

JENNÉ CHALFANT INTERVIEW, PART TWO

Interviewer: How do you use an SSP for transportation? You mentioned driving places, do you ride the bus or take their car?... can you talk about an SSP specifically with regard to transportation?

Jenné Chalfant: Personally, I like the bus. I go lots of places on the bus. When I first meet with the SSP I ask if they would prefer to ride the bus or drive. Most of the time the SSP will offer to drive and that's fine. So an SSP typically comes with a car but once in a while, we walk. I like the exercise. You don't always need a car. It's good for the environment and it's nice to just get out and have a good walk together. So, it really varies. It depends on my mood. It's not essential to always have a car. It's not necessary. But if a DB person prefers to have a ride, they can negotiate with the SSP and should offer to pay for gas.

Interviewer: How did you transition from using your tunnel vision to using more touch [JC: Yes.] and how did you inform the SSP? You used to have tunnel vision and stand back to see better, work hard to try and catch all that someone was saying but then you transitioned gradually to a more tactual way of communicating. How did you expose your SSP when you realized that you needed more touch, how did you tell the SSP?

Jenné Chalfant: Yes, I remember, I can recall being able to communicate through Sign Language visually and then my vision decreased as the tunnel of vision got smaller. But I didn't so much go through that period of standing further back to see more; I moved pretty quickly to putting my hands on the signer. So, how I told the SSP, well first I should say it just felt more natural putting my hands on people, for example, you know that people have 5 senses: hearing, vision, feeling, taste, and smell. So as a deaf person I lost hearing and had four, then later lost vision so I had three, so the sense of touch became my power. It's very, very powerful; it's a way to communicate. More than anything else it's communication, connection with people through communication. So when I first meet an SSP, I just say it, "I prefer touch, tactile signing; I can't see signing" and ask "Are you comfortable?" or I would say, "I hope you don't mind using touch, I can't see you clearly, is it all right if I touch your hands?" I give them full information about what I want. But I'm not really afraid, but I ask if they mind first. It was educating them about what I wanted and about touch to touch them or have them touch me. It's important to inform them, be direct and put it out there. You can't just say nothing or be afraid and expect the SSP to read your mind. No. It's up to you as the DB person to inform the SSP fully what you want because they otherwise how would they know? So you have to tell them about touch, educate them.

... I remember when I worked for the Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc. for 7, close to 7 years, when some of the staff members said to me, "I have to be honest with you, I

notice that your eyes have gotten worse.” It was kind of a shock to hear that and my first response was no, that I didn’t think so. But they all said yes, that I was misunderstanding things pretty regularly. It was hard to take. Communication is so critical, but I was embarrassed, confused and didn’t know what to do. One of the staff members educated me about communication options. She said you can start using tracking¹ or you can stand back further and make sure you have the person clearly in your range of vision [with good lighting etc.] or you can start using tactile Sign Language.

I just took that in and didn’t really respond. I didn’t really want to do any of those; I liked signing as a deaf person. I missed it so much. I remember I was in a little bit of denial, not serious, but a little bit. So I left work and stayed home. I had 2 kids who were 3 and 5 at the time. They would sign to me and I didn’t fully catch everything they said but I just let it go and then, it hit me BAM! ME! I’M MISSING WHAT MY OWN KIDS ARE SAYING!!! I felt disgusted with myself. I thought what am I doing? They look up to me and good communication is so important. They understood I was deaf but not yet that I was going blind. They didn’t understand. They were just innocent little children doing their best. I didn’t want to ruin our relationship! So that was it. That was the turning point. I knew I had to get over my feelings and just do it. So I determined to go ahead, and put my hands on theirs. At first, of course, the kids resisted. They were irritated. But with practice, and determination it got smoother.

I remember at that time, the rest of the DB Community thought I was still relying on my vision to communicate. That’s what I did in public but I worked hard to practice in secret; I just kept on practicing. And then I decided to ‘come out’. I was terrified but I screwed up my courage and just put my hands out to feel the other person’s signing and I was so surprised, they all smiled and said, “Good for you. I’m so glad you decided to start using tactile signing, because you’re being honest with yourself.” Communication is so important. From there on I was comfortable using tactile signing.

But I’ll tell you the truth – I can’t tell you how important communication is! I can’t even imagine if I was still in denial and still trying to get by, just pretending but not understanding like a dummy. It’s classic, of course, people with Usher getting only parts of what people say, just pretending they are understanding. It has to stop! Don’t do it! Tactile is worth it. I’ve been using tactile signing for 7 years now.

My advice to DB people is remember who you are. You remember yourself as a hopeful little deaf child full of energy, life and curiosity, learning about the world, right? Then as you grew up your vision got worse and worse, the tunnel got smaller and smaller, right? But stay strong. Be brave, remember who you are. Don’t feel helpless.

¹ Placing your [the DB person’s] hand on the wrist of the signer to help your eyes track better.

Work with the SSP; know it is your decisions that matter. Remember, it is your power, your life; it doesn't matter that you are blind. Keep thinking for yourself. Imagine how you want to live your life. When your vision gets bad, partner up with an SSP. It is your tasks with their eyes; you work together. Don't let the SSP take over. Remember the SSP works for you. [interviewer: yes, right] You have to tell the SSP what you need. You can't expect the SSP to read your mind. [interviewer: Right, right.] Be creative, be assertive, and communicate. This service belongs to you. Also, your power is incredibly precious. Keep your power. Work with the SSP, support them and have them guide you using their eyes to whatever and wherever you decide you want to go.

I hope you fully enjoy using an SSP.

Interviewer: That's absolutely right!