



Scene  
& Heard

# All Eyes are on...

## Deanne Bray, Star of Sue Thomas: F.B.Eye

When actress and teacher Deanne Bray first heard about the opportunity to star in a new television series about real-life deaf FBI surveillance expert, Sue Thomas, she jumped at the chance. Deanne, who has been deaf since birth, saw this as both the role of a lifetime and a vehicle for sharing Deaf experiences and Deaf Culture with a larger classroom - the international viewing audience. *Sue Thomas: F.B.Eye*, which now airs in 19 countries, depicts Sue Thomas's career as a special assistant to the F.B.I. where she utilized her exceptional lip-reading skills in deciphering the conversations of crime suspects. Deanne took time away from her busy schedule to speak with *House Calls Magazine*.

**HC:** Deanne, I'm sure that many *House Calls* readers are fans of your T.V. show and are hoping to gain more behind-the-scenes information from this article – and we'll certainly get to that – but let's begin with the story of your own hearing loss and how it has affected you. What type and degree of hearing loss do you have?

**Deanne:** I have sensorineural hearing loss. The doctor believed that my mother was exposed to German measles when she was pregnant and that I was born deaf. I prefer the term "severely Deaf" – my identity is Deaf (with a capital "D"), as I embrace the Deaf Culture and use American Sign Language (ASL) as my primary language.

**HC:** How and when were you first diagnosed with a hearing loss?

**Deanne:** I was first diagnosed as severely Deaf when I was about 18 months old, but my parents had noticed that something was different about me much earlier than that. My father kept a baby journal, in which he described my voice and how it differed from other babies. Dad noticed as I got older that my vocabulary was low, so he took me to an audiologist to determine if I had a hearing loss. Since I had some residual hearing in my left ear, I was given a behind-the-ear

(BTE) hearing aid. For me, this was like a light being switched on. I could suddenly hear what was going on around me, but I couldn't identify all the sounds. My parents moved the entire family so that I could be enrolled in a special school that had a Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) Program where I was exposed to everything – American Sign Language (ASL), spoken and written English, speech therapy and training in hearing.

**HC:** You seem to be an accomplished individual with a positive outlook on life. How do you think your hearing loss may have shaped who you are as a person?

**Deanne:** Who I've become today is related to my early learning method. I was exposed to everything – every mode of communication – and that made me who I am. I'm grateful that my father trusted his instincts as a parent and got me into the right program at an early age when I was learning language. And thanks to my first Deaf teacher and my Deaf neighbor when I was growing up, ASL and Deaf Culture were in my life from the beginning. I was raised in both the hearing and Deaf worlds and was bilingual in English and ASL. I now meet other people who were embarrassed to use sign language when they were young, but I learned to accept both. My spoken language was not strong in the early days, nor was my ASL. These skills developed over time.

**HC:** Can you explain any differences in your communication style when addressing Deaf people and hearing people?

**Deanne:** When I was growing up I would speak with hearing people and sign with Deaf people, but I never used both modes of communication simultaneously. Then I met someone who did both at the same time. I

learned that there are many Deaf/deaf/hard of hearing individuals out there with many different communication styles and different philosophies. Over

time I learned to accept the communication choices of everyone I met. The turning point came when I performed in the play *Road to Revolution* by Mark Medoff at Deaf West Theatre. I portrayed a woman who signs and speaks at the same time, and rejects Deaf Culture. At first I was in conflict about this, but I had to leave my personal philosophy aside and be true to the character. This happens on *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye* – I have to leave my own opinions aside and be true to my character on the show, who sometimes signs and speaks simultaneously. The real Sue, who speaks

and signs only in English (not in ASL), is hoping that the show will continue to include all people and communication styles.

**HC:** I'm sure there are misconceptions that hearing people have about Deaf or hard of hearing (HH) people. What are the most common misconceptions hearing people have about you, and how do you deal with it?

**Deanne:** When I first meet and talk to hearing people who have had no exposure to Deaf and hard of hearing people, they ask me if I'm from a different country. I explain that they must be hearing my Deaf accent. It seems that I often have to explain myself.

**HC:** Are there any misconceptions, or assumptions, that Deaf people have about you?

**Deanne:** Once Deaf/HH people discover my speaking skills, they assume that I grew up using oral language and that I learned to use ASL in high school or college. Just



because I speak well, it doesn't mean that I grew up oral. I grew up bilingual, speaking English or signing ASL. I always identified myself as a Deaf person and embraced Deaf Culture. However, I happen to be from a hearing family, therefore, I respect and accept the hearing culture.

**HC:** What special challenges are you facing as a Deaf actress working with a hearing director, hearing actors and a hearing crew?

**Deanne:** The challenge is being patient in teaching hearing people about my needs on the set. They often forget I don't hear everything because I speak well and wear a hearing aid. They do try to make eye contact when they speak so I can see their facial expressions and their lips. I have an interpreter on the set, when needed. Otherwise, my preparation for scenes is pretty much the same as it is for any hearing actor. Whenever a Deaf actor makes a guest appearance on the show, the producers get a qualified interpreter in order to meet every Deaf/HH actor's needs.

**HC:** Have you found that you receive a lot more questions about your hearing loss since you've been working on *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye*, and do you think the show is raising awareness of the challenges faced by deaf and hard of hearing people?

**Deanne:** Yes and yes. The real Sue and I have the desire to include all points of view, and we want to illustrate in future shows what a Deaf or hard of hearing person might or might not hear. Also, I'm very proud to announce that during the show's first season the producers hired 32 Deaf and hard of hearing people. I believe the exposure of the Deaf/HH community on set and demonstrated on the show will raise awareness.

**HC:** The House Ear Institute (HEI) and William F. House, M.D., were instrumental in the development of the cochlear implant. HEI and the House Ear Clinic present every individual with all available options for dealing with and treating deafness and hearing loss – including the cochlear implant, when appropriate. HEI also honors the choice not to use any device at all, if that is an individual's preference. We're aware that many Deaf people are opposed to the cochlear implant,

particularly for young children. What are your feelings about the cochlear implant (CI)?

**Deanne:** I have a lot of friends with different feelings about the CI, and I have 6 friends who have received CIs in the last 3 years. There are some people in the Deaf Community who feel strongly opposed to the CI because it has to do with losing your identity as a Deaf person, but this view has been slowly changing. Some people who get a CI are still accepted as members of the Deaf Community. Some people who are against the CI wear a hearing aid, which is interesting, because I see the CI as a higher-tech version of a hearing aid.

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I'm not ready to accept a cochlear implant for myself, but I respect those who choose the cochlear implant. I have residual hearing in my left ear – without my hearing aid I can hear sounds above 90 decibels and I can hear with an amplified phone – and I'm afraid if I get a cochlear implant I'd lose my residual hearing. But in the future, if I lose my residual hearing, would I get a cochlear implant? Right now, my answer would be "no", but my feelings may change in 10 years.

**HC:** Do you think there's room for an additional culture of Deaf people who use hearing technology?

**Deanne:** That culture has the best and worst of both worlds. I'm in that culture. The worst part about this other culture is that you'll never be hearing, even with the cochlear implant. You'll always be considered a little different, as if you have a disability, and you'll always have to prove yourself. And the Deaf Community questions your identity – you're viewed as being a member of the hearing world.

The best part of this other culture is that you're able to reach out to the hearing world and live in the hearing world. And, you may be able to fit in with Deaf Community if you use ASL and embrace the Deaf Culture. I had both worlds as I grew up. I had a hearing aid, and I learned to hear and speak. I fluently use ASL as my primary language and that makes me who I am. I like the idea of exposing a child to everything and looking for the child's strength and nurturing that strength. However, I'm not yet sure what I think about having a child go through surgery to restore some hearing.

**HC:** Many readers may not know that in addition to being an accomplished actress, you are also pursuing a degree in education.

**Deanne:** I have a bachelor's degree in Biology, and have almost completed a master's in Education. At some time I'd like to finish my degree and return to teaching.

**HC:** Is there anything else that you would like to share with our readers?

**Deanne:** I don't want people to think *Sue Thomas: F.B.Eye* is promoting the idea that speaking, for a Deaf person, is the only road to success. There are plenty of Deaf/deaf/HH people who choose not to speak and are very successful in life. Like me, and the real Sue Thomas, the writers of our show want to send the message that everyone can be successful, regardless of their mode of communication. ❖



*Deanne is currently working with the real Sue Thomas and "F.B.Eye" creators to develop several new episodes that highlight real-life issues of Deaf and hard of hearing people. Deanne also works closely with the show's writers to develop stories that feature Deaf actors, like her husband, Troy Kotsur. Airing on PAX TV, Sundays at 9 p.m./ET, "Sue Thomas: F.B.Eye" just completed a winning first season and is slated to return for its second season in September 2003.*