The Power of Representation

We spoke with seven individuals—including authors, a professional dancer, an inclusive designer and Clarke alums—about what it means to see deaf and hard of hearing experiences in popular culture.

To Be Under-Represented

Imagine what it's like to never see a movie star, book character or professional athlete who looks like you. Perhaps you don't have to imagine.

When children who are deaf or hard of hearing don't see themselves reflected in pop culture, sports, television and positions of leadership, it's natural to wonder where or how they fit in.

Juliet Corwin, Clarke alum and high school senior.

"Growing up deaf with hearing technology, accurate representation of others who lived a similar lifestyle to my own was very fleeting and difficult to find," says Juliet Corwin, a Clarke alum and senior in a mainstream high school. "Specifically in media such as television, representation of people who are deaf or hard of hearing can be disappointing. There is often a lot of inaccuracy and perpetuation of stereotypes… Additionally, deaf characters' lives and personalities typically revolve solely around their deafness, suggesting that there is no other depth to them." *(Read more about Juliet.)*

According to the World Health Organization, about 15% of the world's population live with a disability, making them the largest minority group in the world. And in the US, one in four adults lives with a disability. But the general public won't see this reflected in media.

For instance, the Ford Foundation's 2019 "Road Map for Inclusion" reports that fewer than 25% of characters in the media are depicted with a disability. The organization calls for the representation of disability in the media to align with the statistics in the US and be "one in four, in front of and behind the camera, in characters, in actors, in directors, in writers' rooms, and more."

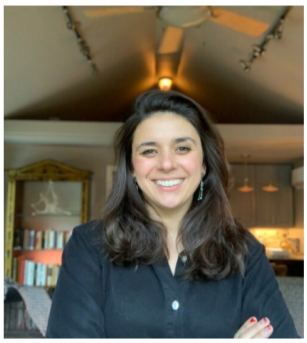
"When I was growing up, I didn't see any meaningful representation of deaf people," says Torin Early, Clarke alum and college student. "Maybe I heard it mentioned as a joke in a TV show or in various lyrics in songs but never

anything I specifically related to. Unfortunately, I haven't seen a shift in this representation over time. While growing up there were no role models or mentors that were deaf. I had no one like me that I was able to look up to and learn from. I try to be a mentor to other deaf and hard of hearing people I come in contact with because I know it hasn't always been easy." *(Read more about Torin.)*

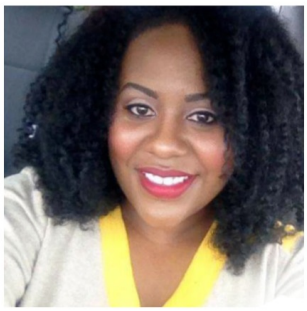
Encouragingly, a 2020 study found that 8% of family films in 2019 featured a lead with a disability, which is a significant increase from the 1% featured throughout the preceding decade.

And there are many people working to improve this lack of representation. We spoke with children's book author Jessica Jordan-Hogan, professional dancer and model Simoné Botha, inclusive designer and writer of the new show *Oral*, Alexandra Dean-Grossi, American Girl spokesperson Susan Jevens, American Girl author Erin Falligant and Clarke alums Juliet Corwin and Torin Early to learn more.

Alums & Advocates on Representation



Alexandra Dean Grossi, television writer, inclusive designer READ MORE >



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