



Photo by Aliza Danielson

# THERESA BULGER

## prisoners of silence no more

BY DOMINGO LOVE

**E**arly this spring, the reigning Miss Deaf Texas, who was profoundly deaf, was text messaging as she walked along railroad tracks near her home. She never heard the train that sent her to her death and caused such a deep loss to family and friends. Theresa Bulger is one person, who, if she can, will do everything in her power to see that tragedies like that are avoided, simply by facilitating the teaching of profoundly deaf children to hear and speak via the use of today's latest technological innovations, especially cochlear implants and FM receivers.

*Lifestyles* tried to track her down for months because Bulger is never in one place long enough to find her shadow. She is always traveling to make sure that the myriad projects she has undertaken to benefit those who are not quite as lucky as she is are always working at top form.

Bulger is CEO of the Auditory Oral Foundation for the Auditory Oral School of New York (AOSNY) and director of OPTION School Services. OPTION Schools International is an umbrella organization of 49 educational institutions that provide auditory/oral education, thus mainstreaming profoundly deaf children by teaching them to listen and speak. This work takes Bulger around the world.

We caught up with her on the sunny, cold, first day of spring and pinned her down long enough to get her to talk about herself. Of course, the first question we wanted an answer to was: "How did she ever end up doing the work that she does?"

Bulger says the way to explain that is to start at the beginning. She was born in upper New York State and is a classic baby boomer. Her mom was a newspaper editor and her dad, a politi-

Bulger had no idea that she was walking into something that would shape her life for years to come.

There she saw, for the first time, that children who were born profoundly deaf had the chance to listen and speak just like their peers. She walked up the drive, expecting a wall of silence. Deaf children, in her experience, couldn't speak because they couldn't hear. They signed. Signing makes no sound. Instead, as she drew closer to the school, she heard children singing and laughing, chattering and teasing each other. It amazed her how the gift of sound could so change a child.

These children were no longer prisoners of silence and they inspired her. She resigned from the foundation she was working for and took the job her board member offered at the school for much less pay. "It was a chance to change the world forever for these chil-

Five years ago, Bulger was at an OPTION school conference in Jacksonville, Florida, where she met Sam and Pnina Bravmann, an Orthodox Jewish couple from Flatbush, Brooklyn, who built an OPTION school of their own. They had decided to do so because when their profoundly deaf daughter was growing up there were no educational organizations that could help her mainstream into a regular school system. If they could do it for their own child, they decided to make it possible for others as well.

As part of the process, they turned their home into a school and used personal financing to fund it, including using their credit cards. They began their first week with one student. By the end of the semester, they were servicing nine. By the next year, they were handling 18 students. Over the years, the space has been remodeled to meet the

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cian. Social action was in her genes.

As a young adult, she attended college in western Pennsylvania and majored in sociology and pre-law. Then life took an interesting twist, she says. "I was doing all this socially conscious work when I realized that money has power. Money does talk, and you can do more with money than you can otherwise. There is no mission if there is no money." So she learned how to become a top-notch professional fundraiser and to create sustainable revenue streams for non-profit organizations.

She was working at a venerable not-for-profit in Pittsburgh and thinking of moving up to another foundation when a board member for her employer invited her to visit an OPTION school.

dren, instead of just putting a finger in a dike or having to continually funnel money to minimal results."

At the DePaul Institute, she honed her skills and then became involved in the umbrella organization for OPTION schools around the world. She has never looked back.

She now devotes almost all her time to assisting these special schools around the country to help them mainstream profoundly deaf children into regular schools; to help them lead normal lives and have a voice in their own future.



Many of these schools face challenges, but none has touched her more deeply than the AOSNY.

needs of tiny tots as young as one month old. The house next door to the Bravmanns has been remodeled for school use, and more children are trained in the school's other location in Canarsie, about a mile away from the main offices. All told, today the school teaches in three shifts, with nearly 200 students ranging in age from infant to 5 years old who come from all walks of life—Latino, Muslim, Chassidic, Russian, Asian, and more. They have since become the largest, most diversified OPTION preschool in the world.

When Bulger heard the Bravmanns' story, she was determined to help them succeed in finding and funding a new building.

In late winter, the service coordinator and therapist from the school

were present when one of their youngest students, 10-month-old Baby L, had his dual cochlear implants turned on at the NYU Medical Center and heard his mother's voice for the first time. In May, his mother reported that she heard him laughing and that when he heard his laughter, he laughed more!

One of the important tips Bulger would offer parents is to make sure they have their children's hearing tested as soon after birth as possible. If there's a problem, it can be helped better if it's helped earlier—95% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, and the child may be a candidate for technical intervention. As Bulger explains, "Not every child is a candidate, but for those who are, the difference is amazing."

How do you take care of a baby that's a few days old? Clinicians work with parents to prepare them for the option of cochlear implants or other hearing aids that will amplify sound and transmit it to a child's brain.

Parents are considered by AOSNY teachers to be part of the teaching team. They are the most valuable partners the school has in helping their own children listen and speak.

The school also offers home-based services, where professionals visit the child's natural environment and do whatever needs to be done—from speech pathology to occupational therapy. But making that happen isn't as simple as it sounds. When you are trying to build a school and get more students, you need to obey laws and meet the highest standards, which the bureaucracy controls. There are miles of red tape to cut through on any given day. And money is vital. So is the need for a real school building in Brooklyn, where the demand for the school's services increase yearly. So today, the dream is to get a building that can be converted into an ideal hi-tech, kid-

## NEWS YOU CAN USE

1. Hearing impairment is the number-one birth anomaly in the U.S.
2. 95% of deaf children are born to hearing parents.
3. There are multiple causes for deafness, not all of them understood.
4. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends mandatory hearing screening for all newborns, yet many pediatricians are still unaware of the benefits of early intervention.
5. Only .02% of Americans know how to use sign language. Hearing parents who sign to communicate with their child can, at best, only do so with a preschool vocabulary.
6. It costs \$800,000 to teach a single child to use sign language.
7. Individuals who can listen and speak can call for help in an emergency, order pizza, and have unlimited employment opportunities. Imagine if someone couldn't speak and needed to summon help while their loved one is drowning!
8. Early intervention utilizing the auditory/oral method enables a child to obtain treatment, rehabilitation, and special training to learn to listen and speak while at a critical stage in their development.
9. Teaching deaf and hearing-impaired children to listen and speak improves their reading and writing skills—skills essential to their success as functional, productive adults in the hearing world.
10. 97% of the children who attend the Auditory Oral School of New York are mainstreamed into their neighborhood schools by the time they are ready for kindergarten. The other 47 OPTION schools in the U.S. report similar results.

and parent-friendly environment for AOSNY's very special students.

As the driving force of the OPTION Series Collaboration Project, Bulger makes the rounds of the 49 other schools scattered around the world. There are schools in the U.S. and Australia, in Canada and the U.K. Many of them want help, and that's what she's there for. From working to convince lawmakers to introduce kid-friendly legislation to negotiating collaborative contracts with public agencies, hospitals, and school districts, Bulger is a problem solver for her kids, and she views each student in the OPTION schools as one of her own. She considers serving them a privilege.

But worrying about OPTION schools is only one of her responsibilities. She is always switching hats. In June she chaired the biennial international A. G. Bell Convention in Pittsburgh, which is also her hometown.

The A. G. Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing was founded by Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, with prize money he was awarded for his life's work. Members of the association feel strongly that most deaf and hard-of-hearing children have the right to speak and become fully integrated, successful members of the larger world, a goal that is possible to achieve.

This winter, in attempt to draw Bulger away from her work, her husband, Dr. David Bourne, decided to spirit her away to Antarctica, which is about as far away from Brooklyn and deaf children as you can get. "I checked carefully and there are no OPTION schools or deaf children there, so it's the only place I know where you will really get a break," he said. And then he followed through.

Bulger remembers her trip with a laugh. "I saw lots of penguins and learned that not all penguins are alike. There are emperors, Adélies, Gentoos, Magellanics, and chinstraps. And the one thing they have in common is that they are cute, smell 'bad,' and are funny."

She describes the scenery as breathtaking, the glaciers and mountains reflecting a depth of color that is just amazing. "The wildlife—the leopard seals, the orcas—were gorgeous, and the weather could change on a dime. It was truly awe-inspiring to get caught in a 200-m.p.h. gust of wind. David thought I was going to simply fly away.

"But even though I was so far removed from humanity, I was always tempted to head back to the ship so I could electronically communicate, either via the Internet or the ship-to-shore phone, to check on my kids. Does that mean I'm obsessive-compulsive? I think it means that I love the people I work with so much I can't let go for a moment."

Theresa and David don't get a chance to see each other much, so the trip to the South Pole was really special. David is the principal scientist at the Robotics Institute at Carnegie-Mellon University and a much-published author and inventor. They live out in the countryside in southwestern Pennsylvania and have a home on Chincoteague Island in Virginia. They have five children and three grandchildren and have dedicated themselves to simply making the world a better place.



The children who have escaped the prison of silence appreciate Bulger's efforts, as do their parents. You can tell when you hear AOSNY ring with the laughter and songs of its students. [lifestyles](#)

## AOSNY: THE AUDITORY ORAL SCHOOL OF NEW YORK/ StriVright Early Intervention Program

The Auditory/Oral School of NY/StriVright was founded by professionals in the fields of education, speech pathology, and audiology who are also parents of hearing impaired children. They successfully mainstreamed their own children and are committed to helping other parents do the same.

The AOSNY team of licensed, experienced professionals works extensively with babies and young children in their specific areas of expertise. The multidisciplinary team includes special educators, teachers of the deaf and hearing handicapped, speech-language pathologists, audiologists, psychologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, social workers, service coordinators, a nutritionist, a vision therapist, and a music therapist. Children have so much to communicate that it is important they are encouraged to share their thoughts, feelings, and desires.

StriVright, AOSNY's early intervention program, provides both home-based and center-based services including speech therapy, auditory-verbal therapy, audiology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, counseling, feeding therapy, nutrition therapy, and music therapy.

The preschool is a full-day program. The Early Intervention Program has three daily shifts and also offers weekly individual sessions. Frequent daytime and evening parent meetings are held to educate and support families as they address the variety of issues that arise from having a child with a disability. The school provides counseling for parents as they cope with the normal range of emotions and demands accompanying their child's diagnosis and special needs.

Infants and young toddlers with all types of delays/disabilities receive services tailored individually to meet their needs. Carefully selected teams of experienced therapists work together with service coordinators to deliver targeted high-quality intervention to children and their families. Parents are encouraged to participate in individual therapy sessions and to incorporate goals through their daily activities.

The skill of listening is incorporated into every facet of the curriculum so that it becomes a natural process. The children are taught to listen to their parents and teachers and to their peers as well. Major emphasis is placed on the development of natural language.

AOSNY provides the stepping-stone to mainstreaming hearing-impaired children with their hearing peers. The integrated classrooms consist of an equal ratio of hearing and normal hearing children. The curriculum focuses on auditory, language, speech, cognitive, syntax, and socialization skills within the model of a regular education preschool classroom.