



### **SALT Podcast Episode 8 – Darlene Evans**

*Jenny: Hello, I am Jenny Salt and welcome to 'Salt', a place where we will enter into the lives of people and discover heart-warming, sometimes challenging, yet always distinctive Gospel stories.*

*Jenny: Today's story is a childhood of silence that gave way to a life: smoking cigarettes at the age of 11 which is very young when looking back and at 14 being quite successful at getting into hotels as Darlene looked older. She was married at by the age of 17 and had four children by age of 26. Darlene grew up in a Christian home, but it wasn't a typical Christian home, married at the age of 17 and a mother of 4 children by the age of 26. Darlene's life has taken many turns including later in life communicating the gospel to those who otherwise would never hear it.*

*Jenny: Welcome Darlene. It is lovely to have you here today. You describe your story as A-typical – what do you mean by that. When you think back to your childhood, what did that look like at home with your parents?*

Darlene: At home we talked with our hands, gestering, body language and sign language called Auslan. Both my parents were profoundly Deaf from birth and that meant we communicated differently to other families and I wasn't really aware of that until I went to school. To get their attention you might stomp on the floor or flick a light, or tap them. Other things were different, like we didn't have a doorbell but a light would go on in each room to alert them that someone was at the door. Sometimes that was difficult for me as a child as I might be the one at the door, the sunshine is streaming through the house and I was out there, stranded, but because it was so light they couldn't see that the lights were on and I was stranded outside. While this could be an issue with anyone, but if you are a child this can be very frustrating. And the other thing they might have their bedroom door closed and I couldn't get their attention because the door was locked and they couldn't hear me.

*Jenny: So this was a different world, but you didn't realise it was different because this was the world you knew. So this was all you knew. You are the eldest of 3 children.*

Darlene: As the eldest I suppose I had more responsibility, I was the go-between for the hearing world and the Deaf world, so if someone came to the door I would interpret, or at a shopping centre people would tend to talk through me to my parents.

*Jenny: and your parents encouraged you to be the go-between?*

Darlene: Yes, and so the hearing child is meant to know everything that's going on in the world and that's a lot of responsibility, and so I grew up very quickly. I have 2 younger sisters, all of us are hearing.

*Jenny: so did your sisters also become go-betweens or was that your role?*

Darlene: No, not until I was off the scene, the eldest child carried that until the next one could take over.

*Jenny: So part of your growing up you were involved in the Deaf church, where there was an active community attending church.*

Darlene: It was quite a vibrant community, this was back in the 70s, but we travelled far and wide to get together and it was always an all day experience. The sermon was totally in sign language and the singing was totally in sign language. The minister was a CODA a Child of Deaf Adults, so he was like me and he was quite fluent. The children weren't involved in the church, and as a 10 year old I was minding the rest of the children so the adults could go on their own way. I think I was the only child of that age, and I only know that because I've seen the church minutes.

*Jenny: did the minister preach with words because he was a hearing person?*

Darlene: It was all in silence, so he would be telling stories with his hands.

*Jenny: So you are bi-lingual, in fact sign language is your first language. Did your parents read lips?*

Darlene: No my parents didn't but many Deaf people do, but depended on what school they went to. There are different views of what is best. Some schools discouraged sign language and would actually punish children if they used it. My parent's school didn't.

When I went to school I noticed that some children had hearing parents, so that was different. And I also encountered bullying, so as children we were Deaf and dumb, and they would do these horrible hand signs at me, so I started being embarrassed of my parents and I didn't want to identify with them. I didn't like going to school and I couldn't even play in my front yard as they would come by and tease, and it wasn't very nice, and I couldn't tell my parents because I didn't want to hurt their feelings.

*Jenny: so how did they know you had Deaf parents, would your mum drop you off at school.*

Darlene: I don't recall that but sometimes my father would come to school for parent and teacher interview. So sometimes I would do the go-between so that I could communicate both ways so that I would say what each person wanted each person to know.

*Jenny: I would imagine that if the teacher is saying something about you only the good things would come through – your parents must have been very proud of you, and you are a high achiever, didn't miss any days at school.*

Darlene: I missed many days at school but they didn't know that, particularly in high school as I was a part-time student there.

*Jenny: so when you look back on your childhood do you have good memories?*

Darlene: I'd like to look back with different eyes, but at the time I think it did feel like a totally negative experience, so there was the bullying, the parents lived in a totally different world and the responsibility, which is power, but is also a burden. Power that I could get up to no good and a burden as you are expected to know everything and somehow be part of the solution. Also, my mother was particularly unhappy about being Deaf so she would say 'you are lucky you can hear, so lucky'. She struggled with depression because being Deaf is so isolating, then I would feel really guilty because I could hear, and that there was something wrong with that. It was that other thing of being different because I didn't fit in with the hearing world, nor the Deaf world so I was somewhere but nowhere.

*Jenny: did your sisters feel the same way.*

Darlene: They seemed to have a more positive, they didn't seem to have as much negativity from my mum, because also they were allowed to be children more, so it was different for me.

*Jenny: so your mum struggled with being Deaf, did your father also struggle?*

Darlene: Well he got out of the house more, but in those days mum stayed at home a lot more. My dad went to work and he was a go-er so he would take time to learn a new language, tried to learn to dance which is incredibly hard when you don't hear music, but he was always trying and he was a busy man.

*Jenny: did he learn any languages*

Darlene: I don't know whether he succeeded, but he had a French lady at work he was trying to learn from – rather interesting – sign language and French.

*Jenny: how did he try to master dancing?*

Darlene: I've seen some notes where he had written down some of the moves. There was some sort of vibration but he watched what other people did.

*Jenny: so that is how your dad got out and socialised?*

Darlene: Yes, but my mum didn't. She felt isolated. The neighbours would talk to one another but they often talked about her but not to her and so there was this sense again of isolation. I know that being Deaf is lonely and communication is how we get on with life.

*Jenny: and you as the eldest child felt the burden of that.*

Darlene: As a young person, yes, and somehow you always felt that it was your job, an inescapable job.

*Jenny: you've moved into your teenage years and for some teenagers this can be a tricky time both with relationships and family. How did you cope and relate to your parents?*

Darlene: The generation gap that naturally occurs was further intensified by them living in a totally different world and experience than me. So I gravitated to the friends – from an early age I thought 'I don't want to know you, I am embarrassed by you, your world is a different world to mine'.

*Jenny: so you pushed away the Deaf world and the Christian world, meanwhile you were leaning into your friends.*

Darlene: Yes, so come the friends and the increasing knowledge I had power, power to deceive, power to get away with a lot things, so I became deceptive and would say I was going to a certain place and I was actually going somewhere else. They couldn't check up on me, they couldn't ring to see if I was where I said I'd be, so with the friends I got up to no good, smoking cigarettes at 11 which is very young when you look back, drinking alcohol at 13. Most of my friends were older than me, mostly because I grew up too early, and I also I gravitated to older people as well. I did have some friends my own age as well.

*Jenny: I would have thought it was hard for a girl of 13 to get alcohol, but perhaps not.*

Darlene: At 14 I was quite successful at getting into hotels, I looked older and somehow it just worked.

*Jenny: So your parents had no idea what you were getting up to?*

Darlene: They couldn't check up on me, and if I wanted to go out at night sometimes, I pretended I was asleep then I would sneak out and back in and they didn't hear a thing.

*Jenny: not really sneaking out if they can't hear.*

Darlene: Yes, you mustn't bump anything, as they could feel the vibration.

*Jenny: so that was your teenage years – a time of escaping out of that world and escaping into another world that appeared better.*

Darlene: Yes, escaping out of **that** world of responsibility, and then running smack-bang into another responsibility because I got married and had children, so there wasn't much of a window of freedom.

*Jenny: so you had been smoking at 11 and drinking at 13 and 14, so there wasn't much of a window of freedom and then you were married at 17.*

Darlene: Yes, I married on my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, he had been my boyfriend from 14, I got married because I thought it was the right thing to do.

*Jenny: and why on your 17<sup>th</sup> birthday?*

Darlene: It just happened to work out that way – not for any particular reason.

*Jenny: what did your parents think of this?*

Darlene: I think my Dad was a little switched on by then and thought 'yes, it's the right thing to do'. My Mum said 'too young, too young'.

*Jenny: why did you think it was the right thing to do?*

Darlene: Because I was involved with my boyfriend, but I understood the Christian world view, knew what was right and wrong, it had been drummed into me.

*Jenny: so your Dad thought if she is going to be involved this is the right thing to do.*

Darlene: Dad didn't articulate that, but I heard from someone else that this is what he thought was right.

*Jenny: now was it a day you celebrated, was it in a church, what was the day like.*

It was in a church, and we went to pre-marriage classes which should have sent out warning signals as the man I was marrying was making a mockery of it all. And things didn't go well right from the beginning and so getting married didn't make it any better. There were very difficult times.

*Jenny: so this escape plan of getting out of the world of responsibilities, this marriage plan didn't make it any better, so what was that like?*

Darlene: 17, on one hand I wanted to grow up and I thought that this would be it, but we were both 'off the rails' a bit. I sort of knew that the marriage wasn't any good, I knew I wasn't perfect by any means. There was no love in this marriage, and I thought that maybe a baby would fix the problem. So once I had the baby I became super responsible, but it wasn't the solution to the marriage.

*Jenny: how old was your husband when you married?*

Darlene: He was 21, and I was 17.

*Jenny: how old were you when you had your first baby?*

Darlene: I was eighteen.

*Jenny: So that didn't fix the marriage. So you had another baby!*

Darlene: The first baby was a difficult baby, strong willed, the second one was a lot easier. And then a few years later I had twins and that was really hard work.

*Jenny: so four little ones and in a way your husband was a child as well by the age of 26. Were your parents involved in any way at all as grandparents as you were a young mum?*

Darlene: Not overly. They were involved a little. My father ended up with cancer and he died when the twins were one. So he was sick but they did what they could.

*Jenny: did you children learn sign language so they could communicate with their grandparents?*

Darlene: They started, but my mum didn't have the patience to let them develop. She really wanted to get my attention too, and the children were also trying to get my attention, so that didn't work out as well as it could have because she didn't embrace their trying to learn.

*Jenny: so again the escape plan didn't quite turn out, so now you are a young mum with a marriage that wasn't going very well, but there was a bit of a turning point in the first few years of your marriage.*

Darlene: Yes, at 19 I worked out there was no happiness here, where was love? Somehow, through a series of events, I went to a Christian playgroup. And at this Christian playgroup I was lamenting where is love, where is happiness and the pastor's wife said, 'don't go away, just stand here, don't go anywhere', so she brought her husband along and he was telling me the good news of Jesus, how he died for my sins, that he is love, how to find forgiveness, peace and eternal life. Was I interested in making him Lord and Saviour? And of course I was, I was looking for this. I said yes, and I said this little prayer, and then I had this supernatural experience and my eyes were opened and I saw many things in life in a different light. I started to see things as God sees them, instead of that blindness. I always knew that God had been with me all those years but in the background, yes 'I know You are there, sorry God' attitude but I came to a point where I knew this was all real, this is where love is, this is where life is. I had heard Bible stories before, and legalistic teaching but didn't understand Gospel love.

*Jenny: So you are in a loveless marriage.*

Darlene: I went to church but my husband never did. I went to playgroup. I always felt a little different to the other people – was it because of the Deaf family thing, or was it because I didn't have a husband with me. I have always felt that sense of isolation and loneliness all the way through life, so I was slowly growing in my understand and Christian walk and as a person but he wasn't. He was drinking heavily and drug taking so our lives didn't cross paths, and in fact he didn't want anything to do with me. He just want to be out so there was a double life.

*Jenny: so the marriage ended 10 years after it had started.*

Darlene: I had great perserverence and in fact the church said 'you must stay' and I believed I was committed and I was there for the long haul, there were not many grounds for divorce and I wasn't going to be able to prove anything because he was a compulsive liar. So there I stayed.

*Jenny: so you separated, and by the age of 27 you were a single mum with four little ones.*

Darlene: I remember celebrating my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was more a celebration as I was free, but the road ahead wasn't easy. Divorce is very painful. It doesn't matter how bad the marriage is, divorce is still very painful. Single parenting is very difficult as well, extremely, particularly as the twins were sick all the time, and it was a heavy load to carry.

*Jenny: and in the midst of that heavy load, and as a single mum, you actually took on more, because you started to do some studies. Why did you do that, and what did you study?*

Darlene: I had the children, I am always committed, I was committed to the children and their good. My focus on life was on the problems of life. A series of events led me to continue my education. I

had left school at the end of year 10, so I never did the Higher School Certificate, so I was seeking to do some study and I was investigating a lot of different places, but I wanted a Christian education. I ended up as a student at Sydney Missionary and Bible College and although it was work and study if was my life. It was focussing me on God and what he was doing in my life, what he has done throughout history, what the meaning of life is, where it was all headed. It saved me from despair. It was fantastic.

*Jenny: that is wonderful. You are continuing to study – all that was about 20 years ago.*

Darlene: I got a little addicted to study. I started with the diploma, but then went on to Bachelor of Theology, Graduate Certificate of Theology. I did some external study outside of SMBC with a Graduate Diploma in Information Management, which was to help me get work.

*Jenny: and you are doing some MA units as well. It sounds like that unfinished business with education continues on.*

Darlene: I love learning.

*Jenny: as part of that study you did a MA unit on disability and that has become a major turning point in your life.*

Darlene: I didn't actually want to do that unit, I thought it would be negative, it would make me think of all the negative things in my past. I thought I'd rather go on a study tour, but that didn't quite work so I decided I would do the unit. It was a real eye-opener and a mind-changer. So instead of talking about disability in a negative light, I saw that God has made us all different, that we can all learn from one another, that Deafness isn't a bad thing, that Deafpeople are is a group of people in themselves, signing is just another language. I already knew there was a Deaf culture and so I was seeing things in an entirely different light. At that exact time my sister asked me to help out with some interpreting, and somehow I was coming across Deaf people, so this began a major shift in my thinking. I realised that Deaf people are one of the largest unreached people groups with the Gospel and the good news of Jesus.

*Jenny: that's incredible – you have come the full circle from wanting to run away from the Deaf community and the Deaf church to now really embracing it. You are now involved in a lot of different contexts in terms of interpreting.*

Darlene: I have been interpreting on a regular basis now, which is such a blessing, at a church – the singing, the sermon, the children's talk and I just love being with Deaf Christians. I have also been going to the Deaf Christian Fellowship which existed many years ago – they are an elderly group now and they just love me being there. I have also interpreted outside of a church context and also at a women's conference, so that's been a joy as well. It's great to be able to use my Bachelor of Theology as well as my signing ability to bring access to folk who would not otherwise have access to these conferences. There's a real need and desire to have access, as they are very isolated from many things that we take for granted.

*Jenny: as you look back on your childhood, and as you describe it as being hard and painful, how do you look on it now?*

Darlene: When I look back and see how God has worked through these experiences of life, and you can't see what God was doing at the time, and it is a looking back, and yes it was painful, childhood was difficult, teenage years were difficult, marriage was difficult, single parenting was difficult, the whole Deaf world, but now I can see it as having meaning and purpose and I can now see that God has made it beautiful. He has brought beauty out of what was seemingly a difficult and meaningless experience.

*Jenny: thank you for sharing this with us today.*