

She heard the cry to help children speak

By Cheryl Walker
News Staff Writer

"I was always a rebel," says Ciwa Griffiths, founder of the Hearing, Education, Auditory Research--or HEAR--Center of Pasadena and nine-year Leisure World resident.

"I wanted to change society and that's not easy--it usually takes 30 years, if you're lucky--but I did what I set out to do."

What Griffiths did was nothing less than almost single-handedly change the way deaf people are educated.

Before Griffiths, the hearing impaired were warehoused in segregated schools for the deaf, denied amplification (hearing aids) at early ages, and instructed to depend on lip reading and sign language to communicate.

Thanks to Griffiths pioneering research, willingness to experiment, and tenacity of spirit, a deaf child today can enjoy a virtually normal life completely integrated in society.

In her lifelong studies, Griffiths discovered that even the most profoundly deaf have levels of residual hearing.

That's why her "auditory approach" or sound-based teaching methods require early use of amplification (she has fitted infants with hearing aids as young as 21-days-old) in both ears to insure the development of relatively normal speech patterns.

"Eighty-percent of the intelligibility of speech comes from rate, rhythm, and inflection," Griffiths explains.

In their cycles of development, she says, human beings learn language best during the first eight months of life.

In fact, if hearing problems are discovered and amplification provided in these crucial first eight months, 64-percent of infants born deaf experience a reversal of hearing loss.



Dr. Ciwa Griffiths

The eighth month cut-off date though, warns Griffiths, is final.

"Some children are born with immature hearing neural mechanisms which just need to be stimulated so they will hear--providing the child isn't born with complete nerve loss.

"If amplification isn't introduced within those first eight months the child will be deaf."

Although now Griffiths ideas are respected, it wasn't always so.

Early in her career, scoffers were legion--and who could blame them as they tried to understand a young upstart with the crazy notion of teaching deaf individuals to hear by sound?

"But," Griffiths recalls with a grin, "I proved myself right by doing what they considered wrong."

Although now, in professional circles, Griffiths name is synonymous with the education of the deaf, her

specialization was a by-product of a twist of fate.

Born in the Fiji Islands in 1911, Griffiths was the ninth child (her name, Ciwa, is Fijian for nine) of a publisher father and a diminutive can-do dynamo from Texas who overcame the injustice of being denied entry to law school solely because of her sex--to go on to excel in not one but four careers: as a legal secretary, writer, editor, and poet.

The latter three callings (as well as her spunk) she shared with her daughter who has authored three books of poetry, a non-fiction text, and research studies and has just been elected president of Leisure World's Writers Club.

Due to her mother's ill health and longing to return to the Lone Star state, the family, which had moved from the islands to Australia, relocated to the United States in 1920.

After two years in Texas, Griffiths' father piled his family into two old cars and headed north to San Francisco.

Leisure People

There, Griffiths completed her schooling, graduated from San Francisco State College with a degree in education, and entered the world hopeful of finding a perfect job—at the height of the depression in 1932.

“I couldn’t find a job in my profession, so I worked for the WPA doing surveys for the sum of \$24 a month—and that was to feed four people!”

After a brief marriage and the phasing out of her WPA post, Griffiths took a job on a remote ranch in San Miguel—as a cook for harvestors for \$1 a day plus “found” or room and board.

But the teacher without a job soon found a pupil—and a cause.

“The ranch’s owners, the Works, had a deaf girl but they couldn’t find a teacher to take her. I told them I would.”

Griffiths taught little Johnita speech therapy and lip reading in a one-room school house on the southern tip of Monterey.

The girl made progress, but not enough to please Griffiths, so the young instructor asked Johnita’s parents if they’d be willing to let the girl get a hearing aid. Although their daughter had been diagnosed as “totally deaf” the parents agreed.

Johnita was fitted with an aid which, in those early days of amplification, resembled a box, weighed about a pound, and sat on a table when in use.

Griffiths, however, made Johnita’s portable (and thereby her pupil mobile) by fashioning a leather book bag to put it in—complete with a shoulder strap.

Although Johnita’s hearing loss was grave, the aid, as Griffiths hoped, clearly helped.

The child was soon distinguishing sounds (such as the rustle of tissue paper, the clank of a bell, the twang of a comb, and the notes on a piano) and speaking much better.

After three years of tutelage, Griffiths approached the girl’s parents to ask them to trust her instincts again and allow her to take their daughter to the nation’s hearing experts for more in-depth training.

The parents agreed, and Griffiths took Johnita to the (then) premiere educational institution for the hearing impaired in this country, the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, MA.

Both Johnita and Griffiths enrolled as pupils—the younger girl took the basic program; the elder, the teacher’s training program (while also working on her master’s degree requirements at Massachusetts University).

Although Griffiths entered Clarke full of enthusiasm—“I was so eager to learn”—she soon became disillusioned, and appalled at the effect the school’s methods had on her young charge.

“The first thing they did was take away her hearing aid and their method of teaching speech was so slow—one sound at a time!

“I didn’t like the way they segregated the children either ... and what they did to Johnita!

“I brought her there a happy, smiling girl and when they finished with her the kid was a mess, a real sad sack.”

Griffiths knew she could do better, so after graduating from Clarke and M.U. and returning Johnita to her parents, she set out to change the system, starting in her adopted home state, California.

She approached the superintendent of schools in Monterey County and said if he’d give her an audiometer to test pupil’s hearing levels she’d become a travelling speech and hearing teacher.

He agreed, and thus she became the first instructor of that kind in the United States.

Griffiths next became a consultant in the education of the hard of hearing for the state of California’s Department of Special Education where she fought long and hard to keep deaf children in regular schools.

The so-called experts disagreed with her, as she explains, “they thought sound confused the child.”

Griffiths, however, wouldn’t back down—so she was fired.

Undaunted, Griffiths approached the superintendent of schools for San Diego County, Dr. John Carroll.

“I like your staff—I think they’re the best—do you think you could create a job for me?”

“I didn’t know what I’d do if he said no. Those were the war years (World War II) and I had no money and all my belongings were in a little bag in a little hotel room.”

Griffiths’ gumption, however, paid off and Carroll made her coordinator of special education for all his county’s schools.

“I loved it,” recalls Griffiths, “I was a trouble shooter for all kinds of special kids—the deaf, blind, and retarded.”

It was at this time that she met Glen and Margaret Bollinger who were to become both her benefactors and, more importantly, her lifelong friends.

The Bollingers encouraged her to get her doctorate, so, even though she kept her post in San Diego County, she moved to Los Angeles and started taking courses both at the University of Southern California and at the on-campus John Tracy Clinic.

At the clinic, which specialized in educating the deaf and where she was also a tutor, Griffiths remembers, “I got into hot water again for the same reasons—I didn’t agree with how they were teaching the children.”

Margaret Bollinger advised her to leave the clinic—which she did—and, armed with her USC degree, she became an assistant professor for special education at Los Angeles State College. At the college, she had the time to ponder a thought which had occurred to her during a USC psychology class.

The class’s instructor had been discussing cycles in human development and different maturation periods.

Griffiths said she had a blinding flash of inspiration as she listened to the teacher talk and applied it to her own field.

She asked herself: wasn’t there a key time—a maturation period following birth and up to a certain age—when the skills of language and speech were best acquired?

At about this time—1953—another hearing specialist from England’s Royal Throat, Nose and Ear Hospital, Dr. Edith Whetnal, was doing research to explore just that same proposition.

When the two women met that year, as Griffiths was determined they would, Griffiths posed the question.

Griffiths says she’ll never forget the thrill she got when the lady replied “What else?” to her query.

Griffiths studied with Whetnal in London, and, after seeing—or rather hearing—the success of her programs, wanted to bring them back to the United States.

Again Griffiths ran into a brick wall of resistance ... until her friends the Bollingers “stepped in” like the proverbial fairy godparents of old.

“Margie said isn’t it a crime that because of stupid people children in America won’t get this?”

Glen, an executive at Sparkletts Water in Eagle Rock, agreed to honor a special request from his wife on her birthday: to give Griffiths the opportunity to fulfill the dream of having her own hearing center.

He helped his friend gather a board of directors, brought in his lawyers to work out the legal problems, and obtained a building on York Street close to his plant.

In October, 1954 the HEAR Center opened its doors—and Griffiths rolled up her sleeves and set about putting her theories into practice.

It wasn’t long before word of Griffiths’ successes travelled the globe.

In 1969, the center moved to its present location in Pasadena where children and adults are taught and counseled—regardless of ability to pay.

Today Griffiths, even though nominally retired, is still the Center’s administrative consultant and spokesperson, tirelessly agitating for better education, research, and equipment for the deaf.

The HEAR Center is in the forefront of a movement to make hearing tests mandatory for infants and has developed a Cardiac Digital Audiometer which registers the change in heartbeat due to a reaction from sound.

When asked why the audiometer’s use is not more widespread among medical professionals, considering the consequences of late detection of hearing problems, Griffiths replies simply, “cost.”

“The establishment is against it. The test takes time—about a half hour—and time means money.”

Griffiths recommends, however, that