

# Deanne Bray

## *A Hearing Loss 'Hero'*

By Barbara Kelley

**Deanne Bray stars in the NBC series, *Heroes*, as a new character which debuted this fall. Here's a chance to get to know Deanne and her new role as Emma.**



**D**eanne Bray has hearing loss as do the characters she plays. She is most recently known for her starring role in the PAX-TV series, *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye*. The show was loosely based on the true experiences of Sue Thomas, a woman with a profound hearing loss, who worked for the FBI in 1978 doing uncover surveillance by reading lips.

Deanne played the character in the current time and her character worked with the FBI agents on the field more than the real Sue. The real Sue mostly watched videotapes transcribing suspects' statements by reading lips.

Her role as Sue Thomas brought many e-mails with kind words and lots of support. She tries to respond to all her e-mails within five to ten days, but admits it is sometimes hard to get to them all!

Deanne has a severe hearing loss (70 dB to 90 dB) and wears a hearing aid in her left ear. She reads lips to augment what sounds the hearing aid provides. She also uses sign language, assistive devices, captioning, whatever it takes to navigate her personal and professional life as an actress. She graduated from the University of California-Northridge with a bachelor's degree in biology. Deanne is married to Troy Kotsur, an actor who is Deaf. They have a four-year-old daughter, Kyra.

Deanne's new series, *Heroes*, is a serial saga about people all over the world discovering that they have superpowers and trying to deal with how this change affects their lives. Deanne will play Emma, a woman with a hearing loss who will discover her power throughout the series. She has already appeared in the September 28, October 5, October 12, shows; her role as Emma will continue.

### **Tell us a little about your hearing loss. Does anyone else in your family have hearing loss?**

My father's dad left when my dad was a baby; so I don't know much of his side of the Bray family. I have no idea if there are other members of the family who have hearing loss.

I was told that I was born deaf but my parents did not suspect this until I

was about 16 months old. Back then they did not do newborn hearing screening for hearing loss. When they suspected a hearing loss, they took me to several audiologists but since at that time they didn't test babies, they asked my dad to return when I was age 7 to 12. The test required me to understand that I must raise my hand whenever I heard a sound.

My dad was smart not to follow their advice and wait until I was older. When I was two, he took me to UCLA to get an evaluation of my hearing loss through machines that read my brain activity. They fitted a hearing aid for my left ear since I had some residual hearing of about 70 dB; however, my right ear was deaf and a hearing aid did not help.



*Deanne's character, Emma, in Heroes, uses headphones to block out the world and potential interactions and conversations with people.*

I went to school early to learn how to communicate through sign language, learn how to speak, and undergo auditory verbal training. The extensive training I had did not come only from what the school provided. Time was invested at home with my parents as well. I was bilingual using American Sign Language and speaking spoken English separately, but not simultaneously.

### **Tell us about Heroes, its premise, and what role you will play on the show.**

I will play a character, Emma, who as Tim Kring, the show's creator, said: "Emma is a fascinating and powerful woman." She has a severe hearing loss and throughout the series will use sign language. But later in the series she might be wearing her hearing aid where she functions as a hard of hearing individual. I have no idea right now where they are going with that story line.

She is disconnected from people due to a tragic event that happened in her life a few years back. She meets Peter (Milo Ventimiglia) and Hiro (Masi Oka) who will guide her on how to use her power. It will be a lot of self-discovery and growth during her journey in *Heroes*. She will be in multiple episodes. So far she is in episodes 4, 5, and 6 and maybe 8, 9 and 10. That's all I know for now.

Also, I understand that Peter and Emma will become close and help each other become better individuals down the line. As for what power she will have, I encourage you to tune in and find out this season. And, *Heroes* is closed captioned.

### **You talk about your love of teaching and that your mother, Sylvia Powell, was a teacher. What are your experiences with teaching?**

My mother was a teacher at heart and did not work as a teacher as an occupation. I did go to public school, but with my mother, it was also like I was home schooled, but *her* way. Parents are usually children's first "teachers." Or, it should be that way. I developed the love of learning because of her.

I have taught from elementary to high school age. In high school, I taught math and science. I taught American Sign Language classes as well. Next semester, I should be getting my credentials in a single subject, science.

### **How did having a good education help you in your own career?**

My father raised me with the motto: "Education leads to freedom." If you do well in school and go on to higher

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**Deanne Bray** *cont. from page 11*

education, you have more choices when choosing a career.

**How did you get the accommodations you needed in college?**

I used a sign language interpreter. A couple of times I used an FM system. The University of California-Northridge had a number of deaf students, but if I was the only student with hearing loss in the class, I'd have a volunteer take notes for me and I'd compare my notes with the volunteer's notes. I think the communication access has improved at Northridge since then and they are committed to students who need it. They have a choice of real-time captioning, sign language interpreter, FM system or notetaker. My preference would be to use a sign language interpreter.

**Do you wear your hearing aid in the show? On the set? How do your fellow actors communicate with you? What accommodations or strategies do you use to communicate with actors, directors, set staff?**

I do wear my hearing aid on set. I like hearing the people who talk to me while I read lips. I don't do as well reading lips with my hearing aid off. My hearing aid is good for one-to-one conversations. Being in a room full of people with conversations everywhere is when I need to have a sign language interpreter. My interpret-

er is my "ears." She fills in the gaps of what I miss.

I don't wear a hearing aid for my character. When the camera rolls, I take it off because my character at this point in the series has disconnected herself from people—all people both hearing and people with any degree of hearing loss. Emma does this because of a tragedy in the past. She does not want to get into a conversation with anyone so she wears headphones walking in the streets and at work so that hearing people can leave her alone. She does use sign language with those who know she is deaf.

The fun part is that I am not sure where the writers are going with Emma and how they will play with the idea of her wearing a hearing aid which she did several years ago when she was "connected" with people and was supposedly happy during that time in her life.

**What type of reaction do you get from those who do not have hearing loss? Does anyone on the show have a hearing loss?**

Not that I know of but the crew and cast I work with have been wonderful. They tap me on the shoulder to get my attention. They remember to look at me when they talk to me. They use a sign language interpreter to communicate with me when I don't have my hearing aid on. So far, the experience of working in a hearing environment has been smooth. It's great.



*Deanne Bray relaxes with her husband, Troy Kotsur, and their daughter Kyra.*

**When did you decide to become an actress? What advice would you give to people with hearing loss who want to be actors?**

I was born into the entertainment industry. I got the acting bug. I was exposed to the set with my father working as a director of photography or gaffer on different productions over the years. My father encouraged me to get an education and not go in this direction in acting.

I went to college and during that time, I joined a dance group called Prism West and performed on stage. An agent was in the audience and approached me saying that he could get me jobs in television. He is now my personal manager and has represented me for 15 years. I also grew and learned from working with DeafWest Theatre. I started with them when I was 19.

My advice is to believe in yourself and be true to the characters you play.

**Do you have any mentors? How is that important to you?**

Phyllis Frelich, Linda Bove, and Freda Norman were the three deaf women I looked up to because they were pioneers in Deaf theater and television. I enjoyed watching them discuss a scene, characters, or the details of a play with one another. They support each other in a non-competitive way from what I've witnessed with different DeafWest productions during rehearsals.



*On the Heroes set: Milo Ventimiglia as Peter Petrelli and Bray as Emma. © Justin Lubin/NBC*

**Do you know about cochlear implants? Would you ever consider getting one?**

I do know how cochlear implants work. I would not get one. I'm not ready for the surgery and I don't feel a great need as I am used to my hearing loss since I've had it since birth and have adapted well. The hearing aid in my left ear works for me. If I lose my residual hearing in my left ear, would I consider it? I don't know. I can't answer that until it happens.

**How do you use the phone?**

I use a videophone. With my family, I use a regular phone. But taking care of bills or business calls, I like using a videophone where I can see the interpreter so that I will not misunderstand which often happens, and, naturally, it's uncomfortable for me to go through that.

I remember hanging up on a person when I asked them nicely to repeat (after the third time), the person on the other end asked with irritation, "What are you, deaf or something?!"

Oh boy, that was it! I said: "As a matter of fact, I am!" Then I hung up. So I have found that videophone is the best way for me to communicate.



*The real Sue Thomas with Deanne Bray. Deanne says, "This is one of my favorite pictures of the real Sue Thomas and me concentrating really hard on reading someone's lips (who was talking to us). Our facial expressions were identical!"*

**Please tell us about your four-year-old daughter, Kyra. Talk about communication with her.**

My daughter is hearing. She uses American Sign Language fluently and speaks spoken English very well. The

**Finding Her Identity**

Deanne Bray said she has never in her life been sad or embarrassed that she has hearing loss. Still, dealing with people who feel sorry for her because she is deaf has been a challenge. Bray credited her parents for being open to the idea of taking her to deaf events and exposing her to Deaf culture as a child, so she was able to find her identity at a young age.

Some members of the Deaf community (not knowing her background, seeing her speak and wearing a hearing aid) question whether she embraces Deaf culture, and people who hear well question why others who are deaf do not speak as fluent as Bray.

She resolves the conflict for herself by recognizing, "I have the worst in both worlds, and I have the best in both worlds."

From Deanne Bray's website, [www.DeanneBray.com](http://www.DeanneBray.com).



reason why I strongly use American Sign Language at home is because my husband and her father, Troy, is Deaf and does not use his voice to communicate like I do. So she naturally knows not to speak to Deaf people and to sign if they are signers. If others with hearing loss speak to her, she will use her voice as well. We wanted her to be bilingual.

Some people have the misconception of when you sign, you will not speak well. That is so untrue. If you use one language more than the other, you will become more fluent in one language and less fluent with the other. If you keep up with both, then you'll be fluent in both.

**How is it being a working actress mother with a four-year-old? How do you juggle your schedule?**

The timing has been good for us. My husband, Troy, was in Mark Taper Forum's production of *Pippin* during the fall to spring season and I was teaching while my daughter went to school. Our schedule worked out. Troy worked long hours while I took care of Kyra most of the time.

However, now Troy is not working and I work long hours so he is being Mr. Mom for now. I still try to see her before she goes to sleep or spend the morning with her and have breakfast together. We have the weekends as well.

**Who would you most like to act alongside?**

Kate Winslet. I would love to work with her someday. Jim Carrey is one of my favorites. I wouldn't mind doing a film in Europe. I have never been there.

**What is your dream role in the entertainment industry?**

I would love for Emma to become a regular in *Heroes*. That'd be a dream role. I love how the writers made a Deaf woman not be a victim, but rather, a powerful and fascinating person whose humor shines through.

I would love to do epic films on Deaf women in the past (1700s-present) who have inspired and achieved so much and made a difference in this world.

**Are there any other dream roles you aspire to?**

Yes, to be the best teacher I can be for my daughter. 🍎🍎

Learn more about Deanne Bray on her website at [www.deannebray.com](http://www.deannebray.com). She is an HCAA member and lives in Southern California.

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