

VOCM NIGHT LINE with Jonathan Richler September 8, 2017

JR: Jonathan Richler

TC: Todd Churchill

JR: Were speaking with Todd Churchill father of Carter Churchill. I have no idea who that is, fill me in.

TC: How are you tonight?

JR: Very well sir. How about yourself?

TC: Not too bad considering. My son Carter was born 2011 and when he was born he had a very traumatic entry into the world and we nearly lost him and eventually he was diagnosed with CP and profound deafness. Right now, he is in the education system and just started grade 1 a couple days ago.

JR: Cerebral Palsy, is that what you mean by CP?

TC: Yes, cerebral palsy. So, he was implanted in 2011 and was 10 months old when he was implanted with Cochlear Implants so he has functional hearing but because of the hearing issue and the CP, he is non-verbal. I don't want people to mistake non-verbal with non-communicative because he does communicate with us, he does it through American Sign Language. That's the crux of the issue that we are having now with the education system. Last year in Kindergarten the year was a complete write off because he was in a mainstream classroom without anyone instructing him in ASL so while he can hear his teacher and he can understand his teacher, it is very one-way communication. He can't talk to his teacher back and the teacher can't understand anything he says.

JR: OK, so what grade is he in? One?

TC: He's in grade one.

JR: So, despite the fact that he couldn't communicate with his teacher he was put ahead from kindergarten to grade one - that's something that's wrong right there.

TC: Yeah, I think that's just the way the education system works now. I'm old-school and if you didn't know the curriculum, then you didn't move ahead. Eventually children who shouldn't be passed ahead are going to have a harder time in life because that's just not the way the real-world works. The problem we are having now, and this is not any commentary on the teachers – I do pity the teachers, we said to his teachers last year that we really pity you because you are asked to fulfill a mission by the Department of Education that you are not equipped to do.

JR: Now, was that mission the inclusiveness mission?

TC: Absolutely. So, he has a deaf child in his classroom but he's not trained to teach a deaf child – he doesn't know ASL, so my child has no way to communicate with his teacher and now it's the same way again this year. This year has been even more frustrating because one of the other things that Carter is suppose to have is a Student Assistant to help him with his personal needs and that person is suppose to have ASL as well for the same reason because that is the language that Carter communicates in. We found out when we dropped him off at school on Wednesday, his first day, that that person had not even been hired even though we had a meeting with the school before the end of school last year. where it was agreed that he needed this person. And its very frustrating because he ended up spending the last three days not being able to talk to anybody.

JR: Todd can I ask. You said you had a meeting last year and that you were told, I suppose, that there would be fixes for a grade one. Were you in communication with the school over the summer? In other words, before day one of school, were you made aware of that? Did you have any time to prepare for this? Prepare Carter?

TC: We have had a lot of communication with the English School District over the summer and we were told it's being worked on, it's being worked on and we will get back to you. The Student Assistant issue is really troubling because after 10 weeks of summer break they couldn't hire this person? The need was identified almost three months ago. It's hard to believe, it's really hard believe.

JR: May I ask how many teachers are fluent in American sign language and in our region to region you're calling from?

TC: I live in PCSP. There's very few people, the teachers that you see now are ones that worked at the NSD. That created a lot of problems when that closed down all the students were mainstream some of the student were give TOD when mainstreamed but new students are not being given support like that. Its very hard to learn when communication is one way.

JR: How many students in this province do we have that are Deaf? Under 1000, over 500?

TC: I'm not sure of the exact number. When the school for the deaf closed down I think there were 130 students who were mainstreamed.

JR: That's a lot of kids and a lot of families and I would guess that means by extension there are probably maybe 25 teachers throughout the province who are qualified to communicate via ASL. So how hard is it to learn sign language?

TC: Well, my Wife and I are learning it right because that's what we use to communicate with Carter so its very important for us to learn it. Because he's not getting much ASL in school we are trying to teach him ourselves. So, it's super frustrating and Canada has signed onto a document UN Convention on the

Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Canada ratified that in 2010 and there's specific provisions in article 24 in that convention that deals specifically with the issues we are having in terms of the children should have access to ASL and be taught in ASL but it seems like the provincial government does not want to recognize those international agreements that Canada signed on to.

JR: Well that unfortunately happens all the time. You can ratify documents at the international level but if there's no teeth behind, in other words if you don't follow the rules, they are worth what they're worth – let's look at the truth and reconciliation commission for example, 94, 96 recommendations and I can't think of one which is been implemented or talked about although the Prime Minister campaigned on honouring all of them. It happens all the time unfortunately and leads to a bigger institutional mess but right now poor Carter and at least 100 other future leaders of this province and country are all requiring more assistance. Somebody tweeted on my page here I think last night or early this morning something about and I asked for clarification because I had no idea of the acronyms that this person used. Her name is Kimberly and she says here, sorry Ashley says "I wonder if the Minister of Education, Dale Kirby will call in tonight to discuss issues surrounding children who are deaf or hard of hearing" Kimberly says "we want to know why student, within the education system I guess, has a full-time teacher of the deaf with American sign language and a deaf student assistant and won't give our son the same." I'm guessing the same sort of infrastructure. Would that be your wife?

TC: That is my wife. It's a little frustrating and we are not trying to imply that that child should lose theirs and we should get those resources because both children should have the same level of support.

JR: I think so and I wasn't implying that at all just to be clear Todd because this is important because no doubt Kimberly and you and Carter are in a situation which is not unique. There are some people out there who are receiving support and others who are not and maybe it's because of where you live, there are only so many resources to go around. Gosh wouldn't it be great if we had a school for the deaf.

TC: Yeah, oddly enough we did at one time but unfortunately, I think the Government looks at Cochlear Implants as a curse for deafness. Even though Carter was implanted, he is non-verbal so he still requires ASL. That's the unfortunate thing. Cochlear Implants are a blessing and a curse all in one because I think that is how they are perceived. The deafness will be cured, there will be no deaf children ever again, everybody will talk and no need for a Deaf school and I think that was one of the drivers and if you look at position papers for Canadian Association for the Deaf they're very strong against that opinion because they don't feel that Cochlear Implants minimizes or reduces the need to know ASL because what happens when your device malfunctions.

JR: That's a damn good question. Todd, we got to go to the break can I ask you a favor? Can you and I speak maybe Tuesday or Wednesday perhaps in a longer segment maybe we can speak with both yourself and Kimberly if you want to come in we can even make up more time because as your wife just tweeted to me there over 300 children so this isn't just Carter, this is 299 other future leaders as far as I'm concerned. I would love to learn more and I'm sure listeners as well. At your convenience, you're welcome to come in if you wish otherwise we can have a wonderful conversation. We need to know more about you. I'm ignorant about the situation, I want to learn more.

TC: Absolutely. I would like to add one more thing quickly. Minister Kirby was on Open Line this morning and he said if people were having problems with the education system to reach out to him. Well, I'm reaching out to Dale Kirby right now publicly and challenging Mr. Kirby to be a man of his word and honor what he said this morning on Open Line and each out to me and my wife to discuss issues with our son and if he doesn't I think that will speak volumes.

JR: Thank you. I can hear the frustration in your voice. I appreciate your time tonight. I did not hear the show this morning but I do have a copy of it. I recorded it because I was busy, normally I love to listen to it when I come home on Friday so I'll listen to it over the weekend sir and I'll become a little bit more educated on the situation but you have my..., the carpets open, whatever you or your wife or both and bring Carter if you want. I would love to learn more and meet you.

TC: Absolutely I appreciate the offer.

JR: Thank you for your words tonight and will speak soon.