

Sarika

The Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf is under scrutiny as people from around the United States are fasting for deaf children's language rights.

The story starts with many of the parents of WPSD feeling frustrated about the education at their children's school. While this is a school for the deaf, the language of education is not American Sign Language, but an invented method of communication called Simultaneous Communication. This refers to speaking and signing at the same time and means that both languages lose their meaning.

I learned about this story from facebook posts of some deaf friends who were supporting hunger strikers. And that is how I learned about Swanhilda Lily. I met Swanhilda over Skype and our interview was in American Sign Language. Sarah Wylder Deshpande provided voiceover for this story.

Swanhilda Lily is deaf education teacher from Denver and a recent graduate from Gallaudet University's Sign Language Education program. She's originally from Pittsburgh and attended WPSD for high school. Her brother and his family still live there and she visited their family after graduation. What she learned is that her deaf niece was struggling at WPSD.

Swanhilda

**The teachers at the school speak and sign - mostly speak - not much signing. My brother shared his concerns about this. And another friend, who is a deaf teacher at WPSD. She and other deaf teacher experience oppression from the admin who are Hearing. Three deaf teachers were let go from their jobs. All of these stories reminded me of my time as a student at the school. I went to WPSD for high school - when I was a teenager - I had experienced oppression too. My**

**brother and sister also graduated from from there. We all remembered those difficult times. All those issues speak to our current problems.**

Sarika

When I first met Swanhilda, she had been fasting for 18 days. I interviewed her again on Monday where she informed me that she fasted for 25 days before finally stopping. There was still no response from the school Board or superintendent so the community changed tactics:

Swanhilda

**Patty Germundson set up the hunger strike chain. 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!**

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The group of strikers now includes 29 people, represents various deaf associations all over the United States, and their hunger strike chain continues through December 9th so far. The group even includes a deaf leader from Portland.

They have three demands: That the school board, which holds 84% Hearing representation, be changed to 75% Deaf representation, and especially board members who are well versed on the language, culture, access and educational needs of Deaf children. They also want the school to adopt a truly bilingual, American Sign Language and English, teaching philosophy. And finally, that the school cease their audist practices. Audism refers to discrimination on the basis of the ability to hear.

Swanhilda informed me of the importance of natural language access for children during their critical period - in this case, sign language exposure for deaf children. The critical period begins at birth and extends through ages 4-5.

Swanhilda

**The brain is plastic, so children can fluently acquire language during that time. But after the pathways are hardened, it's very difficult to acquire the language.**

**What oftentimes happens is that a deaf child is exposed to speech from birth. That's what the brain gets used to- reading lips. This habit continues until the child is about 5. At which point they try to introduce sign language, but it doesn't work. The pathways in the brain have already formed - without sign language. Rather, it's better to give natural language, allow that to develop, and then add speech skills.**

Sarika

To understand the depth of the language issues at WPSD, Swanhilda told me about a recently held private meeting with deaf parents of students at the school.

Swanhilda

**Most of the parents were under the impression that Simultaneous Communication and American Sign Language were the same thing! So we held this informational meeting explaining in great detail the differences. This meeting was for deaf parents, actually. You have to understand that the Pittsburg community just hasn't had enough exposure or education to this information. Not at all.**

Sarika

The parents thought their children were getting appropriate language and education at the school. Additionally, many of the hearing teachers hired at the school don't have adequate signing skills to reach their deaf students.

Swanhilda

**there was a new announcement that 90% of the hearing teachers have advanced level signing. But it's not according to the ASLPI**

Sarika

The ASLPI refers to the ASL Proficiency Interview - a well known american sign language proficiency assessment that's used at higher institutions.

Swanhilda

**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!**

Sarika

They're using their own test rather than something accredited and the people grading may not have native, high-level signing skills.

All of these issues culminated to the current hunger strike. According to Swanhilda Lily, she spent four days in Pittsburgh protesting outside the school with no response from the Board or from the superintendent. Just after she left to fly back to Denver, the Superintendent posted an open letter to facebook addressing some of the protestors' issues which resulted in misunderstandings.

He refers to the hunger strikers as outsiders with no real ties to the school.

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).**

**we're outsiders - but not really. I'd say 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

He accused them of inciting deaf on deaf bullying.

Swanhilda

**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.**

Sarika

At press time, I still have not heard back from any representatives from Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. I was most surprised to see a lack of media and press coverage on this issue. Outside of facebook, hardly anyone is aware of the hunger strike.

Swanhilda

**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 member Barbara Doyle is a news reporter! So we haven't been able to get anyone to respond to media requests. Reporters 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.**

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That was hunger striker Swanhilda Lily. These interviews were originally in American Sign Language and Sarah Wylder Deshpande provided voiceover for this story.

You can learn more about this issue and keep up with the hunger strikers at their facebook page: [WPSD Hunger Strike for Deaf Children's Rights](#).

For KBOO News, I'm Sarika Mehta.