



# The BROTHERS

Being raised as children of deaf adults offers two brothers unique opportunities to serve the deaf and hard of hearing community.

Ann M. Ponath

CODA. If you are a writer, reader, or musician, this word means a special ending. But, if you are Benjamin and Andrew Olson, aka *The CODA Brothers*, this word means you are part of an international community called Children of Deaf Adults, which is perhaps more a beginning than an end.

## GROWING UP IN A DEAF HOUSEHOLD

Ben, 37, of Savage, Minnesota, grew up in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, the youngest of two hearing children born to Gerald and Sandra Olson, both of whom are deaf. Gerald and Sandra communicate using American Sign Language (ASL). “My brother and I learned to communicate with ASL before we learned to communicate with our voices,” says Ben. “Our house was equipped with alerts that lit up our house for the doorbell, telephone, and sudden loud noises—like a baby crying. Our television always had closed captioning, and the telephone was something we typed on to, not spoke into. Often my parents wanted to communicate with various people within our community—neighbors, teachers, local food store workers, etc.—and my brother and I were the interpreters for these situations.”

Ben has no memory of not knowing ASL. “My mother’s mother was visiting from Rapid City, South Dakota. My brother and I were four and five years old at the time, and she noticed we were communicating with each other in ASL, not speaking English!” says Ben. “She thought, *These boys can hear, and they are old enough to be speaking to each other. However, they are signing!* My parents thought nothing of it. However, everyone thought it would be a good idea to place my brother and me into a speech therapy program. We eventually learned English. However, ASL will always be our ‘native’ language.”

In addition to speech therapy, a doctor also recommended turning up the TV, buying a radio, and having playdates with neighborhood kids to boost the brothers’ spoken language skills.

While some might focus on the challenges of being raised by deaf parents, Ben looks at the humorous side. “There are many funny stories and situations that have made our upbringing unique and special,” he says. “Day-to-day things differentiate my upbringing from other hearing people like the innocent banging of pots and pans, every light in the house on, or driving at night with our interior light always on for the best visual communication—you could always see us coming!”

He continues, “One of my favorite funny stories is the time my brother and I were in high school, and my brother’s new girlfriend came over to our house. She wanted to communicate with my dad and asked my brother how to sign a particular word. He told her a completely different sign, which embarrassed her very much!”

## USING TALENTS TO REACH OUT

Ben and Andy are blessed with parents who realized the importance of raising their sons in God’s Word. “My parents were surrounded by faithful people who taught them the truth,” says Ben. “They wanted to instill that in us.” In 1986, the family joined nearby Bloomington Lutheran Church and the boys attended Bloomington Lutheran School for their grade school years.

When the Olsons joined Bloomington, they were the only deaf people in the congregation. “Every Sunday there was an interpreter in front of the church,” says Ben. “One funny thing about having an interpreter at church is when our family showed

up late, we could never sneak into church and sit in the back few pews. We had to go all the way to the front of the church and sit in the front row where the interpreter was waiting for us.”

Following his years at St. Croix Lutheran High School, Ben attended Bethany Lutheran College and Minnesota State University, Mankato, to complete his bachelor’s degree. He then went on to receive a master’s degree in special education with an emphasis on deaf and hard of hearing from the University of Minnesota. “Knowing ASL has been a true gift from God,” says Ben. “As young children, we didn’t realize the blessing of ASL and understanding the deaf community until I became a teacher for the hard of hearing. We then became nationally certified ASL interpreters.”

Ben and Andy own and operate CODA Brothers Interpreting, which offers “in-person” sign language interpreting in Minnesota and also national ASL interpreting via video conferencing devices such as Skype or FaceTime. “Also since 2007, my brother and I have produced an ongoing series of funny on-line video-blogs (vlogs) called *The CODA Brothers Show*,” says Ben. “We tell stories [in ASL and ‘voiced over’] about growing up with deaf parents and discuss many other deaf topics. It has been lots of fun to make these videos with my brother.”

They started interpreting church services for Bloomington around 2005. “It has been a true joy and blessing,” says Ben. “The church now has over ten deaf or hard of hearing members and hosted the WELS Mission to the Deaf national convention two years ago.” Ben also serves as a member of the WELS Mission to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Rod Pudell, pastor at Bloomington, is excited to reach out to the deaf and hard of hearing community in the Twin Cities, which has one of the largest deaf populations for a metro area. “God has placed Ben and Andy in a unique position to carry out mission work and ministry,” he says. “Their amazing real-time ability and expertise in interpreting allows them to communicate the message of God’s Word simultaneously with the pastor so that people from the deaf community can actively participate in the worship services and Bible classes. Because of their efforts, we have developed a ‘church within a church’ so that more and more people from the Twin Cities area are literally ‘hearing’ the Word of God and the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ for the first time.”

He continues, “Our hope is to share this blessing of Ben and Andy with others in our synod and across the United States and the world by livestreaming our interpreted services and classes over the Internet in the near future.”

Ben says that not only is there opportunity for spiritual outreach to the deaf community in the Twin Cities area but also all around the world. “With the Lord’s help, the deaf and hard of hearing community in your church can grow too!” he says. “One great way is to secure a consistent ASL interpreter for Sunday church services and place an advertisement on a local deaf community Web site.”

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Andy and Ben Olson.

A unique and sometimes humorous childhood. Brothers serving the community and the church with a talent ingrained since birth. What some may have seen as a dead end, God has certainly turned into a blessing. Ben encourages all of us to look for and reach out to the deaf in our neighborhoods. “The deaf community is a culturally rich community that needs spiritual outreach. Invite them to your congregation and make them feel welcome!”

*Ann Ponath is a member at Christ, North Saint Paul, Minnesota.*

Learn more about the WELS Mission to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing at [www.wels.net/special-ministries/deaf-hard-hearing](http://www.wels.net/special-ministries/deaf-hard-hearing).