North Dakota School for the Deaf

Legacy of the Frellich 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.
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.
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.
The NDSD tumbling team was well-known for its acrobatic stunts. People traveled from across the state to watch the tumblers perform.
In high school, Philip played as a guard on the *NDSD Bulldogs* basketball team.
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 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 had ten siblings. One older brother, Christian, was deaf and attended the *ND School for the Deaf* from 1925 to 1930. One older sister, Ottillie, was also deaf and attended the *ND School for the Deaf* from 1925 to 1938.

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

Ottillie Class of 1938
Recess - 1934

Esther - age 12

Esther, age 14
1936
Philip & Esther performed in the 1936 NDSD Spring Revue.
Esther - age 20

Esther was a graduate of NDSD, Class of 1942.
Senior Girls Fingerspell ‘Goodbye’
April 26, 1943

Philip Frelich married Esther Dockter
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.

Back row: Dennis, Daryl, Merrill, Timothy
Middle row: Pamela, Priscilla, Peggy
Front row: Phyllis, Philip, Esther, Shirley
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
1953-1954

Phyllis and classmates
As a young girl, Phyllis dreamed of acting on stage.
NDSD Homecoming Queen

Phyllis

1958
NDSD Cheerleaders

Phyllis

1961-1962

Go Bulldogs!
Phyllis – age 18

Phyllis was a graduate of NDSD, Class of 1962.
In fall, 1962, Phyllis enrolled in Gallaudet. She majored in *Library Science* and became actively involved in acting and the theater.

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

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.
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.
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*.
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.”
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.
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.
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.
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:

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

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

Phyllis in *Love is Never Silent*
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.

Note: Broncos won the Super Bowl
Like her mother, Esther, Phyllis was a very good seamstress. During her leisure time, Phyllis enjoyed sewing quilts.
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!
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.
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.”
The Deaf West Theater Organization produced a film in her memory called, *A Celebration of the Life of Phyllis Frellich*.  

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.”
For more than 80 years, the lives of Frellich 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.
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.
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