Marlee Matlin Turns BARRIERS Into Opportunities

THE OSCAR-WINNING ACTRESS, AND RELENTLESS ADVOCATE FOR THE DEAF COMMUNITY, RECEIVES THE LOS ANGELES PRESS CLUB'S IMPACT AWARD

BY JACK JASON

I first met a spirited young actress named Marlee Matlin on the street outside her home in New York City. I remember that first meeting: me, a poor NYU doctoral student dressed in a cardigan and tie, and immediately sensing her energy. Marlee communicates with a remarkable combination of fire, precision and warmth that makes one feel like a part of her world even before she starts signing. Her ability to bring people in is something I recognized immediately, and something I've watched her use time and again to create change.

When we began working together, neither of us knew the journey ahead. I thought I was stepping into a job. What I didn't realize was that I was stepping into a partnership, and even more than that, a purpose. I've learned that interpreting for someone isn't just about translating words into another language. It's about conveying intention, emotion, nuance, humor and heart. It's about making sure the world hears someone exactly the way they mean to be heard. And Marlee—well, she has a lot to say.



Matlin received her star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2009.

Tonight, for all that she has said and done, Marlee is receiving the Los Angeles Press Club's Impact Award for Influential Contributions to Culture and Society.

I have been fortunate to watch up close how relentlessly Marlee advocates—not for herself, but for her community. People see the headlines: "first Deaf actor to win an Academy Award," "groundbreaking performer," "trailblazer in entertainment." All of those are true, but what matters just as much, and often more, is what she does when no cameras are around.

I've watched her spend hours talking with young Deaf children and showing them that their stories matter. I've watched her stand her ground in meetings when someone said accessibility was "too complicated" or "too expensive," and I've seen her change minds simply by refusing to accept less than equal treatment. I've even seen her use her incredible position in Hollywood to refuse to do a film unless it was cast authentically, as she did with the Oscar-winning *CODA*. She has used every opportunity—whether on a film or TV set, in a studio talking with executives, on award stages, or even at the White House—to advocate for authentic representation, for captioning, for interpreters, for the idea that communication access isn't charity—it's a right.

Working with Marlee has also taught me what leadership looks like. It's not loud. It's not flashy. It's consistent. It's intentional. It's the choice to show up, day after day, even when it's exhausting, even when it would be easier to let someone else take the lead. She has opened doors in entertainment not by knocking politely, but sometimes by pushing—and sometimes by deciding that the door wasn't good enough and building a new one.







Clockwise from top: Matlin competed in season six of "Dancing With the Stars" in 2008 with partner Fabian Sanchez; *CODA* stars Troy Kotsur, Marlee Matlin, and Daniel Durant on the cover of *The Hollywood Reporter;* After meeting when she was 12, Matlin and Henry Winkler developed a close friendship that has lasted for almost 50 years.

I've seen the impact she has had within the Deaf community, but also far beyond it. Marlee's story resonates with anyone who has ever been told that their identity is a limitation. She proves—every day—that identity is not an obstacle, but rather a source of power. People who meet her walk away feeling bigger, braver and more willing to bet on themselves.

People often ask what I've learned from Marlee. The truth is, I've learned more from her than I could fit into a tribute page. But I'll share a few things.

First, I've learned that humor is a survival skill. Marlee has an incredible ability that she inherited from her father to disarm tension with a joke, to turn frustration into laughter, and to keep moving forward with absolute determination. Who else can respond with a "Bless your heart" when a network executive asks, with no hint of irony, "Is she going to be Deaf for the whole show?" When you're navigating an industry that often lacks imagination in addressing disability, humor becomes a powerful tool. I've seen Marlee use it to educate, to challenge and to unite people. She's used it thousands of times to keep long days on set from becoming unbearable.

Second, I've learned that accessibility is not a technical issue—it's a human one. Watching Marlee advocate for inclusion has reshaped the way I think about communication. Accessibility means that everyone gets to belong. It means that everyone gets a voice. Interpreting for Marlee has required me not only to refine my craft, but to rethink my place in the world—to be someone who builds bridges instead of barriers.

The third thing I've learned is that courage



Matlin and husband Kevin Grandalski have been married since 1993 and have four children.



Whoopi Goldberg, Access Hollywood correspondent Maria Menounous and Marlee Matlin pose in their uniforms after playing in the 2008 All Star Legends & Celebrity Softball Game.







Above, from left: Matlin made her directorial debut on an episode of "Accused" in 2023.

She won an Academy Award for Best Actress in 1987 for *Children of a Lesser God*.

Matlin and Jack Jason appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" in 2004.

isn't always manifested in big speeches or grand gestures. Sometimes it's showing up to a set where you're the only Deaf person. Sometimes it's refusing to let someone else speak for you. Sometimes it means advocating for change when the system tells you, "This is the way we've always done it." Marlee has shown me that every act of courage, no matter how small, changes the world just a little bit.

Finally, I've learned that representation matters more than any of us can measure. I cannot tell you how many people—young, old, hearing, Deaf—have come up to Marlee over the years and said, "You made me believe I could do this too." Yes, she has awards, accolades, and accomplishments that will be remembered. But what will be felt, what will continue to ripple through generations, is the way she has given people permission to dream without limitation.

I've been honored to stand beside her as she's taken barriers and turned them into opportunities, as she has taken on roles that expanded the possibilities for Deaf performers and spoken out on issues affecting millions, as she did with her successful effort to insure there is closed-captioning everywhere. Through all of this, she has never lost sight of her intention: to lift others as she climbs.

So when people ask me what it's like to interpret for Marlee Matlin, I tell them this: It's been the privilege of my life to help amplify a voice that never needed permission to be powerful. She has changed me. She has changed audiences. She has changed the entertainment industry. Let me rephrase that: She has impacted the way the world understands the Deaf community.

Marlee is proof that creativity, advocacy and determination can spark movements. She reminds us that language—whether spoken or signed—is not what defines us. What defines us is our willingness to use our voice for something bigger than ourselves.

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