


# North Dakota School for the Deaf

## Legacy of the Frelich Family

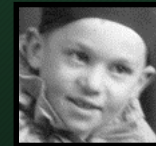
By Lilia Bakken, Communications Coordinator  
North Dakota School for the Deaf  
Resource Center for Deaf & Hard of Hearing



Thank you to the children of  
Philip and Esther Frelich  
for your contributions of information  
and photographs used in the  
creation of this program.

# Introduction - Name Signs

Philip Frelich's name sign = letter 'P' tap on chin twice.



Esther Frelich name sign = letter 'E' tap on chin twice.



Phyllis Frelich name sign = letter 'P' tap on cheek twice.





North Dakota School for the Deaf  
Established in 1890

Philip Frelich was born  
in Devils Lake, ND,  
on April 4, 1917.



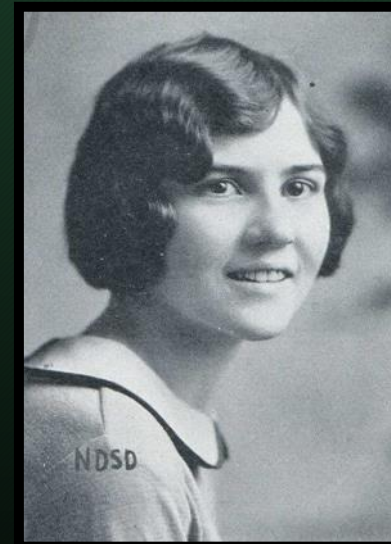
He was born deaf.

In the fall of 1923, at age 6,  
Philip was enrolled in the  
*ND School for the Deaf.*

*(The ND School for the Deaf, located in  
Devils Lake, was near his family's farm.)*

## Philip's siblings

Philip had four siblings. One older sister, Christina, was also deaf. She attended the *ND School for the Deaf* from 1916 to 1929.

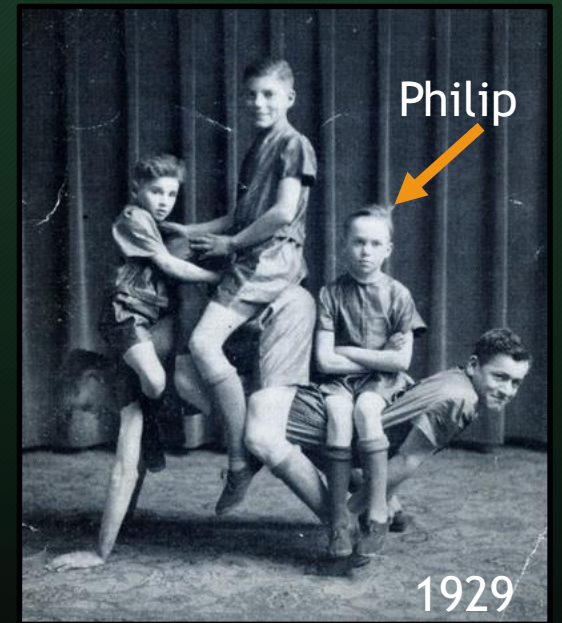


Christina  
Class of 1929

# Skilled Acrobat



Philip was a very good acrobat. By age 8 he was a star member of the *ND School for the Deaf* tumbling team. During his performances, he was often known as Popeye.



# 1930



The NDSD tumbling team was well-known for its acrobatic stunts. People traveled from across the state to watch the tumblers perform.

1934



In high school, Philip played as a guard on the *NDSD Bulldogs* basketball team.



Philip - age 19



Philip's senior picture

Philip was a  
graduate of NDSD,  
Class of 1936.



In June, 1985, Philip was inducted into the *NDSD Athletic Hall of Fame*.

He was lauded for his skills on the basketball team (1932-36).

Philip was also commended for his acrobatics on the tumbling team.

# Esther, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade, 1929



Esther Dockter  
was born August 18, 1922.

Her family was from Anamoose, ND.

School records indicate that Esther lost her hearing at age 6 months due to pneumonia.

However, records also noted that Esther had several other relatives in her extended family who were deaf and listed deafness in the family as hereditary.

In 1929, at age 7, Esther's family enrolled her in the  
*ND School for the Deaf.*

## Esther's siblings



Christian  
worked as the head  
farmer at NDS and  
later as house  
father in the dorm.

Esther had ten siblings.  
One older brother, Christian,  
was deaf and attended the  
*ND School for the Deaf*  
from 1925 to 1930.

One older sister, Ottilie,  
was also deaf and attended the  
*ND School for the Deaf*  
from 1925 to 1938.



Ottilie  
Class of 1938

# Recess - 1934

Esther - age 12



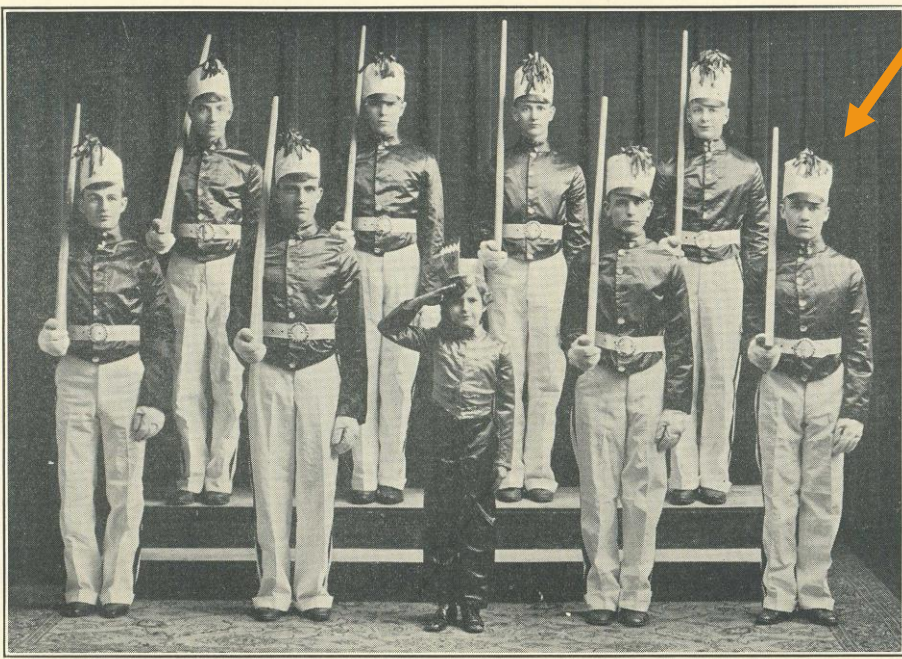
Esther, age 14

1936

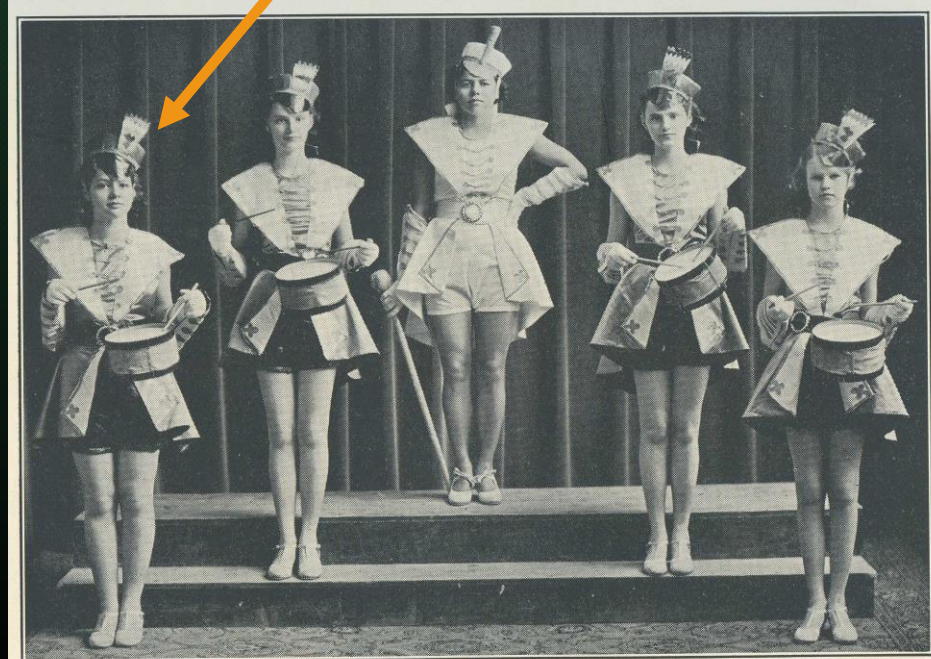
Philip & Esther performed in the  
*1936 NDSD Spring Revue.*

Philip

Esther



Militaire Precision—1936 Revue



Militaire Precision—1936 Revue

# Esther 1941-42



# Esther - age 20



Esther's senior picture

Esther was a  
graduate of NDSD,  
Class of 1942.





# Senior Girls Fingerspell 'Goodbye'



Esther



April 26, 1943

Philip Frelich married Esther Dockter



## Family



Back row: Dennis, Daryl, Merrill, Timothy

Middle row: Pamela, Priscilla, Peggy

Front row: Phyllis, Philip, Esther, Shirley

Philip and Esther had nine children.  
All of them were born deaf.

Between 1949 - 1985 their children  
attended and graduated from the  
*ND School for the Deaf.*

Upon graduation, they all went on  
to attend *Gallaudet University.*

Philip & Esther were very  
proud of their family.

# Deaf Community



Philip and Esther were leading members of the Deaf Community. They were actively involved with events at NDSD and in their community.

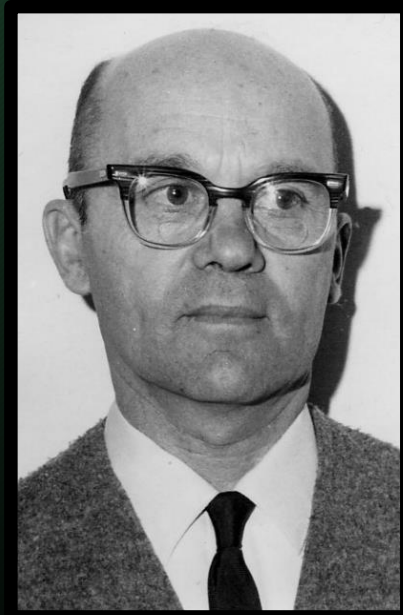


Philip and Esther  
each served as  
state officers for the  
*North Dakota  
Association of the Deaf  
(NDAD)*.



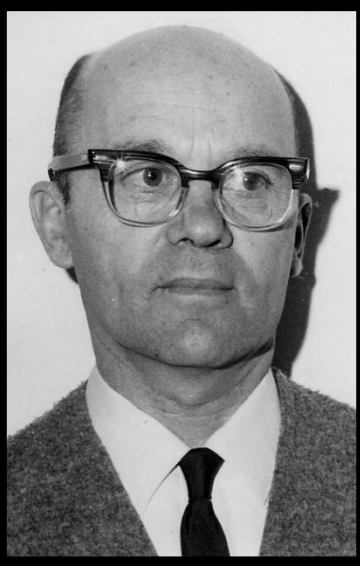
Note: the *ND Association of the Deaf* is a chapter of the *National Association of the Deaf (NAD)*. *NAD* is a civil rights organization for people who are deaf. Each state has its own chapter/organization.

# Photographer



Philip's hobby was photography. From 1964 to 1968 he was the photography instructor in the Vocational Department at NDSD. Philip used his skills and interests in photography to establish and operate a photography business from his home.

# Printer



While he was a student at NDSD, Philip learned the trade of printing. The majority of his career life was spent working as a printer and photographer. For many years, he worked at the *Devils Lake Journal Newspaper* and then later for *Hoiberg Printing*. In 1990, at age 76, Philip retired.

## Skilled Seamstress

Esther learned to sew while she was a student at *ND School for the Deaf*. She became a skilled seamstress. People often came to the Frelich home and asked Esther to alter their clothing or sew new articles of clothing or costumes.



Esther loved to crochet. She made beautiful crocheted items for family and friends.



## Job at NDSD

In 1983, Esther began work as a seamstress at *ND School for the Deaf*. She sewed curtains and bedspreads and repaired clothes for children who lived in the dormitory.

Esther also helped serve meals for special events.

The children loved Esther's warm, loving personality.

In 1999, at age 70, Esther retired.



## *Lake Region Unsung Hero*

In October, 1996, Esther was honored with Lake Region's *Unsung Hero Award*.

An article about Esther's award was printed in the local newspaper. The article stated:

“The story of the Frelich's devotion to their family and the education of their children is a great inspiration. Anyone having visited their home is aware of the great love and respect that all of the family members have for one another. It takes skilled parenting to communicate the feeling to each child that he/she is loved best.”



# *Frelich Playground*

The *Frelich Playground* on the campus of *NDSD* was named in honor of the Frelich family. The playground was dedicated on August 24, 1997.



Frelich siblings



Philip died on  
December 2, 2006.  
He was 89 years old.



## October 12, 2007

After Philip's death, Esther was invited to live with her daughter Shirley, in Minnesota.

A farewell party was held at the school. Esther expressed tearful sadness at leaving her beloved *ND School for the Deaf* and the Devils Lake community. She said, "It's hard to leave. I loved the school, the town and the people. We were all like family."



Esther died on  
May 6, 2013.  
She was  
90 years old.

# Phyllis Frelich

Phyllis



1949-1950 School year

Esther and Philip's first child, Phyllis Annetta, was born in Devils Lake on Leap Day, February 29, 1944.

Phyllis was born deaf.

In 1949, at age 5, her parents enrolled Phyllis in the same school they both had attended,

*ND School for the Deaf.*



Phyllis

1953-1954

Phyllis



Phyllis  
and  
classmates





Phyllis in  
*Beauty & Culture*  
class

As a young girl,  
Phyllis dreamed  
of acting on stage.

# NDSD Homecoming Queen



Phyllis

1958

# NDSD Cheerleaders

Phyllis



Phyllis – age 18



senior picture

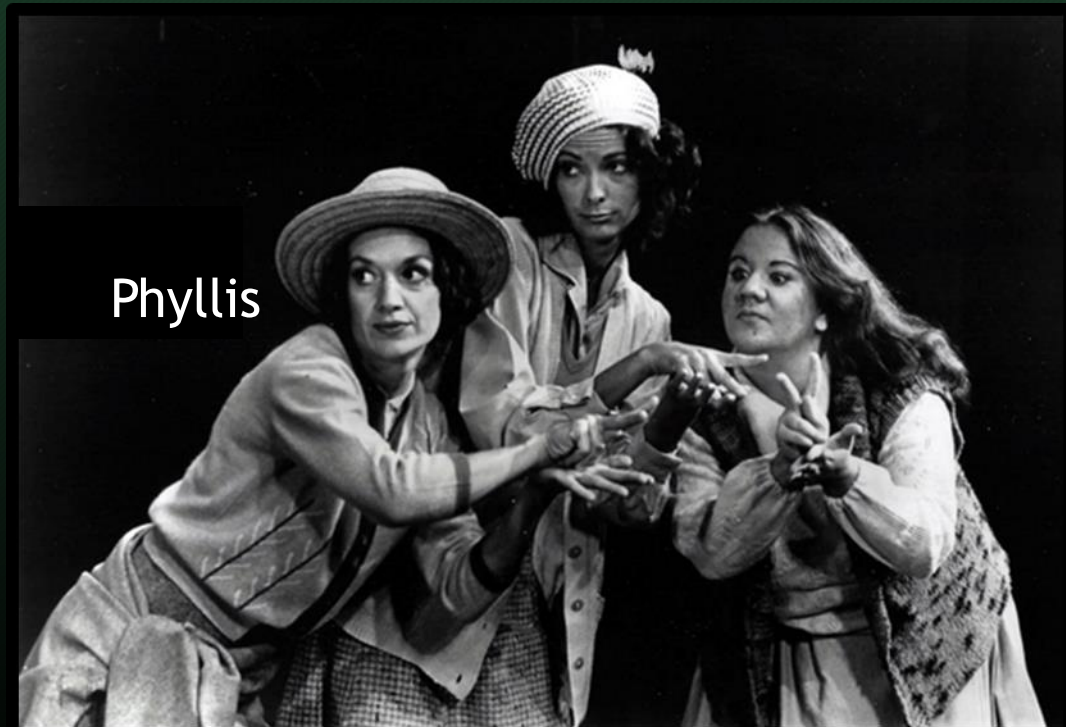
Phyllis was a  
graduate of NDSD,  
Class of 1962.



Gallaudet University,  
Washington, DC,  
is the only 4-year liberal arts  
college in the world for deaf students.

In fall, 1962, Phyllis  
enrolled in Gallaudet.  
She majored in  
*Library Science*  
and became actively  
involved in acting  
and the theater.

## *National Theater of the Deaf*



In 1967, during her senior year at Gallaudet, the *National Theater of the Deaf (NTD)* was founded. Phyllis was a charter (founding) member. *NTD* provided opportunities for Phyllis and other young deaf actors to perform on stage. In 1968 Phyllis made her debut with the *National Theater of the Deaf*.

## *National Theater of the Deaf*



Robert

Phyllis

While acting with the *National Theater of the Deaf*, Phyllis met the stage designer. His name was Robert Steinberg.

Robert was a hearing man. He liked Phyllis and learned sign language so that he could communicate with her better. The two fell in love and were married on May 17, 1968.

# Family



Robert & Phyllis

Phyllis and Robert were married for 46 years. Throughout their married life, Robert often interpreted for Phyllis or added voice to her sign language.

Robert and Phyllis had two sons, Reuben and Joshua (both born hearing).

The boys grew up using American Sign Language (ASL) and English, fluent in both languages.





Mark Medoff with Phyllis

While with the *National Theater for the Deaf*, Phyllis met a playwright named Mark Medoff. Medoff saw Phyllis perform and was impressed by her skilled acting abilities. He was aware that it was difficult for Phyllis to obtain acting roles so Medoff, with Phyllis in mind, wrote a play. The main character was deaf. The play portrayed the communication struggles encountered by deaf people during their interactions with hearing people. Phyllis auditioned for Medoff's play and got the lead role as Sarah.

Note: Medoff wrote the play for Phyllis and though the story is loosely based on her life, it is not the life story of Phyllis Frelich.

## *Children of a Lesser God*



The play Medoff wrote was called *Children of a Lesser God*.

Both the play and performances by Phyllis and co-star, John Rubenstein, received rave reviews.

The play ran on Broadway for more than two years (1979-82).

Phyllis starred in 887 performances of *Children of a Lesser God*.



In 1980, Phyllis won a *Tony Award* for best actress for her performance in *Children of a Lesser God*.

Phyllis was the first deaf person to ever win the *Tony Award*.



Phyllis with co-star, John Rubenstein  
(John also won a *Tony Award* for his performance.)



Phyllis with co-star, John Rubenstein

After winning the award, Phyllis expressed her joy and excitement. She signed, “I was so happy, I felt like Cinderella.”



Phyllis, like Sarah in the play, never had the desire to talk. In an interview Phyllis signed,

“I was born deaf. Sound is something I have never known. I am perfectly happy as I am.”

# Rough Rider Award



Phyllis with Governor Olson

On April 27, 1981, Governor Allen Olson presented Phyllis with the *Theodore Roosevelt Rough Rider Award*. This award is bestowed upon North Dakotans who have achieved fame and success.

The portrait of Phyllis (right) is displayed in the *ND Rough Rider Hall of Fame* in the state capitol in Bismarck.



# Deaf Activist



Phyllis was known as a deaf activist. In Hollywood, Phyllis advocated for deaf actors. She encouraged producers and directors to hire deaf people to act in deaf character roles rather than hiring hearing people to act the parts. Phyllis was considered a 'trail blazer' - she 'paved the road' for other deaf actors to get roles in Hollywood.



Marlee Matlin as Sarah

In 1986, five years after the Broadway play, Hollywood producers decided to make a film version of *Children of a Lesser God*. Although Phyllis wanted to try out for the role, she was told that producers wanted a younger actress. A young deaf woman named Marlee Matlin was hired to act in the movie role that Phyllis played on Broadway.



# 1986



Marlee Matlin displays her *Oscar*.

At the 1986 *Academy Awards*, Marlee won an *Oscar trophy* for best actress for her performance in *Children of a Lesser God*. Marlee was the first deaf person to win an *Oscar*.

After Phyllis won the *Tony Award* and Marlee won the *Oscar Award*, more Hollywood doors opened for Phyllis and Marlee (and other deaf actors too).

Below is a partial list of Phyllis' Hollywood filmography:



In 2011, Phyllis & Marlee acted together in *CSI*.

- Barney Miller* - 1981
- Gimme a Break* - 1985
- Love is Never Silent* - 1985 (Hallmark movie)
- Spencer for Hire* - 1986
- Santa Barbara* - 1988 (Soap Opera)
- L.A. Law* - 1992
- ER* - 1998
- Diagnosis Murder* - 1999
- Children on their Birthdays* - 2002
- Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye* - 2004
- Sweet Nothing in My Ear* - 2008 (Hallmark movie)
- CSI* - 2011

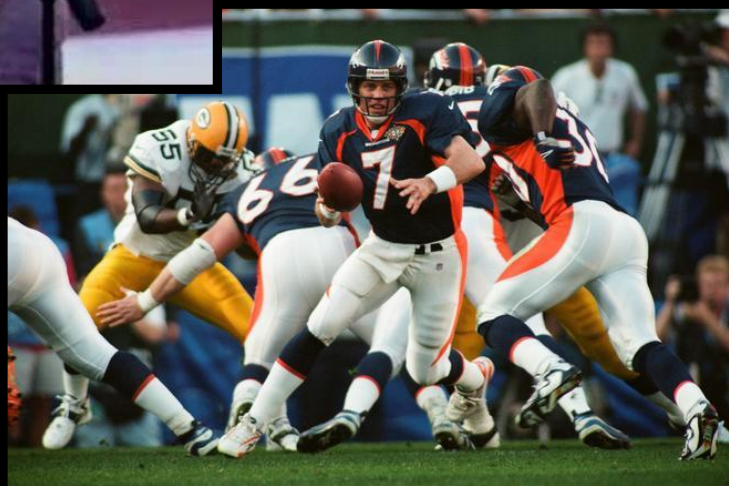


Phyllis in *Love is Never Silent*

## 1998 - *Super Bowl XXXII* in San Diego



Phyllis



Note: Broncos won the *Super Bowl*

In 1998, singer/song writer, **Jewel**, sang the *Star Spangled Banner* before the start of the *Super Bowl* game between the *Green Bay Packers* and the *Denver Broncos*.

Phyllis simultaneously performed the song in *American Sign Language* for viewers who were deaf.



Like her mother, Esther, Phyllis was a very good seamstress. During her leisure time, Phyllis enjoyed sewing quilts.

# Phyllis inspired students to reach for their dreams!

Each year, Phyllis visited her parents in Devils Lake. While she was home, she also visited the *ND School for the Deaf*. Everyone at school looked forward to seeing Phyllis. She encouraged students to dream big, set goals and to study and work hard in order to attain their goals.



Phyllis was an enthusiastic and positive role model for the children!

# Autobiography Unfinished

Phyllis planned to write her autobiography. She spent time at *NDSD* researching issues of early \**Banners* and other historical documents stored in the archives at the *ND School for the Deaf*. She hoped to piece together forgotten memories of her growing up years at *NDSD*.

\* *The Banner* is the school newspaper. Publication began in 1891, one year after the school was established. The entire set of *Banners*, from 1891 to present, is preserved in the library at the *ND School for the Deaf*.



Unfortunately, Phyllis was not able to complete her project.

## Phyllis died on April 10, 2014



In the spring of 2014, Phyllis died of progressive supra-nuclear palsy (PSP), a rare, incurable degenerative neurological disease. She was 70 years old.

Her husband Robert said,  
“Phyllis was extraordinary - the finest sign language actress there ever was.”

# Fall, 2014



*The Deaf West Theater Organization produced a film in her memory called, **A Celebration of the Life of Phyllis Frelich.***

The Deaf West Facebook page posted:

“A leading light of our community has been lost, and we mourn deeply.”



In an interview, Phyllis once said,

“My parents are secure, independent deaf people. The family is the first thing for them - we are close. They taught us kids pride - they never let us accept pity.

People would come and say,  
‘Oh no! You mean you are all deaf? How awful!’

We were never allowed to pay attention to that.

I respect my parents so much!  
They made our family very close in the heart.”



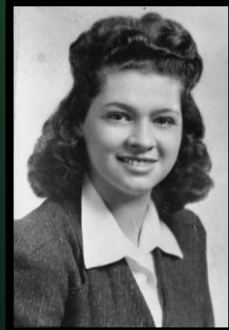


Christina  
1916-1929

# Frelich Legacy



Philip  
1923-1936



Esther  
1929-1942

For more than 80 years, the lives of Frelich family members have been intertwined in the history of the *North Dakota School for the Deaf*. Each one has left his or her own imprint -- each one has his or her own story to share.



Phyllis  
1949-1962



Dennis  
1950-1964



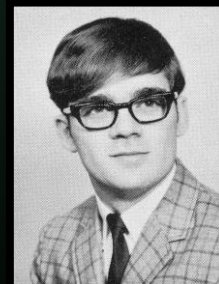
Merrill  
1951-1964



Shirley  
1953-1966



Peggy  
1955-1968



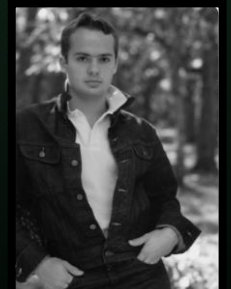
Timothy  
1956-1969



Priscilla  
1964-1977



Pamela  
1969-1982



Daryl  
1970-1985

# Descendants

The *North Dakota School for the Deaf* cherishes the memories of Philip, Esther and Phyllis Frelich. Even though they are gone, the legacy of the Frelich name will continue with the living children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Esther and Philip Frelich.





End