

PUBLICATION

Growing Up as a CODA

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When people find out that I am a child of Deaf adults (CODA), they are usually curious and want to know what it was like growing up with Deaf parents. There is no question that my three siblings and I had an unconventional upbringing – we were all fluent in American Sign Language (ASL) before we could talk and, once we could speak, we were conscripted into service as our parents' interpreters. As a child, I remember answering the doorbell one day and fetching my father at the request of a severe looking woman standing with a clipboard on the other side of the door who claimed she had some vital information to share with us about "green peas." The poor woman attempted to get a dialogue going about green peas, and I did my best to interpret, but after several minutes of staring at my dad's confused face, my dad asking me repeatedly in ASL if she truly was there to talk about green peas, and my insisting that that yes, in fact, that is what she said, the poor woman finally gave up and left. I realized a few years later that she was probably with the international environmental organization, Greenpeace. There is no telling how many misunderstandings like this I perpetuated as an amateur child interpreter, but as my siblings and I often reminded my parents, you get what you pay for.

The role and challenges inherent in spending one's life as an on-call spoken English interpreter is a central theme in *CODA*, the recent Sundance hit and American remake of the French film, *La Famille Bélier*. *CODA* tells the story of a Deaf family (the Rossis) and their hearing adolescent daughter, Ruby, as they work to keep their commercial fishing business afloat and Ruby struggles to find her place in the world at large. Ruby's passion is music, and while her parents, Jackie and Frank, and brother, Leo, try very hard to be supportive, they all are painfully aware that they will never be able to hear her sing a melody or connect with her in this medium. Eventually, Ruby finds herself unable to fully devote herself to both pursuits, and she is forced to choose between pursuing a higher education at the nearby Berklee College of Music and foregoing the opportunity to fulfill her role as the dutiful daughter of Deaf parents who need her at home.

What I admire and appreciate about *CODA* is how it offers an in-depth, unvarnished perspective of Ruby's allyship, love, and advocacy for her family. Frank and Leo rely on her ability to hear while they are out at sea, and her interpreting is vital to their ability to sell their catch and conduct other business dealings. Ruby is also called upon to interpret deeply personal matters for her parents. I won't spoil it for you, but the scene in which she interprets for her parents during Frank's doctor's appointment is perfectly – and painfully – on point and hilarious. Ruby fulfills these daily rituals mostly without complaint...until her choir teacher recognizes her talent and encourages her to audition for a coveted spot at the prestigious Berklee College of Music. Here, *CODA* highlights the internal tension between Ruby's desire to pursue her dream of becoming a singer and her sense of duty to her family. It bears mentioning that this role is one that she was born into and did not choose for herself. This is the lot of every CODA – a life of compulsory allyship that can begin in early childhood and continue into adulthood. The fact that Ruby does not have a meaningful choice does not make her sacrifice any less real or noble, nor does it mean that her family is ignorant of or insensitive to the burden she bears on their behalf. Ruby's parents and brother are painfully aware of their need for her and at times resentful of her independence and their co-dependency. Ruby loves her family and thinks that without her, her family has precious few (if any) real options for sustaining their fishing business. Leo sees her musical gift as a path to independence for both of them, but Jackie and Frank are hesitant to let Ruby go and entrust their livelihood to Leo. *CODA* helps us see that there is a very real cost to allyship, whether it is something we volunteer – or are volunteered – for. To me, the most impactful and uplifting message in this movie is that allyship does not have

to be an *either/or* proposition. You can be true to yourself, advocate for those you love, challenge them to grow, and watch them flourish as they realize their full potential.

The film's resounding success is doubtless attributable to its authenticity. Unlike its French counterpart, in which hearing actors played deaf characters, in *CODA* the three lead Deaf characters were all played by Deaf actors – Marlee Matlin (Jackie Rossi), Troy Kotsur (Frank Rossi), and Daniel Durant (Leo Rossi). Hearing actress Emilia Jones played the role of Ruby Rossi. While casting Deaf actors to play Deaf characters may sound like a no-brainer, casting three Deaf leads was a complete aberration for the film industry, where disabled characters have been historically underrepresented and disabled actors are given very few opportunities to play a lead character on the big screen. When there is an opportunity to play a disabled character, these roles are, more often than not, played by nondisabled actors who are invariably lauded for tackling such a "challenging" role. Matlin was determined not to allow *CODA* to follow the same script, and she and director Sian Heder insisted on casting Deaf actors. Heder, understanding her role as an outsider, did more than just pick up a few basic signs in ASL – she immersed herself in books and literature to learn more about Deaf culture. Once filming was underway, the pair also worked to create an inclusive environment on the set of the movie – *CODA* crew members were fluent in ASL and Heder hired two on-set ASL experts to ensure the script (nearly half of which was in ASL) and signs were accurately portrayed onscreen. After filming, Matlin, Heder, and the Apple production team ensured that every theater showing of *CODA* would have open captions on the movie screens so that Deaf and hearing audience members could watch the film onscreen, at the same time.

The allyship between the hearing and Deaf actors and community at large from the inception of *CODA* through its filming and distribution shows us just how much we can accomplish when we take actionable steps to understand a different culture, a disabled person, or a marginalized group and we convert our knowledge into action and advocate on behalf of others. To me, that insight comes from both *being* and *watching CODA*, and I highly recommend that anyone interested in learning more about Deaf culture, ASL, or life as a CODA go and see this heartwarming and uplifting film. I give it two enthusiastic (*signs in ASL*) thumbs up.