

# Stories from the brainreels transcript

July 11, 2014

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## Introduction

CHERYL: Welcome to Stories from the brainreels. I'm your host, Cheryl Green, from [StoryMinders](#) up in sunny Portland, Oregon. This is a monthly podcast about brain injury and disability with a focus on art, culture, and disability pride. Contact me at [info@storyminders.com](mailto:info@storyminders.com) with questions or topics and guests you want to hear on an upcoming show.

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CHERYL: Well, this month we're broadcasting on the second Friday because the first Friday was the 4th of July. And that's much of a podcasting kind of day. I'm here this time with a pre-recorded interview with Black Deaf filmmaker Jade Bryan. She's currently running a Kickstarter campaign to fund some visual special effects she needs to add to her completed film, "The Shattered Mind." Please visit her campaign page and donate at <http://kck.st/1mP0mkE>.

A little bit about the film: "The Shattered Mind" is centered upon a proud Black Deaf family with a captivating story that has never been told before in the mainstream film industry. The film explores the family's journey while their daughter, Zhane Rain struggles to overcome adversity; traumatic childhood past and hearing loss.

Zhane Rain is a misplaced teenager who is trying to find herself and to overcome unusual psychological and neurological conditions. Ultimately, her biggest battle is in dealing with recurring nightmares due to amnesia from the traumatic experience she had as a child.

And a little bit about the filmmaker: Jade is an award-winning indie filmmaker and the first Jamaican-American Deaf filmmaker, which makes her a pioneer in the film industry. She has been producing and writing films for over 25 years and working as an activist for social change and social justice.

One thing that drives Jade in her work is to increase awareness about the lack of Deaf African-American actors cast in roles in the mainstream movie industry and in television. Think back to the movies and TV shows you've seen. When you think about it, it doesn't take long to realize how little representation there is of Black Deaf Culture. How many American Sign Language (ASL) users have you seen in film and TV? Now how many of those actors are Black? Jade works hard to address issues regarding diversity, intersectionalities, and Deaf People of Color, and her work is never just fluffy entertainment. I hope you enjoy this interview about Jade's life, work, and activism. And please visit her Kickstarter page to support "The Shattered Mind".

And on to the interview.

## The Interview

CHERYL: Thank you so much for coming to be on my show today. I'm very excited to finally meet you.

JADE: Thank you. Likewise.

JANA: So hello. This is Jana. And I just want to let you know that I'll be voicing near simultaneously. From now on, you won't hear me anymore. You'll hear Jade through me.

JADE: My name--my real name--is Anne Marie. And my nickname, if you will, is Jade. I go by Jade Bryan. And the reason I go by Jade and use that as my professional name is that it stands for Jamaican American Destinee Empress. So I was born in Jamaica. When I was five years old, we moved here to New York to a town called Mt. Vernon. And I went to a school for the deaf in White Plains, New York. It was a great school. When I was about five or six years old or so, I was placed in a school that was a regular, mainstream education settings for hearing students. I wasn't able to function appropriately. And they recognized that something was wrong with me. They thought that I was slow to respond, that there was some kind of delay. Maybe it was a learning disability or something. And of course, my mom was made aware of that. At the time, both my parents worked at a hospital. They worked at Bronxville. And so my mother, who was a Nurse's Aide, and my dad, who worked in the Custodian Services and also at a thrift store where some of the well-to-do people would often bring their things that they wanted to donate. So what happened was, there was a man--a white man--who was retired. And he told my father about the New York School for the Deaf, which is also called Fanwood. So they suggested that my folks might wanna look into this school. And what they decided was to go and visit the school first. They wanted to learn more about the programs and what might fit my needs educationally. So then, by the time I was eight, my parents pulled me from the school where I had been not succeeding very well [giggles]. I was trying to copy the other students.

CHERYL: [laughs]

JADE: And I was also picked on quite a bit. I went through some bullying while I was there. So they enrolled me up at Fanwood. Now, this is a bit of a funny story. Apparently, there was kind of an evaluation or test or something on me because I didn't know sign language at all.

CHERYL: Oh.

JADE: However, I also in my speech had a bit of a dialect, being that I was from Jamaica originally. So I had that dialect when I used my voice. Now let me also say that the evaluation system was a bit flawed. So as a result of that, they ended up putting me in school with the low-functioning deaf students. I was kind of shocked to find myself in a class with these kind of students. And I thought something was wrong. So I came home to my mom and told them that I didn't like it, I didn't wanna go back, I didn't wanna be there at all. I was not happy. And so my parents weren't sure what to do. But they figured well, let's give it a chance. And of course, I was in tears.

CHERYL: Mm.

JADE: I felt like I didn't fit in. That wasn't for me. But I went every day. I guess it was probably one particular teacher who started to notice that this wasn't a good fit for me. And she gave me a book to read. After I read the book, she asked me questions. And I was able to respond effectively. And they

made the decision that I should be pulled out of that class. They put me in another class. And I'm thinking I was probably around nine or ten at that time. They realized, again, that I could be further challenged. So in fact, I was put into another class. So it took a while until they had a good placement. But finally, I think, by the time I was 12 years old, maybe 13 years old, they found the right class. And I continued that class through junior high school. And that's when I developed my sign language skills, although I always relied more on using my voice. So once I found my place, if you will, and was amongst my peers, I did pretty well. I think I was even a teacher's pet. [giggles] I think some of the teachers gave me special support and encouraged my reading. And I would even babysit some of their kids. And I don't think that happens to today's generation. So I was given responsibilities. So I was a mature young woman. And they recognized my academic potential. By the time I graduated, I was 17. And even though I had gotten into school late, I had caught up and was able to pick up on things so that I graduated earlier than expected. They also had an athletic program. I did very well in all the sports. And we had various competitions and requirements and things. Now, the one I didn't do so well in was swimming. [both laugh] So I did participate in various sports. That was something that was real important to me. I was All American and earned over 1000 points and all sorts of trophies and everything. So I think some of the instructors honed in on my athletic ability and so encouraged me on that front. And it ended up getting me a full scholarship to Iona College, although I didn't end up going. I went to Gallaudet University instead. The reason being, I wanted to find me. I wanted to learn more about my Deaf identity. I didn't have a scholarship to Gallaudet or anything, but I still went. And that gave me an opportunity to learn more about myself, to become independent, to learn about responsibility. Once I got to Gallaudet, I was away from home for the first time, and I was more interested in partying than anything else. And my GPA was not good.

CHERYL: Mm.

JADE: I wasn't putting as much attention into the academics. And I ended up having to stop the sports.

CHERYL: Mm.

## **Switching from sports to academics and arts at 18 years old**

JADE: I began focusing on my academics and brought my grades up. You know, I was young, 18 at that point. And so by the end of that year, I took a course on drawing. I had no background or experience with art. And remember, my career goals revolved more around athletics and PE at that time.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: But I wasn't able to get past some of the swimming requirements; I failed that during that freshman year. So I had to reconsider. And I was discouraged about that. And so I decided to take art just as a lark. Gallaudet was part of the Consortium. And I felt the opportunities at Gallaudet were somewhat limited at that time. And I was really interested in pursuing that interest. So I took advantage of the Consortium. It was George Washington University. And at first, I didn't get much encouragement. The instructor at Gallaudet didn't think I should go to take a drawing class at George Washington. But I wasn't gonna be limited. And I wasn't gonna be held back. So I decided to go ahead and talk to some other people. And I got more support. Once I got permission from my academic advisor, I went ahead. Once I got into the system, I had my first experience as a young adult of being in a hearing environment

with an interpreter because they also provide an interpreter for that class. So not only did I learn about some of the art concepts, but I was exposed to other, wider opportunities as well. I was then able to go to Howard University where I was accepted into their fine arts program. However, I didn't like Washington DC much. I was not a good fit for me. It wasn't really making me happy. Let me mention, at the time my sister was attending FIT, which is the Fashion Institute of Technology, here in New York. And so I followed her.

CHERYL: Ah [giggles].

JADE: I, throughout this time, was learning more about myself and about my interests. At FIT, I was put on the program that offered evening courses.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: And I was told that I need to work on my portfolio, which I did. And because of that, I was able to get into a full-time program that was offered during the day. Life at FIT was great. I learned so much about myself. I also was involved in the volleyball team for two years and kept that up [both giggle] along with my good GPA. Learned my lesson by that time.

CHERYL: Yeah!

JADE: I so still partied. I have to admit! [both laugh] I was stay up all night studying and take care of my responsibilities. But I learned to balance it by then.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: So I graduated in 1989 and then applied to go to NYU. I still wanted to continue studying and learning. I hadn't yet decided to focus on film. At NYU, they suggested I take some basic, introductory courses to see if it was something that I was interested in.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: It was a tough program, I have to say. They don't play.

CHERYL: Yeah. [both giggle]

JADE: So I graduated with my BFA in 1993.

CHERYL: I feel like I heard a similar theme come up over and over again, themes about people having low expectations about what you could achieve and then you saying, "Nope! I can achieve more!"

JADE: From being put in a wrong class with the kids with mental challenges and wondering what the hell am I doing here to where I am today.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: I mean, I'm very much grateful for my parents. I can't thank them enough because they relocated from Jamaica. They had goals for us, for themselves. They wanted that American Dream. You know, my parents--particularly my father--knew how to stretch a dollar. They really put themselves out there and gave us what we needed, the investment. There were six of us.

CHERYL: Mm.

JADE: So that's a pretty impressive feat, you know? You don't see people too often being able to do that.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: That took a lot. It wasn't an easy process. So I have a lot of respect for them.

CHERYL: Absolutely. And you haven't taken easy roads either by any means.

## **Are there stereotypes and misconceptions about a Deaf woman making films?**

CHERYL: I'm wondering, are there stereotypes and misconceptions people have when they find out you're a Deaf woman making films?

JADE: Yes and no. It's funny. If I meet someone on the street, say, and talk to them without signing, firstly, they'll ask whether I have an accent. And then they might ask whether I'm from Jamaica. And I'll tell them yes. But I'll explain I'm also Deaf. Because I do believe that both of those identities are a part of me.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: You know, you can hear in my voice both of those aspects of who I am. And I do rely on my voice. There are some times I use sign language. But I use spoken English primarily. I think as a Deaf filmmaker, if I were to think about any misconceptions of me, I guess it really depends.

CHERYL: When those schools first met you, they assumed that you didn't really have any intelligence. They just made this assumption. So do you know, do people--

JADE: Right. And part of that was based on my race, too.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: Now, I think you have to understand because all of my classmates were white.

CHERYL: Ah.

JADE: I was the only black student there. And I was the only person who graduated at the top of my class, if you will. You know, I don't mean Valedictorian or anything. But I was the only person who wasn't required to go through a prep year at Gallaudet. I went directly to a freshman status. And the reason for that was because I met the requirements for reading and writing in English.

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

JADE: Whereas, my peers from Fanwood did not. So I was able to achieve that 12th-grade level skill on time relative to other hearing peers.

## Using video chat and interpreters instead of free Video Relay Service

CHERYL: Mmhmm. I really wanna talk about how right now we're using Google Hangout. And we've hired a paid ASL Interpreter so that you and I can communicate really effectively. There is Video Relay Service, which is free. And we chose to not use it because it's really important for you to not use Video Relay Service. Do you wanna talk about why we chose to go this route?

JADE: Sure. I had several reasons. As a business owner, many times when I make a call using Video Relay Service, or VRS, the hearing person on the other end of the call feels awkward. It's not always a comfortable process for them. And so when I'm making a pitch about some idea or trying to get sponsorship or whatever the case may be, the interpreter often makes mistakes, misrepresents what I'm trying to convey. And there are times when it's not effective.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: So when I begin the VRS call, I'll check in with the interpreter to see whether they're following me effectively, to ask them if they're understanding me. And if I don't feel like it's gonna be an effective meeting or an effective conversation, then I'll prefer to use what's called IP Relay, where I'll just type my communication. And instead of signing to an interpreter in VRS, I type to a person who will then read my text message aloud to the hearing person on the other end. And I can trust that to be a more accurately conveyed message. It's very rare that I feel 100% confident over VRS. So if I need something done in a hurry, I'll go ahead and use VRS. But often, I'd rather send an email.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: Sometimes I do use a device that I can put over my phone. It's called VCO: Voice Carry Over. And so that way, I can watch the interpreter. And the hearing caller on the other end hears my voice. And so that is effective sometimes. It kinda depends on the type of meeting.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: So I have to think about what my goal is and what my level of confidence is in the kind of medium I choose as to how to communicate with hearing people via these kinds of technology.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: So if it were family or parents or someone, they're used to my voice. And I know they're gonna understand me. And so I might use Voice Carry Over more comfortably. But when I'm trying to establish a first impression and have a business meeting, I don't assume that hearing people are going to understand my voice effectively. And I know folks don't have patience to get through laborious kinds of communication.

CHERYL: Oh.

JADE: And that happens all the time.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: When it comes to the VRS, I have used a variety of different providers. There are different companies out there. And they all have one goal. Some of these companies that provide VRS services host community events.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: There's one called MICA, which is a runway show. And MICA means Multicultural International Consortium [of Deaf and Hard of Hearing] Artists and Advocates.

CHERYL: Mm.

JADE: So we've had a bi-annual event for four times. Every two years we've hosted events. The VRS companies, they made a sponsorship available for some of these community kinds of events because they supported the diversity aims that we celebrated.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: And so they gave us small contributions. But each times I've approached the VRS companies, they want me to promise to use their service exclusively, to make calls using their service as sort of a quid pro quo, if you will. I started to approach them about sponsoring my film because my films primarily feature black actors. And almost all of them have turned down those sponsorship requests. And what started bothering me was that one of them turned me down and would say things like, "Oh, we're sorry. Your film doesn't meet our mission."

CHERYL: Hmm.

JADE: Now, the deaf community's quite small. And word gets around. I know stuff; I hear stuff.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: So I asked for more information from one of these companies as to what exactly their mission was and what comes under the purview of the kinds of films that they would support. Because there had been other films that I know had gotten sponsorship from some of these companies. So it wasn't just that films were outside of their mission purview. What was it, I wanted to know. I noticed that the films they did support were often made by white, deaf filmmakers, the content was often very much the same, and there wasn't much diversity of perspective in what was being portrayed.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: And what I found from someone who represents the National Black Deaf Advocate group was that almost all of the VRS providers profit, they make more money off of people of color who are usually the ones who are staying home and talking on the phone the most.

CHERYL: Ah.

JADE: Those people who are on SSI, who aren't out all day at jobs, they're staying home. So my understanding is that those people are their highest customers. Those people are who's making more calls.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: So the way VRS providers make their money is that when a VRS call is made, the minutes add up. And so I can't speak to exactly how the formula works. I wouldn't wanna give you incorrect information. But they make money based on the number of minutes that deaf people are on the phone.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: They then submit the bill to the FCC who then reimburses them. So I decided to stop using their services as much as I can because when I asked them for reciprocal support and asked them to consider changing their image by supporting the arts represented by my film--And actually, I noticed almost all the VRS providers will partner with DeafNation, which is another company. DeafNation then brings a whole bunch of deaf consumers together at Expo shows.

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

JADE: So then the deaf community comes out, and that's where the VRS companies recruit them. And that's how the dollars build up for them. So I'm telling you, it's quite a racket. Most people who are there signing up for their services are people of color.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: And again, these are people who are less likely to have jobs and who are more likely to be home on the phone.

CHERYL: Right.

JADE: And that's where the VRS companies get their subscribers. You know, it can be an advantage for my business as well. But I wanna be sure that I cater to the people who are supporting me and my community. I don't want it to be a one-way street.

CHERYL: Right.

JADE: So that's also why I feel like in order to rely on quality services, I wanna be able to also support the company. Now, I also have a vlog. And it was suggested to me that I should share some of my thoughts about how the VRS companies take advantage of our communities in some ways. But I didn't wanna burn any bridges.

CHERYL: Oh yeah!

JADE: I think I ended up doing so anyway. But hey, what can you do?

CHERYL: Right.

JADE: You know, I'm not the kind of person who can just sit back and accept a situation that I don't think is right. I need to speak up and voice my concerns. So I wanted to make sure that I'm diplomatic and approach things in a way where I can offer solutions. But no one took advantage of the potential that I offered in terms of supporting the community that has given them so much--

CHERYL: Right.



JADE: --in terms of improving the relationships and doing more for our community because our community is providing the primary customers for their service. But I don't see them giving back in effective ways to the black deaf community, and specifically to black deaf filmmakers.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

## **VRS companies are supporting white deaf filmmakers**

JADE: I see them supporting white deaf filmmakers more consistently. So I asked the deaf community by posting a forum on Facebook. I asked three questions. I asked which films VRS providers have sponsored. And I got a variety of answers. I asked for whether there were any people of color who were filmmakers that they knew of that VRS companies had supported. And I didn't get any responses to that question. No one knew of anyone. My third question was whether they supported intersectionalities and themes about deaf people of color.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: And again, I didn't find that they had. There were no responses that they had. So that's when I got encouragement to share my thoughts on the vlog. And I got a lot of support for my ideas, a lot of positive feedback.

CHERYL: Good.

JADE: Which surprised me. But that's where I am right now with regard to those VRS providers that purport to serve the deaf community. It's not something I can dwell on.

CHERYL: Right.

JADE: I'm just moving on and have looked for other ways to raise money. But the one thing I do know is that I don't choose to spend very much time at all with my calls over Video Relay Services that are benefitting a company until I see a change in the way they support our communities.

CHERYL: You don't seem to be dwelling on it. You seem to be very proactive, making a statement, and with integrity, sticking by what you're doing. Yeah.

JADE: Sure. Yeah, I figure I can share information. And it's also funny because there were two deaf white ladies who were college students. And I didn't know either of them. But they saw my vlog. And for some reason, I guess my vlog inspired them. They shared their own thoughts that they were looking forward to seeing my film and encouraging me, which meant a lot to me that they were looking beyond the kind of films that other deaf filmmakers are making, which are not always of serious content, don't include people of color. When they did their vlog, they inspired somebody else to donate \$500 to me.

CHERYL: Oh!

JADE: Which was pretty impressive! I really told them thank you because it wasn't something I expected for someone else to have seen my thoughts on my vlog and for the ripple effect to end up in funding coming back to me. I need to just put my focus in what I believe in and let my work speak for me and my message. Whether the people who receive that message, black or white, I think the story itself can resonate.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. I'm so glad you said that because that's actually how I found out--Now, I don't remember how I first found out about you. But I don't remember my own name sometimes. But what resonated with me--

JADE: I think you contributed to my film, though.

CHERYL: Yes, I contributed to your film. And I was sharing because it looked so fascinating. But I don't remember how I first found you.

## How "The Shattered Mind" film got started

CHERYL: The film that you have been fundraising for and working on most recently, "The Shattered Mind," what resonated with me is the character who had a traumatic brain injury. But then, I thought, well this is so great, because I'm also very interested in intersectionality. There is so much going on with white stories, with straight stories, with male stories. And when I saw you, I thought well, my gosh, we need so much more of this. It's written up as "it explores a black, deaf family's journey while their daughter struggles to overcome adversity, hearing loss and brain trauma." So yeah, anything you'd like to talk about that film would be great.

JADE: So I'll tell you a bit about how it started. While I was going to school at NYU, I needed to make a short film. So during the time it was a short film, I used a different title. It was called "Cutting the Edge of the Free Bird." It was a 15-minute film. And it was basically about a mother and her daughter. The mother had attended a school for the deaf, which was based on Gallaudet. And the daughter went to a different school, NYU. And where the mother was giving a lot of encouragement, the daughter was very resistant and was also exploring her sexual identity and didn't have confusion. She knew she was gay. But she was still struggling with those issues. And so, as a short film, I won two awards for that. This was in 1994-95. And I traveled to some different film festivals. So during my junior year at NYU, I decided to go ahead and take a class in script writing. One of the professors asked whether any of us had any short scripts that we wanted to expand. And so I took advantage of that opportunity to expand on the work I had begun. I got an A out of the work.

After I graduated, I decided that this was a project that meant a lot to me and that I wanted to continue to work on. And so I asked my professor to serve as mentor to me. In about 1997, I was pretty deeply involved with the film world. I went out to L.A. to their showbiz expo. And so I began to look for investors in order to get this idea off the ground. The short was in 35 mm format; digital hadn't really made an appearance to much extent at that time. So I was still thinking in terms of film. In the meantime though, I decided to focus on making a documentary. So I did other kinds of work for quite a while. And then in about 2007, I decided to pick it up again. A lot of the things that I had written 10 years earlier was outdated in terms of the style and the language. And it needed a full rewrite. In the process, I added more characters and decided to focus on a black, deaf family as opposed to just the three or four characters that I had created originally. So I added additional characters, other siblings, and worked up a family. I decided also to incorporate some of my own experiences about brain trauma.

You know, in some ways it's similar to my family. But none of the characters portray anyone in my family directly. But the experiences within my family have informed the movie. Now, everyone in my family is hearing. All of my life, I had not realized how or why I'd become deaf. You know, when I had asked my parents, I was always told that no one knew. And I used to be angry with my parents because when the family moved from Jamaica, my parents came first. They left us in Jamaica. So my parents came here

first. And they worked and saved up money and stayed with relatives. And for those first years, they flew back and forth to visit us. So there was a bit of a gap in my life that was always kinda hard to account for. And information didn't seem entirely clear. In fact, later, it was wrong. Something had happened to me over there. We had been staying with a relative who was watching us. And I wasn't sure whether to be angry or upset or you know how to feel about what had happened back then. You know, I have a great life now. I'm very pleased with my life. So it did, though, give me reason to ask my mom. All these years, she had said, "Oh, I don't know. We don't know what had happened and how you became deaf." But she also seemed kind of uncomfortable. When I was younger, I went through a lot of difficulties with being deaf and wondering why I was deaf and what had happened to me. And I know my mom felt bad and felt some degree of guilt. But you know, I always figured it's meant to be. And I didn't blame my mother in any way, you know? I kind of feel like I was called to be this way. Whatever the situation was back then, this is what it is now.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: So my sister gave me some indication that a relative felt he was responsible because apparently I had climbed up onto something to reach something. And I fell and hit my head.

CHERYL: Mm.

JADE: And so this is what my sister told me might've been the cause of my deafness. And you know, that kinda made sense to me because I also had dreams I hadn't really figured out. So I think all of those experiences in my own life came into play in this movie.

CHERYL: Mm, mmhmm.

JADE: When my family moved here to New York, I guess I had also crawled up onto a stove and fell off and hit my head.

CHERYL: [laughs]

JADE: So I guess this was something that I [giggles] was known for. And my sister told me years later that I ended up in the hospital here in Mt. Vernon after that.

CHERYL: Wow.

JADE: So having fallen and hit my head in Mt. Vernon, having some indication I had fallen and hit my head when I was much younger in Jamaica, even though I don't remember anything about the specifics of what happened, I don't remember much about even living there. I don't have any memories of that time.

CHERYL: Wow.

JADE: So whether or not things in my dream represented things from my childhood, I don't know. But that all came into the movie that I'm working on here with "The Shattered Mind."

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah.

JADE: So my sister wrote me a long email later about how I had ended up in a coma for a few weeks after I hit my head. And my parents were very worried. And no one quite knew what kind of shape I would be in when I woke up. I was just crawling up into high places and falling twice. Was one of those incidents what caused my deafness or both of those? I suspect it was the earlier incident. I don't know. Now, my parents weren't there in Jamaica when that happened. They didn't see it. So they didn't know what was happening, you know?

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: Those are the thoughts and the ideas that came into play and informed the movie that I'm making: the flashbacks that I remember, the nightmares.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. And there's a lot of exploration of different parts of identity in this movie too.

JADE: Yes.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: You know, it's funny. My family knew that I was making a movie about it. And they've been very supportive. My sister let me use her house for some of the locations. My brother did the same, my younger brother. But I think there was the time when they were a little concerned about how much I was gonna include. And I told them, "Well, first of all, it's about me. And then second, it's fiction."

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

JADE: So whereas I've drawn from experiences and borrowed from ideas that have come from my own life, it's also then to add flavor and add various things. And I think that's the natural tendency of any writer.

CHERYL: Sure, sure. And the girl's family in your movie has several generations of deaf and hearing family members. So that's different from your family already.

JADE: That's right. That's right. My family is a very religious family, very strong in their Christian beliefs. And I think that, too, has informed the kinds of dynamics that are a part of my movie. The strong belief in going to church and how that has affected generations, so some of that is paralleled as well. In the movie, there are a lot of strong Deaf values and beliefs that resonate. In my own family, it's religious values and beliefs that resonate.

CHERYL: Ah.

JADE: So I drew from that. And there are parallels even though there are differences.

CHERYL: Oh, yeah.

JADE: So family values, I think, is the common theme there.

## **Jade's opinion of media representations of deaf, Deaf, and Hard-of-hearing characters**

CHERYL: Right, right. Now, what's your opinion of representations of deaf, Deaf, or Hard-of-Hearing characters the way you see them in the movies today, in general, by other filmmakers?

JADE: Well, I always look to the content of the story first.

CHERYL: Mm.

JADE: I look to the human experience. I think a lot of TV and movies are pretty one-dimensional. A lot of them focus on cochlear implants--

CHERYL: Uh-huh!

JADE: --as a cure for deaf people. I get sick of that.

CHERYL: Oh yeah.

JADE: There's more to life than that.

CHERYL: Oh yeah.

JADE: I think that's one really big misconception about deaf people is that we need to be fixed.

CHERYL: Mmhmm! No.

JADE: And that's not true.

CHERYL: No.

JADE: No. That's a problem in the way deaf people are portrayed.

CHERYL: Yep.

JADE: I think that's the main way they see us.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: And because they keep making movies about us, and that tends to be their focus that deaf people need to be fixed. "Oh! She can talk! Oh my goodness!" And it's the very big emotional bullshit.

CHERYL: Uh-huh. [laughs] Yes.

JADE: You know, I'd like to see more about deaf people. You know, something like my story, another aspect of humanity: a girl with a strong family, strong family values, and not making movies about gangs or you know that. We see a lot of those reality TV: "Real Housewives of Atlanta" or something. I think we need to make more substantive films.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: You know? A more well-rounded view. Movies that people can relate to, drama that shows accidents and experiences. Every time I see another film or another television show about deaf people being cured--

CHERYL: [laughs]

JADE: --that's just the same-old, same-old that perpetuates dangerous ideas.

CHERYL: I'm with you.

JADE: Yeah, that's why I feel like as a filmmaker, I have a responsibility to correct those misimpressions.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: You know, you had another question regarding hearing filmmakers.

CHERYL: Yes.

JADE: I can give you a good example. The show "Switched At Birth?"

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: I only watched one or two episodes of that program because it gave me nothing I could relate to. What I did notice was that the director didn't seem to know how to work with the actors, in particular with regard to emotion. It's sad to say, I don't think Marlee Matlin is that great of an actress--

CHERYL: [laughs]

JADE: --to be honest with you. She's kinda one-dimensional.

CHERYL: Mm.

JADE: I've never seen a whole lot of range in her work.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: So, to me it seems like hearing directors just think, "Oh, Marlee Matlin, she is THE deaf actress." There's a lot more out there!

CHERYL: Oh yeah.

JADE: There's more of us available.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: They don't know what they're seeing.

CHERYL: Right.

JADE: You know, they can't see beyond the deafness.

CHERYL: That's right.

JADE: They see Marlee Matlin, and they think, "Ok, we'll she's an Oscar-winning actress. And she represents what it means to be deaf."

CHERYL: [giggles]

JADE: Well, she's bankable. But I don't think she represents us. I think she's past her prime.

CHERYL: Mm.

JADE: So "Switched At Birth" has several deaf actors in that program. But I don't think there's much of a range. It just seems to be very monotone. As a director, I want--I'm trying to think of a good example. "Through Deaf Eyes" is a program. If they really are able to identify what it is they're looking for, as a director, I wanna be able to pick up on the emotion and use that without overdoing it. But I don't think that the hearing directors of deaf actors are always able to catch that. I don't think they clue in to deaf culture, deaf sensitivities, and the reactions.

CHERYL: Right, right.

JADE: And hearing directors don't always catch that.

CHERYL: Right.

JADE: They can clue in to that for hearing people. But if they don't know sign language, what I end up seeing is things that are slightly off, things that don't quite ring through.

## **Working without interpreters during filming**

JADE: There was one incident that happened during the making of my film, "The Shattered Mind." We had a hard time getting interpreters.

CHERYL: Mm.

JADE: I needed interpreters in order that that very important relationship between my director of cinematography and myself--I wanted to make sure that our shared vision was communicated effectively during the work.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: Because we had communication barriers that proved to be frustrating for both of us. I would end up feeling like that's not my vision. That's not what I want. But because I often wasn't able to find interpreters, there were times I thought that the director of cinematography understood what I was trying to convey. I mean, he had read the script. There were times when I would turn around, and then I would become aware that he was talking. And he was giving instruction. And I would realize wait a minute. What's going on here?

CHERYL: Oh no!!

JADE: Yeah. When we didn't have effective communication because of a lack of interpreter, that set me off.

CHERYL: Oh yeah. Yeah!

JADE: So there were times we got into it, even in front of the actors where the actors were kind of feeling a little bit uncomfortable. And there were family members of mine that didn't like this guy. They didn't like how he was talking down to me.

CHERYL: Mm, mmhmm!

JADE: And so my brother and my sister were on the set a few times and kinda gave him the eye. But they know that I'm tough. Don't fuck with me. [both laugh] So things like that happened. You know, feeling like I was ignored, and the hearing person tried to step up and take control.

CHERYL: Yep!

JADE: There was a white, male DP who also kinda stepped in at times with the attitude of "I know what I'm doing."

CHERYL: Yep!

JADE: And I had to assert myself and make sure that it was my vision that was gonna be portrayed. I mean, if he had an idea that he wanted to put forth about a camera angle or something that he saw, I'm certainly open to that.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: But I'm also watching the monitor; I'm seeing what he's seeing. And if it doesn't meet my needs, then I was certainly not shy about telling him, "Well, this isn't gonna work." Or I needed to make sure that the aspect of deaf culture or deaf sensitivity was something I needed to educate him about. I'm sure it ended up being a learning experience for him. It required a lot of patience, especially because we didn't have an interpreter. Communication was a challenge. I mean, even sometimes the actors had to step in to serve as an interpreter from time to time. And that's not a position I wanted to put them in.

CHERYL: Right.

JADE: Not just in trying to tell the story, but in trying to get the story made, people have to learn how to work together in order to accomplish the vision, you know, to be able to give the script meaning in the way that it had been written so that it was a story that was told with quality and told accurately. Now, I would have to tell the camera man to move back in order that the actors' hands would be in the frame. And depending on the angle we were working with or what was going on, there were times when he did end up cutting off the hands, I think not always intentionally.

CHERYL: Ugh.

JADE: But I had to be on top of things to make sure that it came off the way I wanted it to. And it required me taking control quite a bit. But I have to tell you, that experience taught me something. It really taught me to be more self-confident because you know, I was working with people who had dealt



with big-budget Hollywood movies. And if I'm dealing with a man like that, you know, oftentimes you're dealing with a bigger asshole. I've dealt with worse than him.

## **Filmmakers are often not experts in the area they're filming**

CHERYL: Uh-huh. Oh yeah. You have a video clip of your biopic on YouTube, and there are some title cards in there. One of the quotations you put up there--it's you saying this, but it's written. You said, "You cannot make a movie without first being informed, aware, compassionate and open to change." And this is what I hear in the stories you're telling. Yes, you're an absolute expert in your area of filmmaking, but that doesn't make you an expert in deaf culture or deaf communication. And so you've got to become aware of understanding that this is not random gesturing, this is not that you're just doing some kind of concept with your hands. This is signed language, and it's representing a culture.

JADE: Yes, right. And I know a lot of times, having met filmmakers and writers who would be in touch with me, these are hearing people who would say, "I'm making a film about deaf so-and-so." The first thing that comes to mind for me is whether they have a consultant, whether a deaf person is involved anywhere along the way.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: That's very important because otherwise, a hearing person isn't gonna be able to portray the deaf story accurately.

CHERYL: Absolutely. My question is why is it that people keep going into communities they know nothing about and making a film about these capital "O" Others? "Oh, I'll make a film about you! I could make it!" It blows my mind how often that continues to happen.

JADE: I think people think it's the "in" thing to do.

CHERYL: [giggles] Yeah.

JADE: "Oh, look! This is something different. I'm gonna provide something original. I'm sure I can write it. I'm sure I'll be able to master what it takes to write this story."

CHERYL: Right.

JADE: And that's presumptuous.

CHERYL: Yes.

JADE: There was a deaf filmmaker who interviewed me. And her question was something like, I think she asked me, "What can be done for deaf filmmakers to put themselves involved at executive levels of filmmaking?" I think a lot of times people complain that we aren't in positions of power.

CHERYL: Right.

JADE: We don't have enough content. We aren't able to effect content about ourselves. We're lacking representation of our own stories and our own experiences. So my take on what can be done about this

is that we have to do more writing. We have to write the content. We have to make the films, the quality films that we wanna see. And we need to always stayed attached to the project. If you're a writer, you should also be a producer so that we're always attached to that work, and we're always being the producers of our own content. Whether you're writing or directing, you also need to produce. Because that way, when you get recognition for your work, people begin to pay attention. They'll recognize that producer's credit. You're gonna be able to move your way up. And that is how we're gonna get more respect.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JADE: That's how we put ourselves up that ladder at the executive levels where people will recognize our work. That is how we're gonna get the clout to be able to do the work we wanna do. You know, look at Shonda Rhimes, the woman who's writing "Scandal" or "Grey's Anatomy." They're hot shit now. And I've heard that she's making 8 figures now.

CHERYL: Oh!

JADE: So she started as a writer. But she continued to be attached as producer with every piece of work that she did. And so that was my answer to this young deaf filmmaker, to make sure that she's involved as producer. On all of my work, that's my plan: Producer Plus. Whether I'm primarily writer, director, producer, and my own editing. Oh!

CHERYL: Yes. [both laugh]

JADE: So that's my thinking. Because I think we get overlooked a lot.

CHERYL: Oh yeah!

JADE: So I think that's the best way to do it.

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah. I agree. There's no question that you get overlooked a lot, especially when you look at the different intersections that you're at.

## **Representations are sugar-coated and superficial**

CHERYL: You're in multiple groups that get overlooked a lot, or like you said, reduced down to one dimension. Oh, that video of that young woman getting her cochlear implant turned on, and she started crying. That just exploded on Facebook. And I only watched it to see how angry and bored I would get with watching this. And I was like you know what? I still don't know this person. I don't know anything about this person except she got her cochlear implant turned on, and now she's crying. And yet everybody thinks they know something about her. What? You did not get to know anything about this person's life experience. You don't know her story. You don't know what's gonna happen when she walks out the door. But like you said, I agree that people think that's the whole story. And it's not.

JADE: Right. It's sugar-coated.

CHERYL: Oh, it is so sugar-coated!

JADE: We have deaf people who are doctors. What about that story? How did they overcome the obstacles that they faced in order to practice medicine?

CHERYL: Absolutely.

JADE: You know, there are deaf lawyers. You know there are over 200 deaf lawyers?

CHERYL: I didn't.

JADE: Why not make a movie about that?

CHERYL: [giggles] Yes! This is why I think more of these films need to be made from within the community. Cuz like you said, you can't really adequately represent that multi-dimensional, complex person if you're just observing from the outside.

JADE: My movie "The Shattered Mind," all of the characters have, they're all very different. So that even though they're deaf, there's diversity amongst them. I want my audience to see the range of deaf people and their communication styles in my movie. That's what we need to see.

CHERYL: Yes!

JADE: And I don't see that.

CHERYL: Oh yeah.

JADE: Yeah. So I feel strongly that "The Shattered Mind" will do well.

CHERYL: Yeah.

## **Updates on "The Shattered Mind"**

JADE: Right now, I just hired a product placement specialist. We're also working on a special effects artist. So I've got somebody who seems to be willing to work within my budget because they believe in the product. They like the content of the story.

CHERYL: Mhmm.

JADE: And so the project is meaningful enough to them to be able to put their own fees in perspective in terms of their willingness to support my film.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JADE: Which makes me feel good, too.

CHERYL: Yeah!

JADE: During the Sundance Film Festival, I had a wonderful time. I met so many different people. It was just fantastic. I think I would like to have two versions, one short--a 20-minute version that I can send to the film festivals and hope to get a distributor pick it up in order that I could get the full funds to be able to shoot a full feature-length.

CHERYL: Right, right.

JADE: We'll see.

CHERYL: Great. When do you think the 20 minute version will be released?

JADE: I'm thinking maybe September.

CHERYL: Oh, great.

JADE: But I'll certainly show the longer version. The 20-minute, I think, would be specifically made for the festivals. I think that would be a better strategy.

CHERYL: This is just wonderful. Oh my gosh. Is there anything else you wanna say to wrap up? Talk about where folks can find you, what else to look for from you?

JADE: Sure. I'm still looking for funding, as always.

CHERYL: Oh yeah.

JADE: You can go to my website, which is [JadeFilm.com](http://JadeFilm.com). There's no "s." JadeFilm.com. You can go there to make a donation. I'm also developing a new piece of work that would be more focused on a TV pilot, a sitcom, if you will. So that's something that I submitted a proposal for to the Apollo recently.

CHERYL: Mm!

JADE: And if I get approval then that's something they might host for a staged-reading.

CHERYL: Oh wow. Nice.

JADE: Yeah, so that's exciting. Cuz I'd like to have a backup project ready so that once "The Shattered Mind" is finished, I've got something in the wings that I can move to next.

CHERYL: Right. I really wanna thank you so much for talking to me today. You know, you really shared a lot of perspectives that I think a lot more people who make films and who watch films really need to hear. So thank you very, very much.

JADE: Thank you.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CHERYL: Thanks for joining me for another episode of Stories from the brainreels. Find more handy info on brain injury and disability art and culture on my disability arts blog, [WhoAmIToStopIt.com](http://WhoAmIToStopIt.com).

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