

Honorable Finalist, Level III

Allison Roberts

Letter to author Lou Ann Walker concerning her book *A Loss for Words: The Story of Deafness in a Family*

Dear Lou Ann Walker:

I was raised by two hearing impaired women. My mom started losing her hearing when she turned 22-years-old and I assume my grandmother did as well: both need to wear hearing aids. It's theorized that the cause is genetics. Both my mother and grandmother happen to be the second daughters born to their respective mothers.

I chose your book because I needed a new piece for my speech and debate competition. I do dramatic interpretation and I was searching for a piece of literature I could connect to. I found it in your book *A Loss For Words: The Story of Deafness in a Family*. My whole life I've dealt with struggles from the fact that I was raised by hearing impaired relatives. I talk loud and am very dramatic in my facial expressions and body movements. I've often been bullied for being obnoxious or exuberant. But none of my struggles are comparable to those which you, your family, and other deaf people have had to fight.

Your book opened my eyes to the trials and tribulations experienced by those who are afflicted with deafness. Never could I imagine the educational and social limits as explicitly as you described them. The demeaning behavior of others to those harboring that pain is inexcusable, and it inspired me to stand up for those in similar situations and people like my family.

I'm waiting in agony to know if I will be next to fall victim to the disease. I'm my mother's first born and my younger brother is her second; therefore, she's hoping to break the cycle. Your book motivated me to learn sign, and I have been studying and practicing it for a couple of months now. A deaf woman came to my work a while back, and she seemed anxious and shy about trying to communicate with anyone. After I spoke to her and learned that she was deaf, I told her that I was learning to sign and that my mother, like her, was also hearing impaired. The smile that broke out on her face was indescribable. She was so comforted that I could comprehend her situation and that I was sympathetic. It made my heart leap to know I was brightening her day even for the few seconds I signed with her.

Shortly after she left, I felt this guilt for not always being so forward and supportive of others like her. Deaf and hearing impaired individuals must feel so much shame and embarrassment when they *shouldn't*; no one should have to feel ashamed or be belittled for something they can't control. As you said in your book, "Every day they were reminded of their shortcomings. From the petty annoyance of not being able to ask for a cup of coffee in a restaurant, to the sobering knowledge that they couldn't hear cars careening around corners . . ." These few lines aided me in realizing that it isn't about my struggles when living with them, it's about their struggles attempting to mesh with society.

I've seen my mother cry very often over how sorry she is that she is incapable of hearing us at times. I never want her to feel this way again. In your book you also told your point of view from interpreting your parents. Although I don't even compare, I understand partially what it took out of you. I constantly have to repeat and listen for my mother, and kids often ask why she looks at their mouths so much and why she occasionally ignores them. I tell them she is reading their lips and if it seems like she's ignoring them, she isn't—she just didn't hear them.

I want to thank you, even though your parents already have, for all you've done for them, and for how much your book has done to further inform those who are unaware of just how malicious a disease deafness really is. My favorite line in your book was when your father asked your mom to marry him. "Can we marry soon?" This was the first text I learned how to sign. It was so genuine and it reminded me

that, in all the gloom deafness can bring, there are moments of jubilation that are worth remembering, like when my mom heard me sing in my first lead musical and she cried. My grandmother heard me, too: I belted as loud as I could for them.

Thank you, Lou Ann, for welcoming me to my new passion for sign language. Of course, thank you for sharing your remarkable journey with the world, and for bringing this monumental book into my life. I've connected with it on a deep level and now carry it with me everywhere I go. Thank you for striving for the equal treatment of all hearing impaired individuals, and instructing to look past the deafness to find the heart and personality of a person. Your book has earned a special place in my life forever, and has helped mold me into a better daughter, as well as a strong advocate for those who rely on us to be their ears.

Sincerely,
Allison Roberts