The Third National CODA Conference
Children of Deaf Adults
Co-Sponsored by
The CODA Organization and
Gallaudet University: National Academy, Family Life Program

The Ramada Western
Denver, Colorado, USA
August 13-15, 1988

My Experiences as a Coda

By Stan Schuchman, J.D., Ph.D.
Arlington, Virginia, USA

Originally from Indianapolis, Stan is an only child and first-generation American. His father's family emigrated from Russian at the turn of the century and settled in Indianapolis where he attended the Indiana School for the Deaf. His mother went to the Florida School for the Deaf and later the family moved to Indiana where she also attended the state school. He has ha B.A. degree from Butler University, M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in history from Indiana University and a law degree from Georgetown University Law School. (At the time of this keynote, he had taught at Gallaudet University for 20 years as a history professor, was Dean of the College, and was Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Provost from 1970 to 1985.) His book, Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry was published by the University of Illinois Press. He and his wife, BJ reside in Arlington, Virginia. During his career, he spoke widely on the topic of deafness as portrayed in film and extended his research into the area of preserving a variety of film and oral history aspects of deaf heritage.

My purpose – in waving this sheaf of papers in front of you – is to show that I did prepare a speech. I've been thinking about and revising it for approximately a month but after being here and listening to the presentations, I went back to my room last night and tried to re-think what I wanted to say. Let me explain…I'm in a strange situation: if I were not the keynote speaker, I would not have come to this conference. But now I've joined CODA and, as you can see, I've bought my T-shirt, so I'm in the position of being the keynote speaker and a "newcomer" simultaneously. With this opportunity to talk with CODA peers, I'd like to share some of my

personal experiences as a "deaf" person…[audience laughed, realizing that "as a child of deaf parents" was meant]. You see, I really don't know who I am! So let me put my prepared remarks aside and only use them as a guide to keep me honest.

Let's "putz" around for a minute: it's John Stanley Schuchman. I'm a mixture of a lot of things: deaf/hearing – which is why I'm here; I'm also a first-generation American – my dad's family came from Russian at the turn of the century and I grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana, with them close by; and my dad's family is Jewish and my mom's is Christian, so I grew up being called by my middle name, "Stan". Members of his family said, "John, that's your first name? That's not a Jewish name" and conversely, when we went south to visit my mom's family they would ask, "Why aren't you a Johnny, John?"

Although my parents' deafness excluded them from an active religious life, the sent me to a Talmud Torah (Hebrew school) where I proceeded to become a good Jewish kid with straight "alephs" (A's). It took special effort to go to Hebrew school in Indianapolis because there was a Christian education program in our neighborhood school. Since there were only three of us who were Jewish, the Christian students would leave for religious instruction and those of us who were "different" would remain to do unpleasant things – usually "arts and crafts". Then, when school was over, we traveled by bus to the north side of the city to attend Talmud Torah where we spent two or three more hours on Hebrew lessons. Subsequently, I went through Bar mitzvah; heard my father say I had to marry a Christian woman because it was hard to find a Jewish deaf woman; and I heard my Jewish hearing relatives say things like, "Well, you're not really Jewish unless the mother is Jewish." So it was hard to figure out whether I was a John or Stanley.

It wasn't until a wonderful sixth grade music teacher, Miss Banks, asked me, "What's your name in Hebrew?" and I replied, "Yeshua" that it was translated for me: "Joshua". No one had ever explained the translation of my name – neither my Hebrew teacher, my deaf parents, nor my Jewish relatives. Later on, after I left Indianapolis, I used my first name, John, for the next several decades of my life. I spent a lot of energy on an odyssey looking for that identity: John, Stan, or Yeshua. Ultimately, I opted for Stan-an "s" on the chin – the name my parents had given me.

In this preface of my recently published book, Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry, I began the process of opening up and talking about my mixed cultural heritage: deaf/hearing and Jewish/Christian. In effect, that process of opening up continues this afternoon. Notice I used the phrase "began the process of opening up". I want to say this especially for newcomers: just because I am the keynote speaker, don't assume I've worked out all of my feelings about deafness and my identity, because I haven't.

The title for this keynote – as it was originally given to me by the planning committee – was "How Being a Coda Contributed to My Success". I had mixed feelings about that because I don't consider myself a success. I have worked through many of the issues being discussed in groups here. For example, I wrote volumes of letters to my mom and dad in my early 20's and then tore them up. Through that process and talking to other people – primarily my wife – I began to work out some of the things that bothered me as a kid of deaf parents. However, the process continues today and I'll give you an example.

While I was revising this speech at home, my 82-year-old dad – who has lived with us for the last 17 years – became quite ill, alternately suffering difficult bouts of constipation and diarrhea. I had been cleaning up after him for about 24 hours and trying to revise this speech on my "Coda characteristics for success". He was not being a particularly good patient, was feeling sorry for himself – and I was cleaning up his feces, being angry, loving him, yet wanting to shout at him – while my wife was reminding me that he is an old person who needs touching and hugging. So, for you newcomers: I can't say that being a kid of deaf parents will get any easier – even with all these wonderful CODA rap sessions – but it changes color and we deal with different aspects of it. That's why I wanted to share some of the context of this presentation on "success".

Although each of us needs to work on our own strategies for coping, CODA does help. It helps to know there are others who share our experience. I've discovered that, in my short time here. For one thing, I've opened up a little more. I've been an "official kid of deaf parents" for a long time – I think most of us have. Sheila Jacobs mentioned, very kindly, that I had been Dean of the College, Vice-President of Academic Affairs and Provost at Gallaudet from 1970 to 1985. Being in those kinds of positions, everybody wants to take advantage of you: "Here's the Dean, here's the Vice-President: get him

to come and talk about being a kid of deaf parents." I was always being trotted out. That's how CODA Founder, Millie Brother, and I first met. When she was a graduate student at Gallaudet one of her professors asked me to speak about my experience as a hearing child of deaf parents. Throughout those years I gave an official line to outsiders and really didn't open up to other "Millie's" out there either.

I'm reminded of a deaf woman who came to my office at Gallaudet several years ago. She had a little boy – about nine or ten years old – and when she introduced us she said: "See, his mom and dad are deaf, too." I don't know why – what need she had – but I looked down at this poor little kid and he looked up at me and I didn't know what to say. After they left, I've often wondered about the kind of impression I made on him. What I suspect is that there's this teenage hearing kid running around Washington, D.C., terrified of becoming bald like me. I guess both Millie's professor and this deaf mother wanted something that I was unable – or perhaps unwilling – to give.

In a group session yesterday I shared the story of my mom's funeral in 1971. We had gone back to Indianapolis to sit "Shiva" or what's called a wake. Later, at the funeral, I sat in an alcove with my dad, my wife, and some relatives. Signing to him, I looked around the corner and noticed a large group of deaf people in the audience. Of course, no one had arranged for an interpreter, so I got up, got a little chair and sat next to the Rabbi and proceeded to do it. I went through that whole ordeal masking my own feelings of grief. I felt badly about that for years and years. When I expressed some of those feelings yesterday, several other Codas said: "Yeah, I did that, too." That was a revelation to me and it was important to hear. That's why I wanted to change my speech, but a CODA T-shirt and just talk today.

Another conversation yesterday was again, helpful. Someone made the remark that outsiders sometimes say, "Aren't you lucky to have deaf parents." I remember sitting in the faculty dining room at Gallaudet several years ago – I think I was Vice-President of Academic Affairs at the time – when a very famous linguist, who's left Gallaudet and gone on to other things now, said: "Boy, you're lucky to have deaf parents." There I was, a college vice-president – who's not supposed to beat up faculty members – and it was all I could do to keep from going across the table and popping him. In general, I'm not a violent person. The problem is I never had anybody to talk to, to discuss what these experiences meant. Hearing folks

just don't understand; certainly linguists who want to study us and our culture don't understand; and we can't talk to deaf people either – too often they ask questions like, "Do you mean you don't feel lucky?" or "Is it something bad about deaf people." And that isn't the point at all.

I've had good friends, I've had a good family life and I've had a happy childhood and still it's important to hear that someone else experienced these same things. Unfortunately, I've never had the opportunity to talk with other Codas until now. Even though there were several at Gallaudet, I was an administrator – most of them worked for me – and so it seemed inappropriate to open up and share these things. Thank you for this opportunity to express some of my observations and feelings about the Coda experience.

Now let's shift focus to my prepared text and I'll begin by summarizing my personal background. My father graduated from the Indiana School for the Deaf (class of 1927) and my mother attended the Florida School for the Deaf but eventually ended up in Indiana. They were the only deaf people in their families – both pre-lingually deaf and non-speaking – I can't do their voices. Although my mom had no intelligible speech, the whole neighborhood understood her mood when she called for me. I'm 50 years old which means I grew up in the 40's and early 50's. We never had a telephone. We also never had a car because my grandmother and grandfather didn't think deaf people should be allowed to drive. My dad bought that stupid argument and as a consequence we took a trolley, walked a lot or knocked on friendly deaf doors whenever we needed a ride. When I bought my first car at the age of 18, "family chauffeur" became another one of my responsibilities. My dad worked at a scrap metal yard as a metal sorter so, in short, we were working-class poor.

My wife BJ really is a saint in terms of being a daughter-in-law: she came to deafness cold. My dad has lived with us for the past 17 years and since I lived with him for 18, next year I plan to throw him out in the name of equity. (That's a joke!) BJ reminded me of the time she asked my dad about the difference between the signs for "winter" and "cold". In all seriousness, he responded with the same sign for each plus his oral version of the word "cold". That's a really good orientation to deafness. My Dad really loves BJ; she knows how to hug and she fixes his meals. She's a professional counselor-trainer and occasionally provides me with insights about the

CODA experience. We each have stores about taking an idea literally – let me share one of mine.

My mother was originally from Florida and apparently my grandmother must have told her: "You don't go into the ocean after you've eaten because you'll drown." My mother took that information literally and applied it to all water. As a result, growing up in our household we couldn't take a bath for two hours after lunch or dinner until our food "went down so you won't drown". I just accepted and never questioned that household wisdom because I grew up with it. As a consequence, no one in our family took a bath for two hours after meals. When my 65-year-old dad came to live with us after my mother died he tried that family "wisdom" on BJ. We were having lunch after working outside and were planning to go out to do some errands. BJ said to my father: "Why don't you go take a bath?" Naturally he responded that he couldn't bathe for two hours because "I have food to digest." BJ broke out with laughter and my dad turned to me and said, "She's making fun of me." As a daughter-in-law she had to learn what that was all about, and as a counselor-educator she helped me gain some outside perspective about a behavior I assumed was normal. As for my dad, he assumes it's just another hearing quirk but to keep the peace he makes sure he bathes <u>before</u> meals – and now it becomes a funny story among Codas. With this description of the Schuchman family context in mind, let me identify some conditions I think are central to existence for all Codas.

WE ARE DIFFERENT – It seems to me that we overlook the most obvious condition of our childhood: We are different from our parents. The fact that we can hear is apparent to each of us at a very early age. That single sensory condition is basic to our existence and is the reason why we are fundamentally different from them. Although I'm personally unaware of the exact moment I understood this difference, it's clear that my parents' deafness permeates my life and has profoundly affected my growing up. Certainly my mother was aware of the difference: She tested my hearing the moment the nurses brought me to her in the hospital. Every deaf family I know tells a similar story about checking the hearing status of newborns.

I her book, A Loss for Words, Lou Ann Walker made this point quite well when she explained that although she was intimately familiar with deafness, there existed a wide chasm between understanding deafness and being deaf. More poignantly, she wondered what it was like for her father to be reminded daily – by the presence of his hearing daughter – that he could not

hear. That is the only time I cried while reading the book because it does emphasize the central fact that we can hear is important and we shouldn't deny this condition.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard myself and other Codas tell "outsiders" how normal our childhoods and family lives were. That is ridiculous! The reason hearing people are curious is that it's obvious a childhood where the child is fundamentally different from the parent is not usual. Most of us have had to deal with that difference. Please don't misunderstand me when I say we did not have normal childhoods, because I don't mean we were not happy or that we don't love our parents. It is possible for us to be happy, despite differences in the family, the same sense that a Black child with white adoptive parents can certainly be happy and have happy family relationships. But in that family situation, the child still has a fundamental understanding of being different, and thereby unique. It seems to me that the manner in which Codas deal with this fact is central to their personality. The sooner we come to terms with this difference and decide it's okay to be different, the healthier we'll be. So, we are all different, unique and every one of us has to accept this fact.

WE ARE SPECIAL – There's a second condition central to the existence of Codas: we are special, in addition to being different. This is true because we are living refutations of a widely held belief – certainly in the United States and perhaps universally – that deaf people should not be permitted to marry and bear children. This set of cultural attitudes permeates public policy in the form of legislation, judicial decisions, and bureaucratic procedures. Let me limit our discussion solely to popular attitudes. As evidence, I'll cite material that I hope will be familiar to this audience.

The early twentieth century marks the apogee of the eugenics movement: a pseudo-scientific phenomenon whose advocates contended that the human race could be improved through correct or selective breeding. For a time, these views became legitimatized in the United States when the Supreme Court approved state laws, which permitted the sterilization of persons who were mentally retarded. As scientists learned more about the principles of genetics, however, these practices were called into question. It was not until the world learned of the horrors of the Holocaust – perpetrated by the Nazis in their quest to create a master race – that eugenics became discredited.

The recent Holocaust exhibit at Gallaudet titled "In Der Nacht" – "In the Night" – has made it clear that the Nazis applied these principles of eugenics to the deaf community as well – in the form of mandatory sterilizations of, and abortions for, deaf people. Today, we view this exhibit with sadness and grieve for the deaf community of Europe. But the truth is that the cultural attitudes, which permitted the Nazis their excesses, are alive and well.

Alexander Graham Bell was an early advocate of the eugenics movement. Although most of you know he opposed signs and schools for the deaf, you may not know that his position was based on the belief that they encouraged social interaction among deaf people – which in turn would lead to marriage. To his credit, he did not believe in mandatory legislation prohibiting marriage between deaf persons. In his personal life, Bell married a deaf woman, Mable Hubbard, and years later Hollywood produced his life story. As a result, their marriage became the popular cultural model for the depiction of deaf characters.

It is no accident that our most recent popular stage play and film, Children of a Lesser God, featured a hearing/deaf love interest. Even though recent television episodes are somewhat better, there has only been one deaf couple – the parents of Lon Chaney in Man of a Thousand Faces – depicted in the nearly ninety-year history of motion pictures produced in Hollywood. In those rare instances on television where a deaf couple has been featured, (The Man and the City: Hands of Love – 1971, Mom and Dan Can't Hear Me – 1978, and Love is Never Silent – 1985), the focus has invariably been on the hearing child (Coda), not the deaf parents. To summarize: Hollywood films and television programs are a primary source of cultural attitudes that perpetuate a milieu of discrimination against deaf persons and their desire to enjoy an active family life.

In its kindest or mildest forms, this attitude simple translates into an assumption that "hearing is better". As a practical matter, this attitude explains why adoption agencies and local judges are reluctant to allow deaf couples to adopt children; why school nurses and elementary school teachers routinely assume that Codas require special help; and why we all had grandmothers or aunts who tried to raise us, instead of our parents.

So, in my view, Codas share two basic conditions: we are different and we are special. Within the family, we must deal with the fact that we are unique and oftentimes, alone. Outside the family, we must deal with a society that

does not understand or – at its worst – is hostile. With these assumptions in place, let me now turn to those characteristics I believe were important in my development.

OVER ACHIEVEMENT – This is first on my list simply because my wife always tells me that I'm an overachiever. By way of definition: an "overachiever" is someone who accomplishes much more than society expects of such an individual. Every time my public school hired a new nurse, they tested my hearing. It was very difficult for them to believe that I did not have a hearing problem. As a child, I was very aware people were surprised to learn that a deaf couple had a normal kid. Invariably, when people discover that my parents are deaf, they ask, "How did you learn to talk?" Once again, my wife reminds me that I usually snap at my questioner with this response: "Deaf people don't live in ghettos."

Obviously, the point is that outsiders expect Codas to have problems due to some imagined inadequacy in their deaf parents. My response to that, I think, manifested itself in the need to prove myself – continuously. To this day, I don't consider myself to be a very intelligent person and I've always felt I was basically lazy. Given my academic track record and professional career, that is an amazing perception. Yet it is there, and I know that the feeling is related to the need to prove myself.

I might add that this need was also related to my parents. In spite of the fact that I knew they loved me and were very proud of my accomplishments, they also saw me as a hearing person. Often – when I would bring them news of something I had done – their response would be, "Of course. You're hearing." Please understand that this response was not a put-down in our family. My parents simply had unrealistic expectations of what a hearing person could do. So, in general, they were always pleased, but never surprised.

RESPONSIBILITY – In retrospect, I can't think of anything dumber than to tell a child to be good for his parents. My relatives were always telling me to be good and – what's even more amazing – I bought their argument. I was a good kid and the extended family counted on me to be more mature and responsible. Since my "mispucha" relied on me to communicate information to and from my parents, they treated me as an older kid. They counted on me to take care of and watch out for my parents, and they trusted me to be responsible for my cousins. As a practical matter, it meant that I was given

the money to buy tickets for the movies and dispense a child's version of justice.

Outsiders spoke to me, instead of my parents. In our roles as interpreters, I think we simply have an opportunity to talk to more adults about adult topics than other children. I also think there were very selfish reasons for behaving and acting like a small adult: in some ways it was easier to be good. If I were bad someone would have to talk to my parents, and if that happened, I would be called in to interpret. At the same time, I don't want to mislead you about my "goodness".

When I was about 10-years-old, one of my cousins and I were caught throwing rocks at passing railroad cars. Two railroad detectives divided us up and took us home to meet our respective parents. As we approached my house, I turned to the officer and said: "Sire, my parents are deaf and I will need to interpret for you." He responded by letting me go home by myself but made me promise to tell my parents what had happened. What's amazing is I knew I was manipulating him and expected his response. And what's more amazing is that I did, indeed, tell my parents and was rewarded with a whipping.

INTERPRETING – Although I can understand most deaf people, I am not a particularly good expressive interpreter and have never done it professionally, for money. In fact, I grew up interpreting the old-fashioned way: I would watch my parents and then turn to the hearing person and translate. For me, interpreting was simply a way of communicating family business. In retrospect, what was important was not my ability in sign language but the fact that I was in the middle – as a mediator, arbiter, explainer, or simply a helper. My parents expected me to interpret all family business. Given the fact that neither of my parents had a very good command of English; I was forced to learn how to explain concepts simply and accurately. I say accurately because whenever something went wrong, they held me personally accountable. Needless to say, I didn't particularly enjoy this role. I've had my share of stomach cramps and feeling ill because I didn't want to interpret, and to this day I avoid the telephone whenever possible – we never had one which meant I had to go to the drugstore or a neighbor's house to make phone calls. But in the end, I always did it because I saw no other alternative. My parents were deaf and I was hearing and that was my job. It taught me that I could do things I didn't want to do and that, of course would be a useful life skill.

ROLE MODELS – I always knew my parents were good people. I spent enough time in clubs for the deaf to become acquainted with people who were drunks or got into fights – so I knew my folks were respectable and good. At the same time, I didn't want to be like them and early on determined I was not going to be poor or remain in my neighborhood. My role models were outside my immediate family and, for that matter, outside of deafness. As a child I never knew or met any deaf teachers or professionals in the field of deafness and my parents never suggested that I work with the deaf.

CONCLUSION – So, how did I get involved in deafness? When I was 18 there was a hearing man in my Boy Scout troop named Sam. He was a role model for me and an architect. Although I didn't know anything about architecture, I knew that he had gone to college, and so I knew I would do the same. Fortunately, I received a scholarship. My mom's contribution was, "Don't go to college, it will hurt your brain." She was right, it did, in fact, hurt the brain. Her advice didn't have anything to do with deafness she simply didn't want to see her only baby leave home.

Eventually, I returned to Indiana and earned degrees in history. My graduate studies were in constitutional and colonial history, but I still wasn't sure whether I wanted to teach in that area or go on to law school. I was interested in helping people and that's why I was struggling with my career choices.

I subsequently went to Washington, D.C. for a summer internship in the manuscript department of the Library of Congress. On the first day there, as my supervisor introduced me around, we met a young man standing in a corner of the stack area. The supervisor informed me, "He is deaf, he won't hear you." Now this was 1963, and the Library of Congress didn't know what to do with a deaf person. It turned out that he was an employee and a Gallaudet College graduate – their token disabled employee who didn't meet up to their expectations. Since I could communicate with him, I learned about Gallaudet, went to visit the campus and was completely unimpressed. I forgot about Gallaudet and devoted myself to my work and civil rights activities for the rest of the summer. Later, when I returned to Washington, D.C. to attend Georgetown Law School, BJ and I were married. And like graduate students everywhere, we were desperate for money so I obtained a part-time job teaching three history classes at Gallaudet. It was an interesting

time because we were in Washington during the violence and riots that occurred after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. At the time, I was not back into deafness but I recognized my interest in helping people because I was in a storefront working as a law intern with Black clients.

My contact with Gallaudet was a part of the process of coming back home. I was beginning to use the skills I had with deaf people so instead of law clerking, I taught in the history department at Gallaudet. That gave me the opportunity to do all kinds of neat things and to have an impact, which wouldn't have been possible otherwise. At Gallaudet, we began talking with the staff and attorneys from George Washington University about setting up a new national law center for the deaf. I believed that deaf people could be attorneys – I didn't see any reason whey that could not happen. I also believed that deaf people could earn doctorates. When I first came to Gallaudet there were only 25 Ph.D.'s on the entire campus, and only one was held by a deaf person (Dick Phillips). As Dean, I decided to push deaf people to get their doctoral degrees even if I had to kick their butts, beat them over the head, or do other things that some people wouldn't understand.

I don't mean to use these two examples and say I accomplished them by myself – there were many other hearing and deaf people involved. But I believed they were possible because of my Coda experience and I was in a position to make things happen. I never doubted that deaf persons could do these things; it was never a question of "could" but "how" they might be accomplished. Gallaudet gave me that opportunity to come home and find myself. I left administration in 1985 for the opportunity to devote more energy to history.

Going back a little bit, in 1980, I decided to apply my skills as a historian to deafness. In spite of my Coda background, no one had ever said much to me about deaf history. At Gallaudet I had taught straight history and so to remedy this gap, I initiated an oral history project and talked to deaf people about their life experiences. I developed video techniques for use in a series of oral history interviews with members of my dad's senior citizen's – Happy Hands – club in Washington, D.C. For the first time, I learned about deaf pilots in the 1940's, deaf actors who had performed in silent films and deaf politicians who fought against "oralist" superintendents.

One thing that disturbed me in these interviews was to realize that most of the deaf people with whom I talked – about silent movies for example – could tell me about Lon Chaney (who was a Coda) but they couldn't tell me about such deaf actors as Granville Redmond. I was disturbed that this aspect of deaf heritage was not being preserved, so I decided to devote my energies to the heritage of our deaf community. The most recent result of this work has been the publication of Hollywood Speaks. I'll close by quoting the first paragraph from the preface:

"When introduced to strangers, his father pointed a finger at his son, uttered a sound like 'boy', and clasped an open hand to his chest in a possessive gesture. Then his father closed his hand in a fist, which represented the letter 's' in the manual alphabet, and tapped it lightly to the chin. Thus, the father introduced his son, Stanley."

That's me, folks! I thank you for the opportunity to open up a little further with fellow Codas and I hope these personal remarks will help us all gain further insight in our ongoing efforts to understand the Coda experience.

Thank you.