

Joe Myklebust and Deaf Advocacy

As well as being of Norwegian descent I am also a CODA, a child of deaf adults. My father, Joseph Myklebust, was a man with many accomplishments in many areas. I am writing about his role as an advocate for the deaf population.

Joe was the youngest of eight children born to Sam and Alis Myklebust who came to the US from Norway in 1903 finally settling in Southwest Minnesota. Sam and Alis had 2 deaf children, Joe and his sister Bertha. Both attended the Minnesota School for the Deaf in Faribault, Minnesota. Through these children Sam and Alis became interested in the deaf and hosted an annual picnic for more than 100 deaf children and adults from far and near to participate in games and eat sandwiches, ice cream, cookies, and cake. Joe's two brothers became prominent in fields related to deafness. Brother Art became superintendent of the South Dakota School for the Deaf. Brother Helmer became an internationally known researcher in speech and hearing and learning disabilities.

Despite family acceptance and support, in the first half of the twentieth century, it was impossible for deaf individuals to obtain life insurance at an affordable rate. In 1901 the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf ("the Frat") was established to provide insurance, advocacy, community service, and recreational opportunities. Joe was a lifelong member, serving as an officer of the Frat for many years in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and later in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

A related issue was that automobile insurance was also difficult to obtain for deaf individuals. Joe's only moving violation came in 1939 when, as a recent graduate of the Minnesota School for the Deaf, he didn't hear a fire engine siren and failed to yield right of way. He turned himself in to the local authorities and had his license suspended for 30 days. When I was growing up in Council Bluffs, Iowa more than 25 years later, the only way he could get insurance was through the assigned risk pool. One of the remarkable ironies was that when I was added to the policy as a teenager with a less than stellar driving record but able to hear, Joe could get standard insurance and the premium decreased!

Along with the Frat, Joe was an officer in the Sioux Falls and Council Bluffs Silent Clubs. He became president of the Iowa Association of the Deaf (IAD), ultimately being inducted into the IAD Hall of Fame. In this capacity he was appointed by Governor Robert Ray of Iowa to the Iowa Advisory Committee on the Deaf from 1976-1979. In 1977 he was extensively quoted in the Congressional Record by Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa. Joe noted that "there's very, very few (deaf people) on welfare – They are usually underemployed". It is interesting to note that Senator Harkin had a deaf brother and authored the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It is an interesting side note that Senator Harkin introduced the ADA using sign language so that his brother could understand.

One related phenomenon is "deaf peddlers". Deaf individuals would descend on a local business "selling" articles such as cards with the manual alphabet for the deaf. Joe, as well as

the large majority of the deaf community were embarrassed and outraged at this activity, just a short step above begging. Joe was co-author of a letter to the editor of the Argus Leader newspaper in Sioux Falls in 1947 that implored the population to ignore and not encourage these “peddlers”. He pointed out that anyone who wanted a card with sign language could get it free from any deaf individual in the city.

My personal experience with this phenomenon came when I was about 10 years old in a restaurant in Council Bluffs, Iowa where our family was eating dinner. My parents were always very discreet with their signing to avoid calling undue attention to our family. You can imagine my surprise when suddenly they were signing with large arm movements – the equivalent of shouting. There were peddlers going from table to table dropping off manual alphabet cards with a notation asking for 25 cents. My parents hoped that their display of signing would discourage the beggars and they would leave. This didn’t work so Joe got up and directly confronted the individuals and told them in no uncertain terms that they were an embarrassment, they should leave and get legitimate jobs. My mother was trying to explain what was going on to other patrons in the restaurant. I think of this event every time I encounter a panhandler.

Joe was trained as a printer at the Minnesota School for the Deaf. He spent 35 years working for newspapers as a typesetter and then became a co-founder of the Interpreter’s Training Program at Iowa Western Community College in Council Bluffs, Iowa. While he had a significant role at the state and national level advocating for the deaf community, he was also a leader in his hometown serving as a role model for young deaf men and women helping them to thrive in the hearing world. I remember many times when people would come to our house looking for advice and support. He was always there for them.