

# THE baRRicAdE to

by Michelle Bourgeois

*Cet article raconte comment les malentendantes qui résident au nord de l'Ontario sont affectées par la pénurie d'interprètes.*

We are young Deaf womyn who were born feminists. We want to speak out. We want to educate the world for our future Deaf children and pave the path for those who will follow. Unfortunately, a barricade was built centuries ago and we are still trying to tear it down; a barricade that was imposed on us by the hearing world, by the bureaucratic government, and by an ignorant society. It is a barricade that stands before a collapsed bridge to communication.

Picture this: Susan,<sup>1</sup> a young Deaf womyn, is getting married. At the reception, Susan squirms in her seat next to her husband who is hearing, glancing at the crowd that sits before her. They laugh during the best man's toast. Susan doesn't laugh. She smiles to acknowledge the laughter but not the person's remarks. You know why? None of the American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters were available that day.

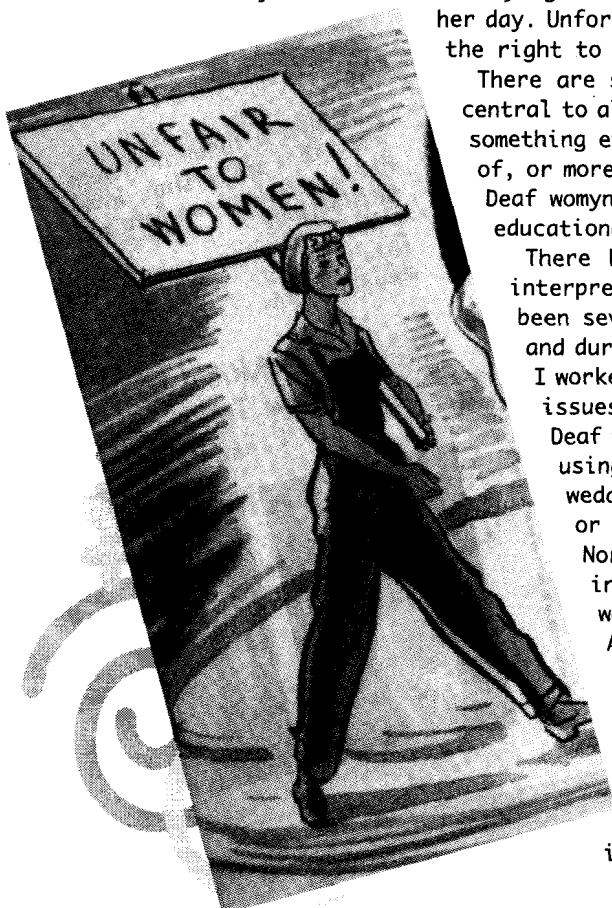
This could actually happen. Susan, whose wedding is taking place this summer, can not find an interpreter in Northern Ontario where she lives. I am Susan's maid of honour and I would also like an interpreter at the wedding, so I took over the responsibility of finding one. As I write this paper, I am doing a call for interpreters here in Southern Ontario and hope that at least one interpreter would be willing to come up North for a day. Susan should not be denied a sign language interpreter at her own wedding. In effect, society

is denying her right to know what is going on, and her right to enjoy her day. Unfortunately, this is not new. Society has been denying her the right to accessible communication since she was born.

There are so many issues that Deaf womyn have to deal with and central to all these issues is communication. Among those issues is something every Deaf community in Canada suffers from: a shortage of, or more accurately, a lack of interpreters. As a consequence, Deaf womyn have limited or no access to the medical, legal, and educational system.

There has been a great deal of advocacy for the need of interpreters in Southern Ontario, however, Northern Ontario has been severely neglected. I lived in North Bay for five years and during that time, I became very involved in activist work. I worked with people on many different issues: gay and lesbian issues, disability issues, womyn's issues, and of course, Deaf issues. During the time I lived in North Bay, I starting using interpreters at meetings, conferences, and even at weddings. However, these events occurred either in Toronto or Sudbury where there were interpreters available. In North Bay, I often sat through meetings without an interpreter trying contribute what I could. Normally, I would wait for someone to cue me and ask me what I thought. Almost every time they asked for input, I would have to ask what the discussion was about.

I can count on one hand how many interpreters we had in the North. Trying to get an interpreter to come to a meeting in North Bay was a lost cause. Interpreters from Sudbury were often booked up for in-city events and needed to be booked at the very least two weeks in advance for all events, and especially for out-of-city



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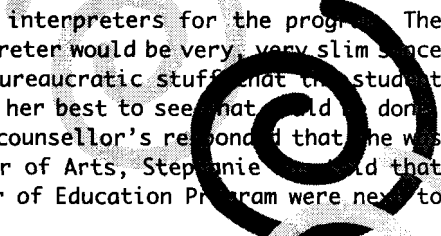

events. To remedy the situation, videoconferencing was set up recently in Northern Ontario by The Canadian Hearing Society (CHS) in Sudbury to connect with other cities too far to travel to. Interpreters from Sudbury could thus go online and interpret for a Deaf womyn at a meeting in the CHS Office in North Bay. This is a good step to removing communication barriers for the Northern Deaf community. However, the videoconferencing is only available, for the most part, in the CHS offices. Very often we go to activist meetings or conferences in smaller cities like Sunridge or Muskoka where it would be impossible to get an interpreter. Three reasons account for this: the meeting or conference could not afford to pay an interpreter, the interpreter was booked, or the interpreter could not travel that far. We would be obliged to sit through meetings relying on computerized note-taking or a friend who knew sign language (like asking a first-year medical student to perform heart surgery), or with nothing but the vague hope of making some sense of what was going on.

ASL interpreters contribute to creating a signing environment where we can express ourselves freely, where we can exercise our right to educate ourselves and people around us, and simply to participate. While I was living in the Bay, these rights were denied. We had protests, conferences, and meetings with representatives from the Ontario government, all concerning accessibility for Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. We urged the government to take action on an issue that was long neglected in Northern Ontario but they did nothing.

I organized a press conference last year in North Bay which had a representative panel of Deaf womyn and men who shared their experiences about lack of interpreters in the North. One Deaf womyn, Chloe, had a challenging experience with the courts regarding custody of her two children. She had requested on a number of occasions that ASL interpreters be provided during the court proceedings. The courts refused to pay for an interpreter. Chloe was forced to proceed without interpreters at the custody hearing for her two children. Miscommunications occurred and as a result, Chloe lost custody of the children. If there had been an interpreter, the situation might have turned out differently. Chloe may have had a chance to express herself and the case may have ended in her favour. Chloe went on fighting for years before she finally gained partial custody of her children. However, this entire ordeal was *not* necessary. She had a right to have an interpreter in the court. She had a right to request a delay until an interpreter was provided. Instead, the judicial system, and the government officials forced her to proceed and fall prey to injustice.

Education in the North for Deaf womyn and men has been extremely challenging. Stephanie, for example, decided to move to northern Ontario to attend university because the community suited her; it was small and very friendly. While she was studying for her B.A. in psychology, she simultaneously prepared for Teacher's College offered at the same university. During her B.A. program, Stephanie used a computerized note-taker system. Later, Stephanie decided that she wanted ASL interpreters for the Bachelor of Education Program. She asked the Special






Needs Counsellor well in advance to try and recruit interpreters for the program. The counsellor indicated that chances of getting an interpreter would be very, very slim since the university is small and has very little money (bureaucratic stuff that the student does not need to know). However, she said she would do her best to see what could be done. When Stephanie checked periodically for updates, the counsellor's response was that she was still working on it. In the last year of her Bachelor of Arts, Stephanie was told that the chances of getting an interpreter in the Bachelor of Education Program were next to none.

The government should have intervened and helped the Special Needs Office but they did not. Stephanie was told that services are better in Southern Ontario and encouraged her to move. She struggled with the issue for a while as she really did not want to move. Eventually, Stephanie decided it might be good to get away from this barrier madness and was amazed at the accessibility of services that were offered in Southern Ontario. Interpreters were available on the spot. Stephanie did not have to fight for them.

Not every Deaf individual will want to move South where interpreter services are more readily available. There are Deaf womyn and men who love the North, have family, friends and community in the North, and plan to stay there for a long time to come.

In the medical system, barriers still continue to build while we fight to remove existing ones. Consider this scenario: a 19-year-old Deaf womyn has been severely attacked by an abuser and needs to go to the hospital. What are the chances of having an interpreter arrive and interpret the conversation between the womyn and the personnel? Next to none. As an abused womyn, not only does she have to survive the abuse she receives from her attacker, but the neglect abuse from the system that is supposed to provide her with support. Instead they give her a pen and paper. Deaf womyn in this situation often use pen and paper as a last resort. Miscommunications often occur and things can go awry. Deaf womyn are fighting to change that. We are fighting along with others in the Deaf community to ensure that hospitals enforce policies where interpreters will be called when Deaf individuals are admitted. The Supreme Court in British Columbia, for example, ruled that all hospitals in B.C. must enforce such a policy. We are still waiting for the rest of Canada to catch up.

Like young women everywhere, young Deaf womyn are also dealing with continuing inequities in their lives. Our struggle to define our relationships within the Deaf and hearing communities makes our battles that much harder. We are fighting to be recognized as womyn with rights, but also, we are fighting to be recognized as Deaf womyn with rights. The lack of availability of interpreters undermines young Deaf womyn's attempts to achieve equitable access at all levels of society, and this is an issue that must no longer be ignored.



This article is designed to paint only a microcosmic picture of what is happening in the faces of Deaf womyn in northern Ontario. To this day, I can still count on one hand how many interpreters we have. We will not move because of the lack of interpreters. We will not move because the government or agencies continue to say they do not have the money. With or without interpreters, our hands will continue to sign with such passion while we fight for our right to a fair and accessible education, while we fight for fair working conditions, while we fight for a better life, while we fight for zero tolerance on violence against womyn, while we fight for our right to be heard. While we are fighting for our rights, we are also striving and pushing our way through the socially-constructed tangled web of oppression and discrimination, tearing down the barricades to build piece by piece a bridge to communication—the bridge to roads we have a right to walk on.

*Michelle Bourgeois is a 25-year-old Deaf womyn who will soon be graduating from the York University Faculty of Education and will pursue further studies at York to become a teacher for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing children. Michelle has been very involved as an activist advocating on issues that are of concern to the Deaf Community, womyn, people with disabilities, and the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community. Michelle is currently involved with the Young Women's Anti-Violence Speaker's Bureau formed by the Metro Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC), Deaf Womyn Against Violence Everywhere (DOWAVE), and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) on issues concerning young women and women with disabilities.*

<sup>1</sup>Names of the womyn presented in this paper are fictional.