

Legacy Oral-Visual History Interview with Gerald “Bummy” Burstein

Background Information

Interview Information

This interview with Gerald “Bummy” Burstein (GB) was conducted for the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans’ (MNCDHH) Oral-Visual History Project. This interview took place on October 1, 2010 at the Depot Renaissance Hotel (225 3rd Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55401). The interviewer was Douglas Bahl (DB).

Translation Notes

A note about translation of this interview: The interview was recorded in American Sign Language (ASL). The interviewer and interviewee used ASL as a first language, and the signed information was translated into vernacular or spoken English by Certified Interpreters. Two Certified Interpreters voiced for the interview participants, one for the interviewer and the other for the interviewee.

This transcript and the open captions in the video are based on the spoken English information.

Actions are in brackets. Translation notes are in parentheses and italics (using the emphasis font), and they represent additional information and corrections about what was said.

Transcript of Interview with Gerald “Bummy” Burstein

Key to names:

GB = Gerald “Bummy” Burstein (signs in American Sign Language, voiced in English by Richard Laurion)

DB = Douglas Bahl (signs in American Sign Language, voiced in English by Stephen Medicott)

[Visual of title graphic “Minnesota Oral History Project Interview with Gerald “Bummy” Burstein”]

[Douglas Bahl is sitting with Gerald “Bummy” Burstein for the interview.]

[Interview time 00:32:40]

GB: I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, USA. I was born deaf and I went to an oral school in New York City – PS 47. It was a very well-known school. When I graduated I went to the City College of New York. It was very challenging because that was immediately after World War II and each of my classes had about a hundred GIs who were attending school on the GI Bill which allowed them to go to school for free. I was studying until two or three in the morning sometimes. My father saw how hard it was for me and told me that it just wasn’t worth it. I agreed and he convinced me to transfer to Gallaudet (***College – now University***). I came into Gallaudet as a sophomore and graduated in 1950.

DB: So you graduated from Gallaudet and then came to Minnesota. What brought you here?

GB: During my senior year, all the students who were majoring in education were sending out their letters of interest to various schools, searching for teaching positions. In February, I got a letter from Minnesota which was unusual because most people were notified during the spring. So for me to get this letter in February was quite early. I don't know why I happened to get this. They needed a teacher. So I went to see the principal of the Kendall School (**at Gallaudet**) where I had done my student teaching. I went there to ask her – and, oh, her name was Mrs. Wilder – I don't know why that name popped back into my mind suddenly – but I asked her about the Minnesota School for the Deaf. Right away, she told me the school was wonderful. That the students all learned straight English and that they were using the Wings Syllables. I had no idea what that was. I'd never heard of it. I felt I needed another opinion so I went to see the President of Gallaudet, Dr. (**Leonard M.**) Elstad. He had actually been the superintendent of the Minnesota school just prior to coming to Gallaudet. He also told me that the Minnesota school was a very good school and that I should take the position. So I thought, "I got two positive responses. I needed to get one more." So I went to the printing instructor at Gallaudet – the man who was teaching in the printing area. He had been teaching at the Minnesota school, but when Dr. Elstad had come to Gallaudet, Dr. Elstad had brought him with him. I asked him about going to Minnesota. He told me the school was very good and that I should probably take the position. He said that the people in Minnesota tended to be tight – usually staying within their group. I wouldn't want to use the word clannish, but certainly insular. They were not particularly open to outsiders coming in to their services or what have you. He said they were just cold – not particularly friendly. I thought, "Well, Minnesota is a cold state. Maybe that's what makes the people cold." This shows you what kind of reasoning skills I had in those days. But I decided to go to Minnesota and I think it was in the fall of 1950, I taught my first classes. I had several different students in several different subjects that first year. The second year, there was a math teacher in the high school who had left and the principal asked me if I was interested in the position. I was interested in teaching math and so I thought, "Sure, I'd like to move up to the upper level grade." I stayed there for fourteen years, so counting my first year at Faribault, that made it fifteen years at the school. I really enjoyed my time at MSAD. I always enjoyed teaching and it wasn't just the teaching itself, but also working with the students. They were all so bright. Such a good group of students. I only had to teach a concept once and they had it. It sure made my life easy.

What else? Well, unlike what the printing teacher had said about Minnesotans, I found the people to be very nice and warm and welcoming. It was a very different experience. The town was very friendly and the townspeople were very friendly. I got to know many people living there. Some became very good friends. I tended to go to one particular restaurant called The Olympia. There were three brothers who owned the restaurant. I considered them friends and I learned about the stock market by going to that restaurant. They happened to subscribe to the *Wall Street Journal*. When I would go there, they would always give me the day-old *Wall Street Journal* and I would look through the paper and learn about stocks and trades. That all started from my experience in Faribault. While I was at Faribault, I also learned how to fly. The town of Faribault has a small airport. I would go to the airport and have an instructor who would give me lessons. The two of us would sit side by side in the small airplane. Then I started to fly solo. I was really nervous the first time I did it but I finally took that solo flight. I flew around for several hours, not all at once, but I did this from time to time. It was in Faribault that I also learned how to play squash. I played with the superintendent every Saturday in the school gymnasium.

(Excuse me, I have to look at my notes.) Oh, yes, I became an official basketball referee. I did that for eleven years. I worked as a ref in the City League – that was a league that included both boys and men playing basketball. Then I also refereed for a small high school and a Bible college. What else did Faribault teach me? *(Excuse me while I look at my notes again.)* Oh, yes, yes, yes – something very important. Faribault is where I learned to play golf. That’s one of the other things that I learned there. That was because there was a nine-hole golf course just across the street from the school. I could easily walk or, most of the time, drive over to the course and play a round after school. I learned by other people telling me what to do, but my advice to anyone else would be to make sure to take a golf lesson. Don’t follow my path. That’s about all of that.

After fifteen years, I wanted to advance professionally so I decided to go to the California State University at Northridge. There I studied what was then part of the National Leadership Academy. It was an eight-month master’s program. Wonderful place. It was the only place in the world where you could get a master’s degree in eight months. I have to remember this. I went in there in January, February, March, April, May, June, July and August. Yes, August, right. My math is still good. I couldn’t remember but my math is still good. I got an eight-month degree and I sent a letter back to Minnesota because I had always wanted to go back to Minnesota. At that time, as I understood it, the Academy – the state school was changing positions and they were creating a position for a Dean of Students. Prior to that time, they never had the Dean’s position. They had what were called headmasters. They had one for the boy’s dorm, one for the girl’s dorm, and then one for the young children – that dorm. Each of those individuals, then, reported to the superintendent. But they wanted to create this new position – a Dean of Students – and have the three head of house report to the Dean of Students to lessen the responsibility or the obligations that the superintendent had. This was spring of ’65 that I sent the letter. I got a reply that said, “We are sorry, but we cannot hire you because the position requires that the individual must be able to use a telephone and must be able to speak to parents who do not know sign language. So we are sorry.” There was nothing I could do about that. So I got a job teaching at the California School for the Deaf in Riverside. That’s the southern California school. It is a city just between LA (**Los Angeles**) and Palm Springs. A very nice town. I taught there in the fall of ’65 but during that year, I still wanted to get back to Faribault. This is the sign for Faribault that I use. I wanted to go back to Faribault where I did my primary teaching. There was nothing against the California School for the Deaf. It was just – but because I had heard that they were going to start a vocational-technical school at the Faribault school for the deaf. I knew the person in charge because his wife had taught me at the school. She was very nice. I sent them a letter and I got a very nice letter in reply. I actually have it with me. That letter confirmed that they knew who I was and the project was still in planning but had not been completed yet. As soon as the new school was ready to go, they would let me know. That was in 1965 and it’s been since then, until today, that I still haven’t heard from them.

[Interview time 14:47:50]

DB: Wow. Minnesota lost a wonderful leader and asset to California. Tell me more about when you first came to Minnesota. What was your salary and where did you live?

GB: Thank you. Yes. I got a telegram from the superintendent offering me the job, paying me the salary of \$295 a month. That would then – I'd have to pay the \$30 for my room and board from that \$295. So that was a nice offer - \$295 a month. I thought it was wonderful at that time. Of course, today –

DB: Did you have, or buy, a car?

GB: Yes, I bought a car before that. I lived on campus. There were two rooms just above the powerhouse. They signed it this way – powerhouse. I stayed there for a few years but then the powerhouse was razed and I moved over to an apartment – a two bedroom apartment – on campus under the dining hall. I stayed there until I left. It was very nice. Now about my car – yes, I did buy a car. I bought my first car. It was a Studebaker, a 1950, and I think the model was a Champion two-door. It was a green two-door. I used that car to bring students to basketball games and football games. In fact, one time, I took the boys down to a track meet that was happening at the Kansas school. I brought the boys from Minnesota down to Olathe for the track meet there. I used my car to do that. I enjoyed driving from Minnesota back to New York to visit my parents and then driving across the United States to California. I put a lot of miles on that car.

[Interview time 17:44:20]

DB: When you first came to Faribault, were the boys still doing military drills?

GB: Yes, you have reminded me that when I got to Faribault, there were boys wearing military uniforms. They had military practice. Faribault was one of the few schools at the time that still practiced military drills. The year after I arrived was the last year they had done that. They practiced military drills around the grounds. Also, Faribault had a girls' drum corps. Many of the girls were in that corps. They would perform during halftime at the football games. I understood that they were so good that they were even asked to go to the state of Minnesota basketball tournament in Minneapolis. They performed twice during two different games. They did the first game and they had to wait then for the second game. Our girls went out during the half of the basketball game – this was not during my time – it was prior to that – people in the audience even started to cry – I'm not sure why. I suppose it was an emotional experience seeing these girls drum. But they had a majorette or a drum leader who had a long baton and would help the students keep in time. They did a beautiful job. They stopped a few years later, which was too bad because it was nice PR for the school.

[Interview time 19:47:10]

DB: Wow, you've seen a lot happen at the school. Can you talk to us a bit about your work with the Deaf community – with what was then the Minnesota Association of the Deaf or MAD and is now the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens or MADC. Tell us about that and your work with other organizations.

GB: Yes, I was very involved at the time. For several terms, I was the president of the Gallaudet Alumni Association. I was very involved there. I was also involved with MADC – an example is in relations to the National Association for the Deaf (**NAD**). At that time, the forty-eight states were considering NAD – and there were forty-eight states at that time. They had to get approval from each state organization to become an affiliate of NAD. Minnesotans – the Minnesota members – you remember were kind of

insular and didn't want to necessarily do things with groups outside of Minnesota. So they asked me to serve on the committee of three. There was an individual who was a teacher at the deaf school – he supported NAD. His name was Herbert Sellner. The other person who was also a well-known leader from Minnesota – his name was Gordon Allen. His name sign was a G on the forehead – a brilliant man. Really, I was very impressed with him. He was against the affiliation with NAD for many of the reasons that I described before. Then I was involved and I was a teacher at the school but I was seen as neutral. I didn't really have enough information about – maybe I didn't know it well at the time – so I was kind of on the fence. The three of us met and we were to make a recommendation whether we joined NAD or not. We deliberated and discussed and I remember during our discussions, it took a lot of time to come to a consensus. But we finally agreed that we should join NAD. We sent a telegram off to NAD and we found that we had been the first state to affiliate with NAD. Several hours later, Oklahoma's chapter had decided to join NAD. They thought they were first, but they were, in fact, second. There was a man – his name was Ted Griffing – he was very good friends with Gordon Allen. They had always been slightly competitive. So Gordon sent him a telegram and said, "No, you're not the first. We were the first." And it's been written in the history books that MADC – or Minnesota – was the first to align with NAD.

Now, in reference to the Gallaudet Alumni Association, Minnesota's chapter was also the first chapter of the alumni association state chapter – so Minnesota has a record of being first in many ways. I'm happy I was involved. I also think that I was involved and asked to speak to a variety of community groups in Minneapolis and St. Paul on a variety of different topics.

DB: While you were teaching, did you attend any MAD conferences?

GB: Yes, I did. I had gone to a few. As I mentioned before, Minnesota has a group has its own way of doing things. For example, I had gone to one MSAD meeting (*sic*) – I can't remember which meeting or which town it was in – but they were seeking new officers – president, vice president and so on. Someone nominated me as president. Another person got up and said, "No, he cannot be president or even run for the office because he is not from Minnesota. He is not native. Therefore he can't be a candidate for the position of president." So that's a clear example of how tight the group was at the time. My understanding is that the tradition was broken a few years ago and a non-native Minnesotan was elected to the office. That individual became president and has served two or three terms.

[Interview time 25:53:40]

DB: I remember when I was a young boy in Faribault, looking up to you. You were a Scoutmaster. Do you have any special memories of working with the Scouts?

GB: Oh, yes. I was a Scoutmaster for a good number of years. One memory I have of that time was that it was the practice for Faribault to pick a "Mayor for the Day." So they would search around the students and choose one to run the city. We sent in a student's name – Ron Nomeland – and he was chosen for the "Mayor of the Day." He worked as mayor of the day in the office – made some decisions and did some writing. His picture was on the front page of the Faribault newspaper. I thought that was interesting.

DB: While you were in Faribault, were you involved in sports as a coach or anything else?

GB: Yes. I was a basketball coach for the Third Team – those are the small kids. We played in a league against other small - it's a basketball group. You know you have varsity and junior varsity and then this was a tier below that. We called it Third Team. I was their coach. We played against a variety of teams. We became champs of the league. It was one year or two years, but it was very nice. I had forgotten all about that until the other day when one of my former students reminded me of our championship and asked me, "Do you remember our championship?" I said, "Yes, thank you. I do remember that."

DB: Your name is Gerald Burstein but people around here call you "Bummy." Where did that nickname come from?

GB: Ah, yes, how I got the name "Bummy." Well, how I got that name – it was in 1947 and I had just entered Gallaudet University. That fall, there was the World Series between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Yankees. What was really amazing is that the Dodgers were even in the World Series because they'd never played well. For example, you know, their outfielders, they would hit the ball and they would run for it and the ball would end up hitting them on the head. Or they had shortstop who would rush up on the ball and the ball would go right through his legs. So that was the famous '47 Dodgers who won the World Series. I was at Gallaudet at the time and we didn't have TV. All we had was a radio. So we would have to find a hard of hearing person, a student at Gallaudet who could hear some, and they would listen to the radio in their room and all of us – all the other students – would go to that room and they would give us the information – the play-by-play – of what was happening. Who had stolen a base. Who was out. Who had gotten a hit. It was very exciting. I was really getting excited and I would hit the other students. I was becoming kind of a pest. I should back up. The Dodgers were known as "just bums" because of the way that they played the game. Their losing so much. It was kind of the way that they played – they were called "just bums." So I was hitting all my classmates and kind of being so disruptive, that they took me by the scruff of the neck, pulled me into the restroom, put on the tap water, and said, "We're going to baptize you 'the bum'." And they sprinkled me with water. I'm Jewish so I didn't know anything about baptism but they thought that this was a ritual that they wanted to let me experience and they wanted to baptize me "the bum." Another student said, "Bum isn't nice. I'm going to add 'my' to that. I'm just going to call you 'Bummy'." The name has stuck to this day. Many people don't even know what my first name really is or how to spell my first name or last name. They just always reference me as "Bummy" because everybody knows who Bummy is. That's me.

[Interview time 32:16:90]

DB: I understand you were the first Deaf person to be certified as a parliamentarian. Is that correct?

GB: No, that's not true. I am not the *(first)* Deaf person. The first Deaf person was – I can't remember his name but the time was 1950s that that individual became a certified professional parliamentarian. He has since passed away. But as of today, I believe that I'm the only certified professional parliamentarian in the United States or in the world – that's considered a CPP. I've traveled around helping individuals and organizations. I've been doing this for about fifteen or twenty years. I've given over two hundred and twenty workshops and am still adding more. I know that there are several good people out there that haven't yet passed the written or oral exams to get the certification. I keep

encouraging them. I can't live forever – or I would certainly like to – but there's just no way that's going to happen. So, now remember, I wasn't the first parliamentarian but I am the only one in the U.S.

DB: Thank you. Now I'd like to give you this opportunity to share any thoughts with our audience. Any final comments or things that may have come to mind that you'd like to share with us?

GB: Oh. I would like to say a little bit about how I've enjoyed coming back from time to time to the state of Minnesota. The last time I was here was in 1985. At that time, it was the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Gallaudet Alumni Association for the Minnesota chapter. I hope to come back again in the near future or even in the far present. And I would like to close by keeping it short and simple. I don't see the people here in Minnesota as just people – I honestly see them as giants. Minnesota as a state is one of the states that's received the most honors of all and it is due to the great people and the great Deaf people and the great hard of hearing people that are here in the state. They are a wonderful group and I applaud their accomplishments. And I owe much to these individuals. Much of my success – my achievements and my many, many awards and my many honors – really are from Minnesota and my experience at Faribault. Just recently, in 1988, Gallaudet decided to honor me with a doctorate degree. They called me Dr. Something – of course, nobody ever calls me that. But in the audience was one of my former students from Minnesota who had moved to the Washington, D.C. area. That student watched me receiving my award and came up to me afterwards and said, "Now, do you realize that your achievements go back to Faribault, Minnesota?" I had to agree. I had to say, "Yes, I owe a great deal of thanks to Faribault and the state of Minnesota." I really am appreciative to you all.

DB: Wow, I really enjoyed this interview with you – hearing your stories about your experiences here in Minnesota. Thank you so much for coming to share these wonderful stories with me and others. There is so much rich history you've experienced for us to learn about. Again, thank you, Bummy, for being with us.

[Interview time 37:36:00]

DB: So this sign (*for parliamentarian*) here, what does it mean? Can you give me an explanation of it?

GB: Yes, I forgot to explain about the use of the word parliamentarian. We sign it like this – a P on the arm. You might ask why they sign that way – I honestly don't know why. It's a long word – parliamentary. It comes from France – *parli* – which means "to speak" – and *mentary* – which means "to act." They put those together – parliamentary. Now I, as the individual, am a parliamentarian. Now what a parliamentarian does is help to follow the rules of the meeting. Many people don't know the right way to conduct a meeting and that always results in a lot of arguments. But we typically use a book called *Robert's Rules of Order*. We condense that to RROR. That book defines how meetings should be conducted – what is the proper order, what is the proper way to make a motion, how do you second a motion, how do you allow debate – among other things. This is all parliamentary.