

CART'ing into the Past

I was contacted via email one day requesting CART services for the New Jersey School for the Deaf/Marie Katzenbach School for the Deaf (NJSD/MKSD) for a weekend of 125th Anniversary Celebration activities. I immediately accepted and was never so enthusiastic about any CART assignment before.

A little background is in order. In 1955 my father, Santo Bonfilio, accepted his first “real” job out of college at the NJSD. He moved from the hills of Western Pennsylvania to West Trenton, New Jersey, and became the Supervisor of the Boys Dorm and coached several sports. He moved his new bride, my mother, and they resided on campus at the Deaf School in a small apartment, where two of my sisters were born and lived for their toddler years. In 1961 my father accepted a job with the South Brunswick School District as a teacher and moved his young family to the suburbs. But our connection to the Deaf School did not end there. My uncle (married to my mother’s sister), Edward Harris, accepted a job at the Deaf School in 1965 and moved his young bride and infant into a small apartment on campus. He would remain there until his retirement in 1994.

During the holidays, the Deaf School’s resident students would return to their homes, leaving the campus quiet and deserted. My family would travel from the suburbs and celebrate Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, birthdays, and any other excuse to get together with my aunt and uncle and their three boys from 1965 to 1975. There was a large community living room/kitchen area where we would gather, prepare meals, eat, and play. As young children, we loved going to the Deaf School because we had the whole place (resident building and grounds) to ourselves to explore. We would run through the halls, rummage through the students’ dorms, pretending we were students by sitting at the desks in their rooms. It was like a second home.

It is a complete coincidence that I would end up serving the Deaf community like my father. I was providing CART for many years before I even realized the connection. Now everything had come full circle. I arrived Friday morning to the school for an Academic Bowl between NJSD/MKSD and Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. Most of the people there were young students. Nobody had heard of my father or my uncle. Saturday night was the dinner banquet for alumni. I just happened to mention my father’s name to an older gentleman, and he got extremely excited and started to wave over one alumnus after another. Before I knew what was happening, there were 15 people gathered around signing fast and feverishly to me. The only sign I knew was, “I do not know how to sign” and the alphabet for fingerspelling (very slowly!). I have been meaning to learn ASL (American Sign Language) for years now and just haven’t gotten around to it. Most of my CART clients over the years have been oral, which means they can speak and read lips. I’ve always been able to communicate with them, with the exception of one event. I vowed I would learn. This event has re-sparked my interest and vow because there were very few people I could communicate with without an interpreter.

Well, it turns out there were many, many people who remembered my father. They taught me his sign – a sign that serves as an abbreviation to avoid having to fingerspell names. They told me stories about him. They recalled that he did not know how to sign when he arrived and after two months was fluent in ASL. Wow! That's impressive. I was practically in tears hearing how he impacted these men's lives as young boys. I was amazed at how sharp their memories were of him. He was only there for six years! They insisted I write their names down and pass along good wishes to my father.

The next day was a picnic at the school. My sister was in town, so I brought her along. The Deaf School was her first home. She learned to sign before she learned to speak. Unfortunately, she has forgotten everything. She brought a couple of photo albums containing pictures of her playing on campus and of our father as a young man. With the help of several interpreters, we had great conversation with many of Dad's former students. They soaked up all the photos, and we soaked up all of the stories and memories. We even learned a little sign language that day.

A couple of the gentlemen accompanied us to the school's museum, and we pored through photos and yearbooks, beaming with excitement each time we located a picture of our dad and uncle. We giggled and pointed each time our new friends were spotted posing as young athletes. I was particularly excited that after spending so much time with these men, by the end of the day, I was actually able to communicate with them without an interpreter. Of course, we exchanged email addresses and swore we would be in touch.

We left the museum and walked through the falling leaves across campus to the building we had spent so many years in. It is now being leased and used as a women's shelter. We explained who we were and what we were doing there, and I guess our story was sappy enough; they agreed to walk us through the building. We even went into my aunt and uncle's apartment, which is now being used for storage. It was surreal being there. It took us back to the '60s and '70s and all of those family gatherings. I was in tears!

Sometimes you learn more about your loved ones through the eyes of strangers than living with them for decades. I just hope when all is said and done I will have had just one ounce of the impact on people's lives that my father had on these "boys" lives.

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The Clock Tower at MKSD



Me (in purple stripes) and my sisters and cousins at the Deaf School, 1970-ish