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Profile: Christy Smith, Co-Founder, Discovering Deaf Worlds

Christy Smith had already learned how to be a survivor by the time she was picked for the television show Survivor: The Amazon in 2003. Born three months prematurely, with a profound hearing loss, she grew up in Aspen, Colorado, the only deaf child in the valley. She was mainstreamed in school and raised to believe she was like everyone else. Of course, that was not true. "I had my own issues, learning how to talk, to socialize, to fit in," she recalls. It wasn't until she entered the Model Secondary School for the Deaf in Washington, D.C., at the age of 15, and later, Gallaudet University, that she developed self-esteem and self confidence. "I developed the identities of speaking and signing, of being able to be part of both worlds," she says.

Since Survivor her purpose in life has been to make life easier for others in the deaf community. She is a co-founder of Discovering Deaf Worlds, along with Dave Justice, a former interpreter. They will travel globally over the next 12 months to connect with international deaf communities and draw awareness to deaf issues worldwide. They will share their experiences through their website (discoveringdeafworlds.com), video, photography and journaling.

Smith struggled as a child to understand why she was having such a hard time communicating despite years of speech therapy. When classmates would make fun of the way she pronounced a word, she would go home and practice it over and over. She didn't know sign language for the most part and didn't have interpreters. "I couldn't really relate to anyone," she says. Attending the School for the Deaf and then Gallaudet finally allowed her to develop her own identity and find a place to belong among other deaf people.

After earning her degrees, Smith worked as a facilitator of group development activities at George Mason University and at Aspen Camp School for the Deaf. She also created a children's television program with signing.

Her dad prompted her to apply to appear on Survivor as a birthday present for him. Smith went through the multi-step application process of videotapes, physical, IQ test and more. "I thought, there's no way they'll let me on this show," she says. "I truly believe someone in the selection group was an advocate for me."

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Smith was eliminated on day 33 out of 39 days. "I made a difference in a bigger way than I had imagined and the experience led me to where I am now," she says. "It showed me that people don't know about those who have hearing loss. I felt that if I was paving the way for others to have opportunities like me then that was a good thing.

"It was really hard at night time so I just went to sleep so I wouldn't get emotional. I couldn't understand what anyone was saying—I couldn't read people's lips, even by the firelight. You had to just suck it up. But sometimes I thought it was a good thing that I couldn't hear all the gossip, all the drama. I was just cruising along so they couldn't say anything about me, and I couldn't say anything about them."

Smith's Survivor stint led to motivational speaking for universities, deaf people, church groups, and businesses. "I tried to provide awareness of what it's like to be a deaf person and how to make deaf workers feel more comfortable or involved. It's easy to shun deaf people," says Smith. "If you don't know how to communicate with them, you put them to the side."

Discovering Deaf Worlds is focused on the entire deaf community—deaf people, interpreters, parents, kids, schools, etc. Smith and Justice will travel to New Zealand, Australia, Japan, China, Thailand, Nepal, India, and Kenya. They'll make contacts through the associations for deaf people and through deaf leaders, visit deaf schools, and attempt to learn how deaf people function in the hearing world in the various countries. Adding a twist of complexity to the effort is the fact that there is no international sign language.

The Discovering Deaf Worlds effort requires \$40,000 in additional funds to support travel needs as well as to fund projects to support deaf people, schools, or organizations identified by the venture. Current sponsors are Up Your Image, which created the website; Rowe Photo & Video, which donated equipment to film the trip; and individual supporter Ralph De Stephano. People can receive updates about Smith's and Justice's experiences by going to the website.

To donate to Discovering Deaf Worlds and find out more information, go to www.discoveringdeafworlds.com.

