

Dining with Danny

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"Heidi, hurry up!" I hear my mom call for me as I take my time walking from the car to the restaurant. We decided to take a trip up to Seattle, Washington this year for spring break to visit family and go sightseeing. We got here late last night when it was still dark, so I'm finally getting a chance to check out the area. I want to keep looking at everything around me, but I know my parents are hungry, so I run to catch up with my family as we enter Ragin' Cajun.

My mom holds up three fingers to the hostess, indicating that we have a party of three. The hostess gestures us in the direction of our table and we take a seat. We are given menus and I go straight to the kid's meal page (I'm not a big fan of Cajun food). A waiter with "Danny" scratched on his nametag comes to our table with a pad of paper and looks at our table, waiting for us to tell him what we want. Why isn't he talking to us? I wonder.

I decide to break the silence: "Hi Danny, I'm Heidi," I tell him. "I would like a lemonade with chicken tenders. Oh, and ketchup. I like ketchup with my chicken tenders".¹

Danny looks to his left, where an older woman stands. She turns to Danny and makes some signs with her hands. What is she doing to him? Danny nods and turns to look at my parents while they tell him what they want. The lady continues to move her hands in ways I haven't seen before while he nods and writes words down. My curiosity gets the best of me and I turn to the woman and ask, "Who are you? What are you doing?" She smiles at me and says, "I'm Amy, I'm Danny's translator".

Translator? Like as in translating language? Does Danny speak another language? What language does he speak?

"Hi Amy, I'm Heidi, it's so nice to see you," I tell the translator. "What language does Danny speak?"

Amy smiles and says to me, "Danny is deaf, he uses sign language. My job as his translator is to tell him what you three are ordering by using sign language."²

Things started to make more sense, that's why she was using the hand motions that she was. But why would a deaf person work at a restaurant? They would always need a translator around! That seems a bit obnoxious.

I decide to keep my thoughts to myself.

"That's so nice of you to do that for him, Amy," I say. "So if I want to ask Danny a question, it will go to you and then to him through sign language?"

"Yes, Heidi, that's how it works. Do you have any questions you'd like to ask Danny?"

So many questions came to my mind. This was something I had never seen before! I decide to start with the first question I can think of.

"Why are you deaf, Danny?"

I watch as Amy signs to Danny. He signs back what he wants her to say. She turns to me and says, "I was born with Usher Syndrome. I have not had hearing my entire life. Now that I'm getting older, I am starting to lose my vision, too, but it hasn't gone completely away yet. It will eventually, though."³

"Wow, why do you work in a restaurant if you're deaf? Isn't that so hard for you?"

After Amy does her translating, I get an answer: "I think it's fun to meet people like you and share my story. Not many people know about Usher Syndrome, so I see this job as a great way to educate customers. Not to mention, I love cooking! Losing my hearing and most of my vision has made my sense of taste grow stronger, so I have a real appreciation for a good Cajun meal!"⁴ Danny smiles as Amy finishes telling me his sentence, which makes me smile.⁵

Wow, Danny's attitude towards his disability is inspiring. I wonder if he knows anything about William's Syndrome.

"Danny, have you heard of William's Syndrome? I have William's Syndrome."

"I haven't," Danny signs, "what is it?"

"Well I can hear okay and I can see okay but I have trouble with numbers and thinking spatially. It's more mental than physical, except my skin isn't stretchy enough and it gives me heart problems."⁶

"Wow, I'm sorry to hear you have to deal with that. But you seem like quite the trooper. I think you're the friendliest kid I've served in this restaurant," signed Danny.

Friendliest kid? That's so nice of him! As I'm sitting in the restaurant listening to the music play over the speaker, I realize: Danny can't listen to music if he's deaf! How could someone go their whole life without hearing a single song?

"Do you ever wish you could hear music, Danny?"

"I do sometimes, but because I've never heard it before, I am content living without it. I can pick up on vibrations from sounds, so I'm sort of able to listen to music in my own way," signs Danny as he smiles.⁷

Wow, I can't imagine living without music, it's so fun to listen to and to sing and to play on instruments, I think to myself.

"I'm sorry you can't hear music, Danny, I love music! I wish I could sing for you and you could hear it!"

My mom chimes into the conversation, "Heidi has quite the ear for music! She has been singing her whole life and is always more on pitch than her father or I ever are. It's impressive!"⁸

"You sound like quite the kid, Heidi. I'm glad I got to meet you," signs Danny as he squints at the pad of paper that's directly in front of him.⁹ "I'd love to hear more about your life with William's Syndrome, but you guys have some delicious-looking orders that need to be taken care of! I'll go run these back to the kitchen so you can all enjoy your meals as soon as possible."

Danny walks away from our table and my mom and dad pick up their conversation where they left off. Danny was so nice, I think to myself. It sure was impressive to see someone who is not only deaf but losing their sight as well do so well in a working environment. The fact that he has Usher Syndrome makes his job even more special to him since he's able to defy any odds that say a disabled person can't be successful working. As I'm thinking about my interaction with Danny, I realize how impactful this experience has been on me. I may be just a kid, but knowing that I can have a future like Danny's despite my William's Syndrome is so exciting to me. I hope to make the rest of my life dedicated to working hard, doing my best, pursuing my passion, and changing the lives and perspectives of others.

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