Spotlight interview with Albert Couthen

[Sean] Hello, I’m Sean Furman, one of the Deaf Specialist with Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing (ACDHH). As this month, February, is the month we recognize and celebrate Black/African American Awareness Month, we are doing a spotlight interview with an African American person. I am excited about the person here today, Albert Couthen, also known as Al. Can you tell us a bit about your background, where you grew up, school you attended, your employment and et cetera?

[Albert] Hello, I’m Albert Couthen and I was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I attended the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, Connecticut. After I graduated in 1961, I went to Gallaudet and graduated from there in 1966. Afterward, I worked at American School for the Deaf for seven years. Then, with my wife and my family, we moved to Washington DC where I worked at Kendall Demonstration Elementary school for fourteen years in different position. During the last ten years there, I was the assistant principal and then after that, I moved to Mississippi School for the Deaf and worked there for four years. We then moved back to Maryland where I worked at Maryland School for the Deaf in Columbia, Maryland, as the elementary school assistant principal. I retired after that and I started to work with deaf Blind students at Gallaudet University for approximately two years. Shortly after, I moved to Arizona.

[Sean] Wow, what an intense employment history. Again, I am excited to have you here. How do you identify yourself first, a Black individual or a Deaf individual? And can you explain why?

[Albert] First, let me explain a brief history, in American School for the Deaf, there were very few Black students and again when I went to Gallaudet, there was not many Black student there. At that time, I identified myself as a Deaf individual first and as Black individual second. When the Black Deaf people met together for the first time and on the 2nd day of conference, it hit me when I witnessed 300 Black deaf people coming together to discuss different issues. It made me look at myself and made me realize that I am Black person. The second time in my life was when I was at Mississippi School for the Deaf as an administrator; naturally, the reaction was negative toward the idea of me, a Black person, as an administrator, which was fine with me as this was a good experience. What really impressed me was how many Black Deaf people lived in Mississippi and attended Black Deaf School all their life; they really looked different, signed differently, and socialized differently and they looked at me as well and I could be seen as part of that group as well.

Truthfully, over the years, I learned a lot from National Black Deaf Advocates and through their conferences that has provided different workshops that helped me analyze how I identify myself first which is Black. This is because the colors reflects who I am when people see or meet me and they will see that I am Black, first, and then realize I am Deaf second. That is why it’s called “National BLACK Deaf Advocates”

[Sean] Ok, as you know different cultures have terminology that feels inappropriate or are considered to be offensive, for instance, with Deaf culture, the terminology “Hearing impaired”, which many feel turned off by, or “Deaf –Dumb”, or “Deaf-Mute”. With African American culture, what terms is there that might be considered not appropriate or offensive?
[Albert] When I answer this question, I am answering this from my personal experience, not reflecting on the different cultures. As there is a Black Deaf and Deaf culture group which are two different things depending on environment. For instance, when I attend the NAACP conference, I would as a Black individual as there are not many Black Deaf people there. When I attend NAD conference, I consider myself as Black individual as majority of people there are White. They will see me as a Black individual. Again, it depends on the environment one is in and there will always be two different cultures, Black Deaf people have both Deaf Culture and Black Deaf Culture which are two distinct cultures. So, this really depends on individual’s perspectives. As to what is offensive, I do truly feel it is important for all cultures to be aware that color always comes first; meaning when you identify a Black Deaf person; not as a Deaf Black person. When you talk about Black Deaf person, think about the color which comes first and the handicap which comes second. Again, that’s my personal answer.

[Sean] Can you tell me about a time where you experienced discrimination or was treated differently? Elaborate on that.

[Albert] With discrimination, it depends on the degree by another group. With my experience, for instance when I was a senior in high school with my Deaf friend, whose brother was a student at Gallaudet. He had invited us to visit him at Gallaudet and we were driving and stopped in a small town to eat. In the restaurant, we were sitting and waiting to be served on. My friend, who is white, was not sure what to do so he asked the server to “serve us.” The server would not serve us and behind us was two state police sitting doing nothing. I told my friend that I would leave and my friend told me “No!” and he left with me. At that time, I realized that what discrimination is.

At Mississippi School for the Deaf, during my first week there, the superintendent called me to his office and informed me that there was substantial amount of negative reactions about me working there by parents, alumnus, and friends of the school. They did not like the idea of working for a Black Deaf administrator. The superintendent asked me what to do about that? My response was “I will do the best I can” and if there was any problems, I would contact the superintendent, who is Deaf and also a friend of mine from Gallaudet. We worked this out and I worked there for four years. Before leaving there, I was given a truly nice farewell party showing appreciation and recognition for my work there. The same group, which objected to my working there, came to realize that they should not judge by one’s color and look at them as a person. If that person happens to be Chinese and is not well liked, the person could be successful because of their personality and willingness to work with different people. It’s important for you to judge the person first by their experience, and you can decide from there on.

[Sean] Nice answer. The year 1964, 50 years since the civil right movement which we are currently celebrating. As I am sure you were alive during that time, can you explain what your experience was like during that time?

[Albert] It was my sophomore year, in 1964 when civil right was celebrated in Washington DC. At that time, my girlfriend and I were dating; we took advantage of the time for us to get some experience, on H Street which is very close to Gallaudet campus. When we went to H Street, there was a huge crowd of people on the way to the Capitol. That gave me the impression of how significant it was! It was not only
Black people but White people, Chinese people, and many other groups of people working together, walking together for the same goal fighting for civil right for anyone. It was not only for Black people, it was for other races. So, we are both standing there watching people marching by, it gave us a moment to ponder about our children should be exposed to anyone, not be limited to only Deaf culture, be exposed to Hearing people and other races. At that time, I was not immersed into the civil right movement but I was exposed to it. Many Gallaudet students did participate in the march but we did not participate and were bystanders on H Street where the march passed by. We got the idea of how important it was and it hit us hard that it was really happening and we were experiencing it.

[Sean] That is inspiring. As a Black Deaf person, what obstacles do you notice are there in regard to equal access for the Deaf community and the Black community?

[Albert] It depends. For example, a few weeks ago, my wife, who is white, and I attended an event. It was a nice event and as I looked around the room, I noticed I was the only Black person there. Hmmm.. It was not a problem as long people acknowledge that I am Black and treated me appropriately when they talked with me. As I was talking about my own personal experience, many other Black Deaf people have their own experience which is different, often with more problems. It tends to be their own problems, not being open minded, general issues that they are dealing with such as job opportunities and socialization in the Deaf community. Again it depends on the individual. For instance, when I live here in Arizona, I do not see many Black Deaf people living here as there’s a few here. When I do meet them, our eyes opens with excitement and we discuss our background, how things are going and so forth. Some answers I get is that they are lonesome, some would answers that they don’t know what to do with themselves as should they get involved with white people all the time? Where are the Black deaf people? It is understandable. So basically, Deaf culture and Black Deaf culture are two separate worlds. It is up to that individual as to how s/he wants to be involved in both cultures.

[Sean] That brings me to the next question; you mentioned Black Deaf Culture and Deaf Culture are two different worlds. How are they different from each other? Include examples.

[Albert] with that question, I will think about it some more. The basic difference is the color of the person which can be distinguished. How the group signs, the way they dress, conversation styles are all different between the two cultures. For example, in Mississippi School, when I went to their picnic, and wow the sign language used was different. The level of understanding outside the world is also different. They are good people. With Deaf people, as an example, when I attended the NBDA conference for several years, one year I decided to invite my wife to attend the conference with me. She is Deaf and white. To her, she only saw two other white people at the conference while there were 400 Black deaf people in attendance. She came to realize this and some of the people’s reaction to her presence was “what are you here for?” My wife accepted this calmly. For the next few years, my wife continued to attend the NBDA conference, and people accepted her being there. Reason for this was they identified her as a good person who was open minded and interacted with different people at the conference. People came to realize with her that color do not necessarily come first and included her. So basically, the Black Deaf community and the white Deaf community are two different worlds in the past. Nowadays, I see more overlapping of both worlds where the differences lessen however there still will
be sense of belonging with the Black Deaf community and the Deaf community. The bonds would still be strong in both cultures.

[Sean] I would like to see more of unity with everyone and hope for that to continue from here on. As you grew up to now, who have been your role models?

[Albert] That depends on the time in my life as there were different stages. When I was young at the school for the Deaf, it was my coach, Oscar Shirley, who graduated from Gallaudet and worked at American School for the Deaf (ASD) as a P.E. teacher and a coach. He often talked about his college days at Gallaudet and that influenced me in wanting to major in P.E. I always looked up to him as he was my former coach.

During my time at Gallaudet, Tom Berg, Assistant Dean of Students at Gallaudet University; he was a coach as well for track. I knew nothing about Track when I arrived to Gallaudet. Their first presentation to the Track team, I was so impressed with his sincerity which struck a chord with me. I worked with him for four years and he was my role model during that time.

Another role model involved with the Black Deaf community, when I grew up attending deaf school, I never saw a Black Deaf high school football player. When West Virginia School for the Deaf came, I saw two Black Deaf football player and that made an impression on me. At that time, I rooted for West Virginia, not ASD simply for my role models. The two players went on to college. I knew both of their names and when I visited Gallaudet, I asked for both of them and found out that both had already graduated. I returned to ASD and when I came back to Washington DC, I looked for that person and I found him at a Black Deaf club chatting with large crowd. I worked my way through the crowd and introduced myself to him. His name was Dr. Ernest Hairston. I told him about how I learned about him and to my surprise, he knew of my name through other people even though we had not met. So I admired Dr. Ernest Hairston who wrote the book, Black Deaf America. It’s truly a good book and with his involvement with the community, he’s still a role model of mine to this day. So I have had different role models throughout my life.

[Sean] Wow. Sometime a person never knows the impact they make on another person until they meet. It can be incredible and inspiring. I am curious to know what type of support services that is out there for the Black Deaf community.

[Albert] Generally, it really depends on where you live. Basically, if a Black deaf person is seeking support, it becomes the question of what kind of support s/he is looking for. There are general support services, if seeking Black Deaf support service, there isn’t much. There is the NBDA, National Black Deaf Advocates, which has 30 chapters across the nation. Some chapters are active while others are inactive. The one that are currently active, there are a lot of support in that state which is part of NBDA. For example, when I came to Phoenix, AZ, there was barely any Black Deaf community, so I attempted to implement a chapter here in Arizona under NBDA. Quite a few of us got together at times, and then NBDA had a national conference here in 2009 which was a good exposure for them here. After the conference, the same people would continue to get together but there was not much activity which gradually reduced. Basically, if the Black Deaf community wants support from the Black Deaf
organizations, there isn’t any. They would need to look into Deaf organizations that support anyone for support. So it really depends on where you live but generally, Black Deaf organization does not provide much support with direct service and so forth.

[Sean] As we are wrapping up, one last question to ask, do you have any word of wisdoms that you would like to share with the audience that is watching this video?

[Albert] The important thing is to look at everyone individually. Every individual has potentials; have a pathway to success and at the same time some failures. I always look at all children, all adults and know they all have potentials. So work with the individual on positive note. I know there will be some negativity where it may appear the person will not be successful. Don’t think negative. You may face times or situation that may be negative, unwillingness to cooperate, or defiant to you, but that’s okay. Maturity will comes up with positivity later in life. It’s really important, looks at each person individually and be positive wherever you go.

[Sean] Nice word of wisdom. Positivity will definitely go a long way in our lives. I want to take the opportunity to thank you so much for coming and being part of the spotlight interview for African American Awareness month. We truly appreciate it. Thank you. Thank you for watching and have a great day.