide

### Introduction

**THROUGH DEAF EYES** explores nearly 200 years of Deaf life in the United States. The film presents shared experiences of family life, education, work, and community connections from the perspective of deaf individuals. It is a window on a world that many people do not know exists - with fascinating history, memorable characters, and thought-provoking issues. The core of the film is the larger history of deaf life in the United States, a story of conflicts, prejudice, and affirmation that reaches the heart of what it means to be human. It is an American story.

**THROUGH DEAF EYES** does not approach the topic of deaf history from the perspective of sentimentality or of overcoming the inability to hear, nor does it deny the physical reality of being deaf. The documentary takes a straightforward look at life for people who are part of the cultural-linguistic group who use American Sign Language and often define themselves as “Deaf” — with a capital, and cultural, “D” — and deaf people who, for a variety of reasons, do not identify with the Deaf cultural community. The history often shows that intersections between deaf and Deaf people are many and that oppression and discrimination are common experiences.

The film is full of surprises and stories that often reflect unusual experiences. These puzzling events in the lives of Deaf people demonstrate a complex relationship with the hearing society. Outstanding themes, underscored through these stories and worthy of discussion, include:

- The broad sweep of U. S. history intersecting the experiences of Deaf people.
- Deaf education’s evolution.
- The enduring linguistic debate on how to education deaf children.
- The creation and expansion of the Deaf cultural community.
- Technology’s role in promoting significant social change for deaf people.
- Deaf leadership and activism.
- Deaf / deaf self-identity.

This guide accompanies the film and supports facilitators as they engage community members, students and others interested in the documentary in dialogue about the issues highlighted in **THROUGH DEAF EYES**.

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### Facilitator Guidelines

- Before convening a group, view the documentary in its entirety. Become familiar with this guide, which provides discussion questions, tips on how to negotiate controversial issues, and supplemental information and resources to further discussion.
- The film is two hours in length. Decide whether participants should watch the entire film or film segments individually or as a group. (If you are presenting clips, select those that are appropriate for your audience.) A group viewing of the entire film will require at least four hours in order to allow for thoughtful discussion time. If participants watch the film individually, they can then attend a post viewing session that allows for sufficient discussion. (Session lengths will vary depending on group composition and the your familiarity with participants.) Regardless of the viewing and discussion formats, provide participants with reading and supplemental materials that familiarize them with the film's content, issues, and topics
- Smaller groups of five to eight members are ideal. You can divide a large group into two smaller ones, each with a different facilitator.
- In hosting a screening/discussion, consider the conflicting perspectives on language use and identity. Beyond linguistic and educational experiences, be mindful of the Deaf community's diversity. Deaf people come from all corners of the country and while common deaf experiences unite, differing histories, understandings, and desires in the Deaf community also exist.
- Moderate discussion where appropriate, but do not try to control the flow of dialogue or defend the film. Pay careful attention to the individual making comments, and assist them in clarifying statements if needed. For example, restate the perspective and ask others to paraphrase their thoughts. If participants disagree with each other, ask them to explain why. Be sure all participants have a chance to share their thoughts. This may require setting time limits.
- Many of the **THROUGH DEAF EYES** events will involve interpreters to allow for free flow of information. Early planning will help ensure that you have highly qualified, professional interpreters for the event. Work with the scheduled interpreters, sharing as much information as possible so that communication can proceed unimpeded by language barriers.
- If appropriate, point participants to resources that provide additional coverage of the film's key topics.

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### Access and Communication

Access to **THROUGH DEAF EYES** cannot be an afterthought. Be mindful of your audience's needs; consider following access issues as you organize your event:

- Is the space you plan to use accessible to all audiences?
- Will you need to hire sign language and/or oral interpreters?
- Will you need to have real-time captioning?
- Will you need large screen projection so that signing can be seen from a distance?
- Will you need additional lighting?
- Will any members of your audience need amplification? If so, what kind?
- Will any audience members need audio description? If yes, is this service possible with your projection and sound system?

Make sure that all participants are able to see each other during the discussion. If possible, make sure that those who want to share a comment come to the front of the viewing venue. This way, the audience will be centered on the person who is speaking or signing.

### Discussion Questions

The discussion framework depends on the group. You might first invite participants to provide immediate feedback on what they have viewed. Questions to prompt this discussion include:

- What did you think of the film?
- What stood out for you?
- What did you learn about Deaf culture, community, and history?
- Did the film reinforce something you already knew about the Deaf community? Explain.
- Describe something of your experience that the film reflects.
- Describe anything in the film that you feel might have been left unsaid.

You can continue the discussion with some or all of the in-depth questions that follow. (Or, depending on the group, begin the dialogue with these.) These questions reference direct quotes from the film.

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### 1A) THROUGH DEAF EYES begins with the following true or false quiz:

All deaf people use sign language.

Sign language is universal.

Deaf people live in a silent world.

Having a deaf child is a tragedy.

All deaf people would like to be cured.

*[Answers: All are FALSE!]*

- a. What does this “quiz” reflect? What does it imply?
- b. Do these questions represent common perceptions of the deaf? Explain.
- c. Does the film demystify issues related to deafness? Explain.
- d. What impact did the film make on your understanding of deafness?

### 1B) In the film, interviewees talk about being deaf and others’ perceptions of deafness:

*Marlee Matlin says:*

“I’m a proud person who happens to be deaf. I don’t want to change it. I don’t want to wake up and suddenly say, ‘Oh my God, I can hear.’ That’s not my dream. It’s not my dream. I’ve been raised deaf. I’m used to the way I am. I don’t want to change it. Why would I ever want to change? Because I’m used to this, I’m happy.”

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*I. King Jordan says:*

“When you talk to people who can hear and you ask them what do you think it would be like to be a deaf person, then all of their thinking is well, I couldn’t do this. Can’t, can’t, can’t, can’t, can’t...they would start listing all the things they can’t do. And I don’t think like that. Deaf people don’t think like that. We think about what we can do...”

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*CJ Jones says:*

“What’s wrong with being deaf? I’m deaf. I’m fine. I function fine. I drive. I have a family. I’ve made a baby. I make people laugh. I travel. What the hell is going on? Like I have to hear that has nothing to do with it. It’s all about knowledge; it’s about the heart. It’s about abilities, about doing something you want and getting what you want out of life...Knowledge is the most powerful vehicle to success, not hearing, not speaking...”

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*Summer Crider says:*

...“In terms of a disability, I don’t view myself as having a disability...I function like any other hearing person can. My deafness does not deprive me of anything. I can do anything I want. Except maybe sing.”

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*David James says:*

“Being deaf is, well, it’s part of me. It’s something I have to deal with, but it doesn’t keep me from being happy. It doesn’t make me either happy or sad. It’s like being a man instead of a woman, or being tall instead of short.”

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*Carolyn McCaskill says:*

“Maybe a person can’t see and is that normal? Maybe it is. And maybe a person walks with a bit of a limp. Perhaps that’s normal to one person and not another. What about left-handedness? Is that abnormal or normal?”

- a. What do these individuals’ statements suggest about common perceptions of deaf people?
- b. What do these comments suggest about how deaf people view themselves in the world?
- c. How do these comments strike you?
- d. Do you agree or disagree with their perceptions/opinions? Explain

### **2) In the film, interviewee Mark Morales says:**

“We have this planet, which we call earth; we spell it EARth, so it relates to the ear, to speaking and hearing. There’s this other planet called EYEth. And that relates to the eye and the visual. So there are two worlds and I grew up on EARth. Now, I am on this other planet, EYEth, a world where all these possibilities are open to me.”

- a. What do Mark’s thoughts suggest about people who are deaf?
- b. What does he intimate about Deaf culture?
- c. How do his thoughts represent or counter perceptions about the physical condition of deafness?

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### 3) In the film, interviewee Doug Baynton says:

“Many people were immigrating to this country from Eastern Europe and southern Europe, and this made a number of Americans very nervous. Ethnic groups set up their own schools here; they published newspapers in their native languages. The deaf community too had their own newspapers, their own schools, and their own churches; and used a separate language, and so people began to think of deaf people as an ethnic group — a group that should be assimilated into the general population.”

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*Interviewee Summer Crider describes her experiences in a mainstream school and then as a student in a school for the deaf:*

In those early years, I was placed in a deaf program within a public school, so it was a mainstream setting. And then when I started to recognize I was different from everyone else, I started to begin to think what makes me different from them and it was the box and this wire that was attached to my head. So, I quit wearing it; I just took it off. And about 10th grade, I decided I needed a better social life, so I started checking things out. And I came across the Florida School for the Deaf. And made the switch to that school, and went back to wearing the implant again. And I began wearing it all the time. So, it's kind of unusual, just the opposite of what you think because my parents were very concerned that once I went to the school for the deaf, that I would stop wearing it entirely, that I wouldn't speak any longer, that I wouldn't wear the implant. But the opposite is what happened and it's because I had confidence in myself. Everybody there was just like I was; everybody else had a problem with their hearing, so it was OK. It gave me the opportunity to wear my implant and to feel like I fit in and really take advantage of everything that it had to offer.”

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*John (Stan) Schuchman describes growing up in his deaf family:*

“My parents were deaf. My parents had many deaf friends. They had an active schedule. We went to deaf clubs. We went to deaf people's homes. It was a natural community for me as a kid growing up. It was like a kid who grew up in an immigrant family where many of the friends spoke a different language...”

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*Lasander Saunders says:*

“I was born hearing and then later I became deaf. I started going to a hearing church to worship, but I was missing so much. When I found out about a deaf church, I thought I [would] try that, and I saw the choir signing music. And the drum. And I felt so inspired. The preacher was good. And I could get worship here with deaf people. It was a great change in my life. “

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(Narration)...“Deaf communities had theatrical societies, literary circles, masquerade balls, organized debates, sports teams, and travel groups. The deaf culture had that had taken root in the schools for deaf children cropped up all across the country in deaf clubs for adults. People came together to sign, to help each other, and, quite simply, to have a good time.”

- a. Based on the film and these excerpted quotes, how would you describe the Deaf community?
- b. Would you describe the Deaf community as an ethnic community? Explain.
- c. How was/is the Deaf community formed?
- d. What does the creation of the Deaf community suggest to those outside of the community about, for example, deaf people’s abilities, desires, or interests?
- e. What challenges and/or divisions exist within this community?
- f. How is this community different from and/or similar to the notion of community/a community, in general?

**4) Describe and discuss the ways the deaf/Deaf community has taken action — politically, as activists/protestors, through legislation, formation of associations — to ensure that its needs are recognized and honored? How has this action influenced not only the deaf/Deaf community, but the way in which society treats and engages with it?**

**5) The film points to the many technological products that have made an impact on deaf people. Describe this technology and its influence, both negative and positive.**

**6) Based on the film and the following quotes from the film, what paradoxes existed/exist within the Deaf community/society with regard to socio-political issues/points of view? What socio-economic conditions exist among the Deaf community?**

(Narration) “But deaf society was like American society. And that wasn’t always good. In 1925, after an African American couple tried to attend a NAD convention, the deaf organization explicitly banned Black people from joining. The ban was in place for forty years. In the south, deaf schools — like all schools — were segregated for decades.”

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*Carolyn McCaskill describes the cultural differences in deaf communication:*

“At the Black deaf school, our Black deaf culture flourished. We had basketball games. We had our dances. We had Black teachers. Moving then to a White deaf school, we all used sign language. But the signs that were being used were very different. The White deaf students would finger spell and then add some signs. As a Black deaf person, they

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would look at my signing and say that doesn't look like what they did as White deaf students. And so I found myself humiliated. I thought I was inferior and that somehow, our signs were subordinate to the signs that they were using. And so I tried to put away my signs and instead, adopt the signs that were used by the White students."

### Background for Complex Topics

*These issues are likely to arise during discussion, although the discussion questions do not center on this debate. As with any other potentially controversial topic, be sure to employ techniques that ensure all voices are respectfully heard, and that tensions do not mount so as to interfere with constructive discussion.*

#### Diversity

About 500,000 people in the United States use American Sign Language, a small social-linguistic group within which a diversity of immense proportions poses both challenges and opportunities to the maintenance of cultural boundaries and to its future evolution. For example, the surge in use of cochlear implant technology poses a challenge to Deaf culture. And the growing sense of an international deaf cultural community that transcends national borders presents it with an opportunity.

The vast majority of deaf, hard of hearing and deaf blind children and youth in the United States are raised by parents who hear and speak English or another auditory-oral language. A small fraction (often estimated at less than 5 per cent) have deaf parents whose native language is American Sign Language, who use it at home and in school, and who pass the norms, values and traditions of a culture from one generation to the next, similar to the transmission of other languages and cultures throughout the world.

Many deaf children and youth grow up without signing as a language or with only minimal linguistic input in a form of sign. These children have widely disparate experiences with acquiring American Sign Language, the language that best fits their communicative needs, and becoming enculturated into the Deaf core. These various pathways create one aspect of diversity within the community by marking them in various degrees of separation from the core in terms of cultural identification, language and communication choices, audiometric measures, age of onset, use of amplification technology, and school experiences.

In addition to the complexity facing children and youth in the construction of their identities as deaf, hard of hearing or deaf-blind people, the deaf community contains the same broad array of diverse characteristics that define people in general, including: age, gender, disability, racial and ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, and social-economic status.

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### **Cochlear Implants**

Cochlear implants are changing the deaf community because they enable infants and young children who are deaf to have access to spoken language at much clearer levels and at very early ages when their brains are most primed to learn language. As a result of implants, more children who are deaf will have intelligible speech skills and usable hearing. The challenge for the Deaf cultural core group will be to assure that these children have a right to learn American Sign Language and to learn about their identities as deaf people. Seeing that ASL and Deaf Culture can be retained, even while technology is harnessed, has led more and more deaf adults to get cochlear implants.

*It might be wise to set up a separate discussion opportunity that allows participants to hear from experts and Deaf community members who speak to the issue of implants vs. the use of sign language.*

### **International Deaf Community**

A growing network of international deaf communities is fostering the concept that deaf people as a community of similar people and separate from their nations. While language, culture and national differences are present, the shared experience of being deaf overrides those differences and allows for cultural bonding based on preference for visual-gestural language and the construction and understanding of human experience based on vision.