

The following is a transcript of the Focus on the Family broadcast for September 22, 2011, titled "Raising and Reaching the Deaf for Christ."

John Fuller: Today's Focus on the Family guest, Marshall Lawrence, shares his heart for the deaf community:

Marshall: "The biggest problem, the biggest handicap deaf people have in the United States today isn't that they don't hear. It's that they don't know Jesus. Only two percent know Christ as Savior. But most deaf people today will be born, will grow up, will live, and will die without ever once having seen the gospel presented to them clearly in their own language."

John: We'll hear more about this unique group of people and insights from a father's heart on this addition of Focus on the Family with Focus president, Jim Daly, and psychologist, Dr. Juli Slattery. And I'm John Fuller.

Jim Daly: John, I was shocked to hear this news but there are about 25 million people in the United States with some form of hearing loss. And there's many more around the world. One in four families have at least one member who is deaf or hard of hearing. And one in 22 children is born with some kind of hearing problem.

And, as you'll hear from today's speaker, Marshall Lawrence, the deaf community is a mission field that really isn't being touched and yet they live all around us and they're right there! They also need to hear the gospel. We've got to reach out to them with the love of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Well before you get into Marshall's story, we want to make sure that people know that he's speaking from his own experience; that he actually is a parent of a deaf child. But we know as we speak to many families that you might have someone in your family like a parent or a sibling who's hearing impaired.

And regardless of the demographic we just want you to see what it's like for a family to walk through this particular challenge and how God has used it in their lives.

John: And our speaker today has, as we've indicated, a great desire to reach out with the gospel to this community. Marshall Lawrence is a singer/songwriter and he heads up a deaf ministry called Silent Blessings. He and his wife, Terri, have two daughters. One is Carol. The other, Rachel, was born deaf. Here now is Marshall Lawrence, as recorded at a church event on today's Focus on the Family.

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Marshall: How many of you are parents or children of parents? (Laughter)

Had to think about that one for a minute, didn't you? We have two children. We have a 25-year-old who now knows all that is knowable. Do you know the type? Yeah. And

then we have a 17-year-old who's deaf. So, for years in our family we've said we have two daughters, one who can't hear and one who won't listen. (Laughter)

I love both of my daughters greatly. I don't love the one more than the other. I certainly love them differently. That's only human nature, but I love both of them, and I cherish them both. I have to admit that the younger one changed my life a lot more than the older one. The older one is hearing. The younger one is deaf.

I was amazed at how different your life is without the tether of sound. When you can't call your child, you have to get their attention visually. That was one of the biggest changes. There are a lot of changes that have happened in our lives, but I will tell you if the Lord had sent me a business reply card, "Please fill out the qualities you want your child to have," I would never have asked for a deaf child.

But her deafness has opened up a world to us we didn't even know existed. When we found out that Rachel was deaf, we talked first to the doctors, and they have ideas. And then you talk to other people, and they have ideas. When it comes to the education of your children, it's hard to know what to do. I really felt that she needed a language to think in, a language to be able to manipulate ideas with.

That's how you use your language most, you know? For yourself, not for other people. You talk to yourself all the time, and don't you sit there and tell me you don't talk to yourself. I know better. You talk to yourself far more than you talk to other people, so you need to have some linguistic system in place that you really own so that you can start doing that.

I knew that our daughter had to have some kind of linguistic system and I didn't know how to give her one. So I felt that sign language was the best for her. But was I going to take her to a sign language tutor? Maybe an hour a day or something? You don't learn language very well if all you have is an hour a day!

So we decided that the best thing to do would be to put her in the deaf school, and that was a really hard decision to make. Our deaf school was three hours from home. And I hated that idea. I hated to do that. We kept knocking on the door to find opportunities to move down to Indianapolis, where the deaf school was located, but God never opened up those opportunities. And it wasn't that we didn't try.

And it was hard for us for many years to understand that. Why would God want us to do that? Why wouldn't He make it possible for us to live together as a family since then? Because I felt that that was the best alternative. But I think God had some other purpose in mind for us.

So, we took her down to the deaf school. I'll never forget the first day we got into the deaf school. She looked around, and she saw these other kids with hearing aids on. She ran to me, and she could only speak like two-or three-word sentences at that time. She was almost five years old, but that's all she could do. But she saw these other kids

with the hearing aids, and she ran to me, and she was so excited. And she said, "Look, same me, same me." I'd hoped she hadn't noticed. Of course she'd noticed.

Then when it came time to leave her there, she thought she was abandoned, and it took several weeks of her coming home on the bus on the weekends to realize that, no, this is school, and they still love me. She started in the second semester of the year, and by the time summer came around; I saw her one morning signing in her sleep. I thought, "Ah, she has a language of the heart now. She has the language to dream in and think in. Now, we can start to communicate."

Of course, I had to acquire that language, too. That was the hard part, you know? She drank it in like a sponge. For an old tired dad whose brain isn't very elastic anymore, that was a hard job. But I felt I had to do that because this is my child. I have to have a relationship with my child. I have to find a way to do this. So, I worked hard, and I learned sign language. I don't do it great, but I learned it.

I think the journey that we've been on has been surprising because it changed the direction of our ministry so totally. And the reason for that is that after Rachel was born we found that it's not just a matter of coping with our own child and the communication issues that we have, but I started to see how other families in a similar situation were dealing with these issues themselves.

So the first thing we tried to do after Rachel started to acquire some language skills, was to try to find Christian materials in sign language for children. And I asked my pastor, and he didn't have a clue. I asked other people in the community, Christian leaders, and they had no clue. And I went to the Christian bookstore, and they had no clue. Nobody had a clue.

It was when I went to Anderson to the television complex there, and I went there to visit because I'm thinking, "If nobody else is putting these things together, I'm going to get some prices, and I'm going to find some interpreters. And we're going to figure out how to do some Bible stories for deaf kids."

Wouldn't you know it, the day that I got in there to get the 'nickel tour' -- I swear this is the truth -- you remember the video that was showing when you came in tonight with the sign language to the Christian songs? That's what they were editing when I walked in the room. I said, "I've got to talk to the people in the control room," and I barged right in, and I met these wonderful people. And that's how I began the process of being involved in some of these projects that these people were doing. And I'd write my little songs for these projects.

The first one we did was "Special Me." It was just a few months after that that I was up in Wisconsin and doing a service very much like this. And in the back row there was this family of five—three children and a mother and a father—and one of the children, apparently, was deaf. After the service we came out, and we talked and so forth. And I gave this little girl these tapes. She was the same age as my little girl, Rachel.

But her mother wrote me a letter three weeks later, and in the letter she said, "You know, our daughter knows who Jesus is, and at night we all try to sign the prayer around the dinner table. And if we forget, she reminds us. But whenever we asked her to pray, she wouldn't do it. And then she saw this tape you gave us, and there's the one part where there's a little boy kneeling beside his bed, and he's praying with his hands only—no voice, no talking, just his hands. When my daughter saw that, she ran into the kitchen, and she signed so excitedly, 'Mommy, Jesus knows sign language!'"

She didn't know before that He would know her language. She had never seen a prayer only signed. The only prayers she had ever seen were either talking prayers or talking and signing. So she assumed Jesus is hearing; "I can't talk, how can I pray? He wouldn't understand me." And when I read that, I mean, I just started to cry. And then at the bottom it said, "P.S., now she won't let anybody else pray." (Laughter)

Wow! Listen, every little girl needs to know that Jesus knows their language. Every little boy needs to know that God knows what they need and knows their heart and knows their language; that every child has access to Jesus, every child. And that was probably the first event on my journey to become involved in this full time.

Rachel and I took a visit one time out to Gallaudet University. Gallaudet is the deaf university in Washington, DC. You have to be deaf to be a student there. So, we went out there to see this because I thought "Here's a deaf child...this is part of her heritage. She needs to know about this place. She might wind up going there someday." So she was about, oh, I'd say, maybe eight.

A woman came up to me who was hearing with kind of tears in her eyes. She said, "I just wanted to tell you how special it is, how rare it is, to see a father sign to his child. I've worked at this deaf school for 18 years, and you're only the second dad I've ever seen do that."

And I couldn't believe that. It just broke my heart. So, we're both standing there in the middle of the commons area sniveling, you know? I couldn't even conceive that a dad wouldn't learn sign language. I have since found out that fewer than two percent of fathers ever learn how to sign to their children—to their deaf kids.

Now let me give you the stats a little bit here. Ninety percent of all deaf children have hearing mothers and fathers. Only about eight percent of those parents ever learn enough sign language to have a conversation with their children. It's unbelievable to me, but I've seen too many incidences where it's happened.

I remember Rachel...I dropped her off at one of her friend's house. She was in high school by this time. Dropped her off at one of her friend's houses for the weekend. And then, when I picked her up, I said, "How did things go?" She said, "Well, I had a great time, but it was kind of weird." We're doing all this in sign language, you understand. I'm paraphrasing it here for you. I said, "What do you mean, weird?" She said, "Well, all

weekend long I was interpreting between my friend and her mom. They were having some disagreement about something, and her mom doesn't sign, and my friend doesn't hear. Her mom kept trying to talk to her, so they talked to me because I could read lips better, and then I would sign it to my friend. Then my friend would sign to me, and I would explain it to her mom. After awhile I started calling her mom my mom. It was just really weird." I said, "Wow!"

We drove in silence for a little bit and that kind of sunk in. And then, all of a sudden she popped up and she said, "I wonder what they do when I'm not there." Here's a 17-year-old girl, but at the time in her life when she needs probably the most depth of support by mom and dad, and her parents have no tools to communicate with this child. That's the norm in the deaf community.

If you were deaf, would you be here today? No, probably not. If you were deaf, would you know Christ? Probably not. How would you find out about him? Through your parents? Well we already know that most of the parents don't know sign language. If the children are going to learn about Jesus, it's not going to be at home because mom and dad don't have the tools. Through the church? Honestly, my church was of very little help at all. It wasn't that the people didn't know us or love us or care about us, but they had no tools, no resources, and no knowledge. They couldn't help much.

The biggest problem, the biggest handicap deaf people have in the United States today isn't that they don't hear; it's that they don't know Jesus. Only two percent know Christ as Savior, but most deaf people today will be born, will grow up, will live, and will die without ever once having seen the gospel presented to them clearly in their own language. The question is what do we do?

The more we've gotten into this, the more we've found that deaf people have their own society. They have their own jokes. They have their own friends. They have their own poetry. They have their own language. They have their own culture, and their culture is different than what we think it might be. How they feel about the world, how they feel about themselves... Deaf people are different. I mean, we're all the same, but we're all different, too.

And deaf people see the world differently than you do. For example, deaf people can't hear behind them. They can only hear from here in front. If you see two people across the room and they're talking away and every now and then they glance in your direction and they giggle, you might think that they're talking about you... (if you don't know what they're talking about, if you can't hear them). But you know, hearing people, you know how we are. We'll talk and then we'll kind of gaze somewhere else as we continue to talk and then we might look at you again, you know. Sometimes we do that. We just kinda gaze off into nowhere as we collect our thoughts and then we get to the punch line and then we laugh. These people over here who are deaf, they don't know that you're not talking about them. If you don't know what's going on, you get a little paranoid sometimes.

Why would deaf people come into a narthex full of people in a church and everybody's talking, and they're out there, and they're all alone. And then they come down here to the cheap seats down here where nobody sits except Brother Glenn because that's where the sign interpreter is. They don't have a sense of community when they come to church because they don't really know anybody here. And it's very hard for them to understand what's going on. You might love the music. They're not getting any of the melody or harmony.

And if they do see the words up on the screen, they may understand those words, and they may not because generally they're written in rhyme which is a what? Two words that *sound* alike. That's a hearing thing right there. Sometimes you use terms that are idioms, expressions that don't really translate word-for-word to the deaf.

So most churches that have a sign language interpreter, in the past, I always thought, "Well, that's pretty good." Now I think, "That's a little start, but if they're not doing something else to build community, to build a sense of, of belonging, to really go that extra mile to make sure that things are communicated properly, to start with some kind of a small group ministry, to be involved in that deaf community, those are some of the issues that we began to discover. We've got to do a better job. We've got to find ways to do it that we haven't done in the past.

We were doing the "Finger Food Café" last year. We'd had a little disagreement on the set focused around my signing of a phrase, a line in the show. And, I was signing it wrong according to some deaf people, and honestly, I wanted to sign it the best way I could, whatever they thought was right, then that's what I was willing to do. But somehow or another, the deaf people all started arguing about what's the right way to sign it. They all were using different ASL or sign language colloquialisms.

So, after we had finished the taping session for that night I had to drive Rachel back to the dormitory. We were doing the taping in Anderson, Indiana. Rachel's school was in Indianapolis, Indiana, so that's about a 40-minute drive. And then I was driving back to Anderson. I was depressed because if I had known my job better, if I could sign better, we'd have been all set. But I know that I don't sign as well as I'd like to, and God and I are having a little argument.

"I know you're Sovereign, and I know you're Lord. But You messed up this time. See, because You chose me to do this, and I don't have the skill to do this, and I don't know what I'm doing. And You've got to find somebody else who knows what they're doing 'cause I'm not doing a very good job of it. I don't have the talent. I don't have the skills. I don't have the patience. I don't have the wisdom. You make one mistake, but this is it!" I was not happy.

So, I had to pull into this gas station. We're out in the middle of no place. It was like cricket city, you know what I mean? All you heard was the crickets. That was it. I pulled up to get this gasoline, and right behind me in the middle of no place, pulls up a car with a deaf couple in it. "Now what are they doing there?" (Laughter)

I pumped the gas. I thought, "I'll go in there. I'll pay real quick. I'll get on the road." I go in there, and I get in line. But I'm waiting there, and I want to get out of there, and sure enough here these deaf people come right behind me. They're signing to one another. Now I know what they're saying. It's really rude for me not to let them know that I know what they're saying. Don't you think that would be rude?

And I felt really stuck, so I signed to the guy. And his wife has seen this. "You're hearing?" I said, "Yeah, I'm hearing. My daughter is deaf. She's in the deaf school." "You sign so skillfully." (I'm thinking: "Aw, thank you, Lord. I needed that. I really needed that.") So I said, "Well, thank you." She said, "How you learn that? How?" I said, "I go to classes, and I talk with deaf people a lot, and I try to learn and have videotapes, because I really love my daughter, and I need to have a relationship with my daughter."

And she started to cry. She said, "My mom and dad, hearing, sign language they know nothing. Relationship, nothing." Now I'm crying. How many times have I heard that story? "My mom and dad don't know how to talk to me. We have no relationship." She said, "You work where?" "Minister." And she turned to her husband, and she made this sign...you know what that means? Goosebumps. Apparently they had just been talking about religion in the car. She said, "You have a deaf church near here?" And I said, "No, I'm sorry," and I explained a little bit about what we were doing, so we talked a little bit, and then I left.

And I got in the car and started driving back to Anderson. And I said, "Okay, God, You did it to me again. You had to put me there in that place in the middle of 'Cricketville' at that moment in time to meet that couple who didn't live near there who just happened to get gas in 'Cricketville', too, who had to have a conversation with a minister that night to be reminded that God loves them and is pursuing them just as You needed to use them to remind me that I need to just shut up and do my job. That I am right where You want me to be, and while I don't get it and I feel so inadequate, and I know that there are other people who could do this better, You've chosen me, and I'm just going to say, "Yes, sir, whatever you say, sir. Okay, sir." And that's why I'm doing this.

If I'm going to be His ambassador and be involved in the ministry of reconciliation and I see families who can't communicate with one another around the dinner table and I see people who don't know who Jesus is, how can I not do this? I got to do this. I have to do this. Thank you very much. (Applause)

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John: And with that mission statement, a great place to end this powerful message from a man with a huge heart, Marshall Lawrence on today's Focus on the Family.

Jim: John, we aired this program a few years ago and Marshall told us that it had a huge impact for his ministry. Many churches started deaf outreach. Camping programs were started for deaf kids. Young people changed their college majors—this one I really

enjoy—to become American Sign Language interpreters.

And Marshall was even able to develop a TV show called ***Dr. Wonder's Workshop*** that uses sign language to teach Christian values to deaf kids. I'd like to challenge each one of us to really pray about how the Lord would have you use what you've heard today as an effective ministry right around your community.

Juli: This is really an untapped mission field, Jim. And as Marshall said, only two- to maybe four-percent of the deaf community know Jesus Christ as their Savior, which is absolutely amazing. So we really do need to pray that the Lord would raise up missionaries specifically called to minister to this community.

Jim: You know, Juli, another thing that shocked me was only ten percent of hearing parents actually learn sign language. There's very little communication in the home. I can only imagine for those little ones—those children that struggle to communicate because they can't hear—just that sense of being trapped and not being able to communicate; to talk. Something that we take for granted each and every day.

We're really in need of those types of missionaries to the deaf. As you said, Juli, people who will learn their language and go into their culture with the gospel. That's our main mission here at Focus; to lead people to Christ. And Marshall Lawrence has done a wonderful job reminding us of a group, right here among us, that we need to reach.

John: We'll have follow-up resources for you, including a full season of ***Dr. Wonder's Workshop***—the TV program that was mentioned—and single-episode DVDs of ***Finger Food Café***...and there's also a special Christmas Edition you might want to get for a special someone in your family. I hate talking about Christmas so early but there it is!

And also while you're looking at these resources, find a CD of this broadcast to pass on and find a link to Marshall's ministry, **Silent Blessings** -- he has a free packet available for you to learn more about having a deaf ministry. And then finally, as Jim indicated, our main mission here is to introduce people to Jesus Christ.

And you probably haven't thought much about sharing the gospel with someone in the deaf community but through this program we trust that you've been inspired to do so. When you contribute to Focus on the Family, you're helping bring needs to the attention of those who want to make a difference in this world and you're helping us to reach out and share the gospel so your gift today of 50-dollars or even 100-dollars would be greatly appreciated.

You can make that contribution when you send a check to Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs CO, 80995 or online at www.focusonthefamily.com/radio. Or just donate over the phone. Our number here: 800, the letter A, and the word FAMILY; 800-232-6459; [In Canada, 1-800-661-9800 or www.focusonthefamily.ca]

Our program today was provided by Focus on the Family. And on behalf of Jim Daly,

Dr. Juli Slattery, and the entire team here, thanks for listening in. I'm John Fuller, inviting you back next time when we'll once again, turn our hearts towards home.