

Lee Perish pioneered theater access, health care

by [Jane McClure](#) // March 9th, 2012



*Lee Perish Feb. 3-1952
Lithon June 1953*

Interpreters at performances are commonplace today, but that wasn't always the case. People who were deaf or hearing-impaired had to watch shows without interpretation or stay home.

Going to a performance in a wheelchair was also difficult if not impossible. Spaces weren't set aside for theatergoers. While passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 opened doors for many who love theater and movies, it also took the dedicated work of countless individuals to get effective interpretation, closed-captioning and designated wheelchair accommodations in place.

Although not all Twin Cities area theatergoers with disabilities knew Lee Perish, they owe her many thanks. The disability community advocate died Feb. 22 at the age of 60. Perish was one of the pioneers of Twin Cities American Sign Language or ASL-interpreted shows. As a deaf woman who used a wheelchair due to her osteogenesis imperfecta, Perish advocated for and attended hundreds of ASL-interpreted or captioned shows over the years. She worked tirelessly to make sure many area theaters made shows accessible to people with hearing loss and other disabilities, a tribute to her from VSA Minnesota stated.

She was very involved in the design of the new Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, to make sure it accommodated all theatergoers with disabilities. Because of Perish and other activists, the Twin Cities have more arts opportunities interpreted, described or captioned than anywhere else in the world.

Perish also generously shared her appreciation of theater with countless people, including science fiction writer Kelly McCullough. He is married to her niece Laura. In a blog tribute to Perish, he wrote: "My wife Laura's Aunt Lee was smart and tough and sarcastic and funny and fierce. That last most of all. . . . When Laura went to college, Lee got into the habit of taking her to every Shakespeare play that came along at the Guthrie Theatre. We would pick up Lee and I would drop them both off and pick them up afterward. That lasted two or three years until Lee suggested that I really ought to come with them. For nearly 20 years after that Lee was our regular date for Guthrie shows, mostly Shakespeare, two or three a season. It was always wonderful to see Lee and have dinner and chat, and it's going to be very hard to go back to the Guthrie without her, though she wouldn't want us to stay away, which means we won't."

Tributes also poured in on her Legacy.com pages. Jon Skaalen of VSA Minnesota wrote, "What can one say or sign about this tiny yet immense bundle of wit -sparked by actors and friends and interpreters. Even getting the 'evil eye' from Lee was a treat because she did it with such relish. Anyone who treasures the arts owes a debt to Lee for advocating for access for people with hearing loss and other disabilities. That front row space will always be yours, Lee."

But Perish's impact wasn't limited to the theater. In 2002 she took on Abbott-Northwestern Hospital, in a landmark case set off by what she saw as discrimination based on her disabilities. She waged and won a year-long legal battle. The case was a first in Minnesota and ensured that the hospital would change its policies when dealing with deaf and hearing-impaired patients.

The hospital assigned staff to assure that an interpreter would be made available to any deaf person entering the hospital within two hours of entering the hospital. This case served as a model for other hospitals. She volunteered for many groups. She was a volunteer for Hearing and Service Dogs of Minnesota, now Can Do Canines, for more than 25 years. She was employed by the organization for more than 11 years.

Perish served on many committees and boards and was a member of the Minneapolis Advisory Committee on People with Disabilities for more than 21 years. She was known not only as a strong, spirited, passionate advocate who not only knew the issues impacting the deaf and hard of hearing community, she could also convincingly argue the issues. She advised on ADA compliance issues involving access for deaf and hard of hearing people to citywide programs and services. In a statement, the commission said, "Lee was a force to be reckoned with and her death leaves a huge void in the disability community."