

WPSD Hunger Strike interview with Swanhilda Lily:

11/9/2015

Sarika: You fasted for 25 days, right?

Swanhilda: 25 days, right.

Sarika: Why did you stop fasting. And also explain the turn-taking of the fasting that you had told me about earlier.

Swanhilda: Since the last time we talked, I was encouraged to fly to Pittsburgh and actually approach the WPSD with Mateo- another friend from Washington DC and hunger striker. There was a gofundme fundraiser that raised money for both of us to fly to Pittsburgh and join the smaller group of protesters there. I was there Tuesday through Friday - just four days. I was hoping to have a discussion, but there was no response....

Sarika: A discussion with whom exactly?

Swanhilda: Well, with the school's superintendent/CEO or even the Board. I mean the Superintendent - he calls himself a CEO - his office was facing us hunger strikers outside. He knew we were there but we never heard from him. There was no response and he even called the cops to keep an eye on us, move us farther away. There were no problems or altercations - we held a peaceful protest.

So that Friday, the day I was leaving, the school closed at noon for a half day. I was leaving and one hour later, the CEO had written this open letter on facebook! It was on facebook! It was this long, detailed letter that was "in response" to us. I sent it to you, right?

Sarika: Yes, you sent it and I read it.

Swanhilda: He was calling us the outsiders who had no ties to WPSD. But that's not the case! Half of us are alumni from the school! I not only went there, but I also have ties because of my brother (who is an alum) and his family (his children attend the school). He called us bullies and a number of other inappropriate things - he was just making it all up.

It was so disappointing. As a community, we issued a complaint because I mean, what he did wasn't professional or appropriate: avoiding us and then writing this long letter as is void of responsibility.

Oh - to answer your question: The communities in California, Texas, Atlanta, etc. Well each of these places have their own Deaf Associations - like the president of the California Association of the Deaf, Julie Rems-Smario, she joined in the hunger strike as well and started a chain! That's how the turn taking started. It means someone will strike for three days and then someone else will take over for three days. That helps sustain us, our movement and frankly keeps us alive!

Swanhilda: There are many people who want to be included, they simply haven't signed up just yet.

So what was I saying...right. So now we just wrote another open letter and send it over, this time a vlog in sign language and we did it through facebook! Previously, we would send correspondence through certified mail. This time we made a video in sign language and posted it to social media this morning. We hope he checks it. Previously we wrote out personal letters to him. But the superintendent himself wrote his letter on facebook! So we decided to use the same approach - an open letter posted to facebook. And we'll see what happens.

Sarika: What are you hoping or expecting from this?

Swanhilda: An open dialogue.

Sarika: The superintendent accused you all - the "outsider" hunger strikers of...how do I say...causing all these problems in the first place. Do you want to comment on this?

Swanhilda: I mean me personally - I have friends in Pennsylvania. I grew up there - I spent about half my life there. I went to WPSD for high school. Many of my friends work there. They are grateful to us for starting this hunger strike. Because they are so afraid - they fear they'll lose their jobs! They've told me they're too scared (to strike).

In fact, the superintendent issued a warning that if any of the employees of the school get involved in the strike, they will be terminated. If they even want to discuss the issues, they'll be fired. They are so afraid.

Parents are also afraid. My brother and his wife have so much fear. They have four kids who attend WPSD and they've been bullied and picked on and they've been punished. And it's been going on for some time now. But the parents' hands are tied.

So we're outsiders - but not really. I think 5 of the strikers live in Pittsburgh itself. But us "outsiders" well, let me count, there's me, there's Mateo...I'd we're about 50-50. The superintendent calls us outsiders and blames us, but it's not true. Sure we live outside of Pittsburgh but we fully support the community! And we have to - the local community is just too afraid and we can advocate!

(Sarika has a complete brain-breakdown and can't remember what question she wanted to ask even though the questions are in front of her)

Swanhilda: We held a private meeting with parents in Pittsburgh. Most of the parents were under the impression that Simultaneous Communication and American Sign Language were the same thing!

Sarika: Ohhhh

Swanhilda: So we held this informational setting explaining in great detail the differences. This meeting was for deaf parents, actually.

Sarika: Wait - deaf parents thought Sim Com and ASL were the same thing?

Swanhilda: You have to understand that the Pittsburgh community just hasn't had enough exposure or education to this information. Not at all.

So as soon as the lightbulb came on, they became much more proactive. We're hoping they can take the reigns on this now. We hope anyways.

Sarika: I remember what I was going to ask before. The NAD (National Assoc of the Deaf) also posted a vlog expressing disappointment, accusing deaf against deaf bullying, etc. Do you think this was in response to the superintendent's letter or based on gossip?

Swanhilda: Well, the NAD president is tight with the superintendent. In fact, I also noticed that on the NAD facebook wall, they shared the open letter from the superintendent, expressing concern about our hunger strike! They even mentioned direct quotes from the letter about the bullying and reprimanded us - the strikers - for it.

I should also mentioned that previously, Mateo - our hunger striker in Washington DC - had gone to the NAD office and met with Howard Rosenbloom, the CEO of the NAD. They had a solid discussion about the issues and Mateo came away with a positive experience. So to see this completely opposite reaction and scolding - so to speak - it's mind-boggling!

I don't know if it's that they have to remain neutral in this case and they can't show support for us or what? I was actually hoping the NAD would mediate an open discussion with the WPSD. But instead we were called out. They're treating us like children. I was really not happy with this response and I asked the president of the NAD to step down.

Sarika: Tell us again about the list of demands.

Swanhilda: We have 3 demands:

1. Currently the Board holds 84% Hearing representation. The Deaf representation is only 3 out of 18 members. And the Hearing representation has no real understanding of Deaf Education, the importance of sign language, Deaf Culture, etc. So our demand is that there be 75% Deaf representation on the Board with full knowledge of Deaf culture, language and education.
2. Do not take away our language. This business with Simultaneous Communication, lip-reading, mouthing and what not doesn't work. There should be a bilingual philosophy. In fact, my niece has an IEP that requires that she use ASL and the school's philosophy doesn't meet the needs of her IEP. It meets the needs of students whose IEPs include Sim Com, but not hers. It's not inclusive. Sure, on paper it sounds inclusive but in fact it's not at all because she's not getting ASL.
3. Stop the audism (oppression?). There are so many hearing teachers who use their voices - instead of signing - in the presence of Deaf teachers and students and that excludes them from the conversation. That means the Deaf teachers and students have to guess what they're saying. There's no communication access for everyone. Hearing people will of course benefit from the access but the Deaf do not. There's also a fair amount of ableism at the school.

So those are our demands.

Swanhilda: There was a new announcement that 90% of the hearing teachers have advanced level signing. But it's not according to the ASLPI (ASL Proficiency Interview - well known proficiency assessment used at higher institutions). The test they use is an

internal benchmark, not at outside one! So there's no neutrality! And their internal test has four hearing raters! I mean it's not right that only hearing people are judging the signing of other hearing people! So we want the signing to be assessed by outside deaf people and the ASLPI.

Sarika: Right, Gallaudet U uses the ASLPI for screening their own staff, right? I mean it's a well-known test for this purpose.

Swanhilda: And the raters are from all over the US.

Sarika: Right.

Swanhilda: Right, it's neutral.

Sarika: So now the CEO/superintendent has written his facebook letter. And you all, the hunger strikers, have responded on facebook. What now? What are you hoping for? What are you expecting?

Swanhilda: I'm expecting us to start an open dialogue. I'm really hoping we start one. So far there's been no response or indication as such and we've been at this for a month now. I'm sure there will be many ideas and brainstorming down the line but we need to start first with an open dialogue.

Sarika: I hope everything works out. I really hope you get a response. Do you have any last remarks?

Swanhilda: So far we've heard nothing from the Board, from the PSAD (PA Society Association for the Deaf), no one has contacted us expressing concern or wanting to open a dialogue, nothing. The president of the PSAD serves as the vice president of the WPSD board. The WPSD treasurer is a retired member of the PSAD board. So everyone is basically related. Even though the PSAD represents the entire state of Pennsylvania, they're weak-willed to stand up to WPSD because there's too much involved. It's tough.

Sarika: Oh one last question: I've noticed that there's been ZERO press on this issue!

Swanhilda: Right! I forgot to talk about that. It's funny because someone from San Francisco contacted us and you contacted us - and you're both outsiders. No one from Pittsburgh has covered this story. We've reached out to local media but we haven't

gotten any bites because the WPSD Board members Barbara Doyle is a news reporter! So we haven't been able to get anyone to respond to media requests. They were told they can't enter the campus and we countered by saying that we're not on campus, we're off-campus but they still didn't want to cover the story. They're afraid the school will sue the news outlet. It's ridiculous.

One print media source called Tribune Review, just last week, interviewed me. But that's all!

Sarika: So that source, San Francisco, and us. Three reporters - that's it.

Swanhilda: Yeah - all three of you! That's it! And I don't know if it's that they don't get it because it's a Deaf thing? It doesn't make enough noise so to speak? But on facebook - we've gone viral! I guess that's the difference between the Deaf and Hearing worlds!

Sarika: Well I hope things get better and I wish you all good luck.

Swanhilda: Thank you, thank you so much for your time.