

# Marlee matlin – deaf actress, cultural icon essay



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These facts are not very different from millions of other Americans across the country. The one fact about Marlee that makes me admire her is that at the tender age of 18 months, she had a bout with Roseola, a form of German measles, which left her totally deaf in her right ear and 80% deaf in her left ear. In spite of this fact, Marlee has become an inspiration to members of the Deaf and hearing communities alike. She is an example of strength and determination, rising above adversity to accomplish her dreams and exemplifies the resilience of the human spirit.

Inspiring millions with her dedication to connecting the Deaf and hearing communities, Marlee Matlin is truly a cultural icon. It is, however, necessary for you to know about Marlee's background and upbringing in order to really understand what has made her such an extraordinary individual. Growing up is not easy for the average child, just ask one of my children and they will go on about their woes for hours. But for Marlee it was even more complicated and confusing.

She was the youngest member of her family and the only person in her Morton Grove home that was deaf. I can only imagine the feelings of loneliness and isolation that she must have felt in her silent world. But there is a point in every child's life where the unyielding support of parents or lack thereof will determine the path in which said child will take. Marlee was one of the lucky children. Her family, albeit grieved by the fact that their baby was now deaf, would support her and ensure that she had all the advantages that every child deserves.

Unlike most hearing parents of a deaf child, Marlee was encouraged by her parents to use both signs and her voice to communicate. Marlee's parents and other siblings learned American Sign Language to provide Marlee with a sense of belonging in her own home. They knew that every child needs to feel like they belong somewhere and their home would be the place to start. It was important for her parents to ensure that Marlee felt like a normal child and not the "little deaf girl" around the neighborhood.

Her parents had a difficult time though finding any support from doctors and specialists, who told them that Marlee would probably need to attend a school for deaf children far from home. This was totally unacceptable to Marlee's parents. They refused to have her treated as if her deafness was a disability. The search went on to find a place for Marlee that would not treat her like an outcast or disabled. Finally, they found a school that would provide supported services to deaf students within a mainstream curriculum, along side hearing children.

Marlee excelled and went on to attend Hersey High School which provided an ideal environment for Marlee to develop an appreciation for both the Deaf and hearing cultures because its Deaf student population was almost equal to the hearing. But Marlee's true love was for attention and she found this attention in acting. But her love for acting developed much earlier in life. At the age of 7, she attended a summer camp that did not specialize in deaf children although there were a few in attendance. One day, a camp counselor asked her if she would like to sign the songs as the other children sang them around a campfire.

Marlee accepted and the response from the other children ignited a spark. They all smiled, cheered and clapped at Marlee's performance and Marlee loved the attention and wanted more. After telling her mother about her camp experience, her mother took her to the International Center for Deafness and the Arts which allowed hearing and deaf children to interact in various programs and activities. It was here that Marlee auditioned for and was cast into their production of the Wizard of Oz as the only character suitable for her personality, Dorothy.

She later attended college and got a degree in Criminal Justice, preparing for a real world career but continuing to perform throughout the Midwest in pursuit of her dream of becoming an actress. After one of her performances, Marlee got an opportunity to meet Henry Winkler, who would eventually become her mentor. Unashamed and not intimidated by this famous actor, Marlee approached him and told him that she wanted to be an actor as well. He encouraged her that she could be whatever she wanted to in life. All she had to do was imagine it in her heart and her dreams would come true. I am sure that the 'Fonz' had no idea how big of an impact his words of encouragement would have on Marlee's life. That this young lady would be the first Deaf actress to win an Academy Award for Best Actress at the age of 21. Not only did Marlee become the first Deaf actress to win an Oscar for her performance of 'Sarah' along side actor William Hurt in the 1986 movie "Children of a Lesser God", but she was also the youngest actresses to win an Oscar and one of only four actresses to win an Oscar in her debut role.

Marlee Matlin not only deserved the attention of the world, she commanded it. Over the last two decades, Marlee has made an impression on both

Hollywood and the world in numerous ways. She has starred in films like “ What the Bleep Do We Know? ” and “ Sweet Nothing In My Ear”. She has maintained ongoing roles in television shows like “ The West Wing” and “ The L Word”. She has co-authored a series of books to inspire teen girls entitled “ Deaf Child Crossing”, “ Nobody’s Perfect” and “ Leading Ladies”.

Marlee’s autobiography, entitled “ I’ll Scream Later” was published in April, 2009, in which she divulges very personal information about her 2 year, abusive relationship with William Hurt, her struggle with drug addiction, her dramatic breakthrough and her struggle to regain the confidence of the Deaf community after an Oscar presentation where she offended many of them. She was featured in the PBS documentary, “ Through Deaf Eyes” and in “ Baby Wordsworth”, part of the “ Baby Einstein” series, teaching sign language to infants and toddlers.

To place a cap on the remarkable accomplishments of this woman, she is the proud mother of four children. This is an accomplishment in and of itself. She is devoted to her family and has dedicated her life to bridging the gap between the Deaf and hearing communities, not only in the U. S. but throughout the world. Is there a wonder why I admire her so much? Not for being deaf or a mother of four or an Academy Award winner. The fact is that this woman has endured trials and obstacles that I can only imagine and still has accomplished all these thing and more. She inspires me and for those who know her story, the world.