

## History of the Sego Lily Center for the Abused Deaf



Penny Williams was a vibrant young Deaf woman in the midst of embarking on a new life. She was soon to complete her college degree to help her pursue her dream of becoming a counselor for the Deaf. Then everything changed in a swift second. Early one Fall morning in 1999, Penny's life was cut short, murdered by her ex-husband - she became a victim of domestic violence.

Penny's death made a profound impact on the Deaf Community. The tragedy sent rippling shock waves throughout Salt Lake City and the State of Utah. We wondered how this could have happened, questions flowed; will it happen again and is there anything that could prevent future tragedies in our community? By coincidence or maybe by fate, an opportunity to set up a domestic violence agency for the Deaf in Utah presented itself.

In the winter of 1999 a letter was received by Annette Stewart, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker at the Sanderson Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. The letter was from Marilyn Smith, the Executive Director of Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services (ADWAS) of Seattle, Washington. ADWAS was created over 20 years ago as a result of a similar incident, the murder of a Deaf woman in Seattle. As a former counselor, Marilyn saw too often the challenges a Deaf person faces when attempting to get help, especially for women wanting to escape domestic violence or sexual assault. Being a Deaf woman and a sexual assault survivor herself, she knew first hand the barriers for getting help. Often Deaf victims do not know where to turn, how they will communicate with shelter workers, police and the courts. Marilyn Smith developed an advocacy agency to assist Deaf and Deaf/Blind women and children to get the help they need in a barrier free environment that is run for and primarily by Deaf individuals.

In 1998 Marilyn obtained a Federal Grant from the Department of Justice's – Office of Violence Against Women to replicate the ADWAS agency model in 15 cities across the nation. The letter Annette Stewart received was to invite Utah to select and send five Deaf and hard of

hearing women to go to Seattle in the Spring of 2000 to receive in-depth, week long training to become domestic violence advocates and to learn how to set up an agency (including developing a Board and funding development). The purpose was to empower these women with appropriate skills, then have them go back to their home States and set up an advocacy agency to support Deaf victims of abuse in a cultural and linguist manner. Five Deaf women (Linda Berness, Christy Layton, Kristi Mortensen, Eli McCowan and Joene Nicolaisen) traveled to Seattle for this training along with Deaf women from several other cities. The full process took three years from 1998 to 2000 and resulted in 15 sister agencies that are now able to provide services to their own Deaf communities across the nation.

After receiving training from ADWAS, Seago Lily Center for the Abused Deaf (SLCAD) was established as a non-profit advocacy agency designed to meet the specific needs of Deaf, Deaf/Blind and Hard of Hearing victims of domestic violence and sexual assault living in Utah. The agency was named after the Utah State flower which appears to be very fragile but is actually a flower of great strength and endurance, a survivor that is able to withstand the harshest environment – much like survivors of abuse. The group of Utah women, who were trained by ADWAS, immediately began spreading the word about SLCAD and served their first client a few months later. Since then, SLCAD has average about 30 victims and their families served annually. SLCAD also began to network and train service providers such as the police, shelters, etc. on how to make their services more appropriate for the Deaf individuals. Community outreach prevention and awareness programs were also developed such as Deaf Women's Day, Safety Fair activities to help deliver information to the Deaf Community about abuse and how to get help.

From the years 2000 to 2006, SLCAD operated solely through a pager system with volunteers as there no money for an office or staff. In 2006 SLCAD was given enough funding by a generous private source to open their first office. Volunteers were still used to perform all duties. Then in 2007 SLCAD applied for and was awarded a large Federal grant through the Department of Justice, Office of Violence Against Women Programs to outreach to the Deaf Communities in 9 targeted rural counties in Utah. It has always been a concern for SLCAD about how to reach to Deaf/HH individuals and providers in the most isolated areas of Utah. This grant

enabled SLCAD to hire paid staff to focus on the Rural Grant goals. Stephanie Mathis became the Rural Program Director, Sari Williams the Community Advocate/Trainer and Jennifer Byrnes as the Office Manager. SLCAD relies on trained volunteer advocates to support victims and survivors along the Wasatch Front and other areas not covered by the Rural Grant Joene Nicolaisen continues as the volunteer Executive Director with support from the past Board members and current Board members Kimberly Thornsberry, Chair; Jennifer Kelly, Financial Chair; Cherie Hodson and Mark Jones.

What makes SLCAD unique is cultural approach for providing services. All of our advocates and volunteers are fluent in American Sign Language. At least 51% of the Board members are either Deaf or hard of hearing and everyone involved are fluent in ASL. This ensures that all services are culturally appropriate. SLCAD's future goals are to expand services to include more counseling services, healthy relationship workshops, positive parenting classes, as well as teens and children's programs.

#### **SLCAD Historical Timeline:**

- September 1999 Penny Williams dies at the hand of her ex-husband
- Winter 1999 Utah is invited to ADWAS for training to set up services in Utah
- April 2000 five Deaf women traveled Seattle to receive training from ADWAS
- June 2000 SLCAD is established as a 501c3 non-profit agency
- Fall 2000 SLCAD served their first victim
- March 2006 SLCAD opens their first office in Murray, Utah
- October 2007 SLCAD awarded Rural Grant from the Department of Justice
- May – Oct 2008 SLCAD hired their first staff members
- June 2008 Joene Nicolaisen, Ex. Director received the Utah Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service for her work with SLCAD
- June 2008, SLCAD is honored with an award from the Utah Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (UTRID) for their outstanding community service in providing support to Deaf, Deaf-Blind and Hard of Hearing victims and survivors of abuse.

More information can be found on the SLCAD web site: [www.slcad.org](http://www.slcad.org)

*In loving memory of Penny Williams and all victims of abuse.*

## PHOTOS

Credit to: Joene Nicolaisen