

‘MY MUM IS DEAF’...

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the experiences of a Deaf parent of a hearing child

BIOGRAPHIES

I am Claire’s mum. Claire is hearing and I am Deaf. I have been Deaf since birth and have a brother who also has a significant hearing loss. Our parents and our extended family are all hearing.

I was educated within a Deaf Unit in Hawkes Bay during my primary school years, moving to a mainstream setting while at Intermediate School. My high school education took place fully within a mainstream school.

On leaving school I attended Otago University moving to a career in Food Technology. Following Claire’s arrival I then moved into Education, training as a high school teacher when Claire was one year old. After working as an itinerant teacher of the Deaf in Wellington for a few months I then taught within a regular High School in Wellington before moving on to Auckland and the world of Deaf Education.

Claire was born in 1990; she was a very beautiful baby. Her name means ‘bright’ and we certainly believed she had a bright future ahead of her.

We knew before Claire was born that there was a possibility that she may have a hearing loss as both my brother and I have significant hearing losses. To me, having a Deaf baby or a hearing baby made no difference; the essence of this child would still be her own regardless of her hearing status. Within two days of her birth we were very confident that this baby was indeed a hearing baby. As a child with a Deaf parent she was targeted for a hearing test within

weeks of her birth. This was merely a formality that confirmed that she was a hearing child.

Claire is now a lovely young woman of fifteen. She is articulate and has a strong interest in social justice and humanity, a feature I have found to be common amongst children of Deaf adults possibly as a result of their experiences as a child. In this article, some of the unique features of our relationship as a Deaf mum with a hearing child will be shared.

CLAIRE'S EARLY YEARS

First, it must be acknowledged that during the initial two years of Claire's life we had little contact with Deaf people and the Deaf community so our mode of communication was using spoken English. This has continued even though we have had a lot of contact with the Deaf community since she was three years old.

One of my funniest memories of Claire as a toddler was to watch her fall, obviously hurt herself and begin to cry, then hold back her cries, and look for me. Once she had me within her sight she really started bawling!! No point in crying when Mum doesn't know!

A WARNING

We moved to Auckland from Wellington when Claire was four years old. Early on, I met a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) who insisted on pulling me aside and giving me a run down on what I must never do with my Deaf child! The theme was not to use my child as my ears, to allow her to be herself and not to burden her with responsibilities which are adult responsibilities, i.e. making business telephone calls for the family. This message has remained in my consciousness, and even now on the rare occasion when I do indeed ask Claire to make telephone calls for me, I am riddled with guilt! Fortunately, by the time Claire was born we had fax machines so I was able to contact most people myself. The advent of freely accessible internet with email facilities, mobile text messaging phones and, more recently, a relay service for the Deaf has meant that I as a parent can manage my own communications freely.

NO RESENTMENT

Claire, on the whole, has never resented having a Deaf parent. The one major regret she had was that I was never able to sit and follow a movie with her.

Other families sat together to watch movies. When I was young I would happily watch movies while making up my own story line in my head. However, once exposed to subtitles on movies and actually following a story line through from beginning to end I no longer willingly sit through a movie I cannot follow. Imagine her delight when DVD movies with captions came out.

BEGINNING SCHOOL

The first day of school is always hard on parents. It comes with the realisation that their child is now growing up. When Claire started school she was very happy to be going and I stayed in the classroom for part of the morning. When I left I had this overwhelming realisation that Claire's schooling experience would be very different to mine. Here she was just one in a class of thirty, not one in a class of six or seven as it was for me. She would never have a pile of adults watching her every step of the way through her education, only the classroom teacher of the time (and me). She would have a different teacher each year, not one who has taught her before and one who already knows her educational background, her family etc. It was actually hard to accept this. No home-school books!!

CHOICE OF SCHOOLS

Claire attended a very middle class primary school. She talks though of the curious questions she would get from her classmates... 'Is your mum Deaf? How do you talk to her?' And so on. I remember when she was in Year Five; I popped into her classroom one day to be greeted by a class full of staring eyes. Because of this I asked the teacher if we could talk outside and she did this willingly. However, minutes later the lunch bell went and the children all poured out. I could see that they were watching our conversation. Later that day, Claire said all the children were asking one thousand and one questions about me being Deaf etc, etc, etc. It was a novelty for them. Claire tried to explain that for her having a Deaf mum was a very normal thing. Many of the children were saying they felt sorry for her. This certainly irritated Claire!

For this reason I decided to send Claire to a different Intermediate School to the one most of her peers at the primary school automatically moved to. The new intermediate school was very multicultural and carried a strong theme of 'celebrating diversity'. Incidentally there were also two signing children enrolled at the same time so, for once, Claire was within an environment where just about everyone had something 'different' about themselves or their home lives and it was quite acceptable. It was easy for me to visit this school. I am

sure the presence of the Deaf students and their communicator contributed to the positive acceptance of Deafness within the environment. From here, Claire moved to a high school which also has a very multicultural roll, the students have matured and are not as curious or as direct with their questioning as they were at primary school. Now Claire has to contend with the comments being made by teachers, but that is another story!

DECISIONS BASED ON OWN EXPERIENCE

One decision I made as result of the circumstances around my educational experiences was to NOT apply undue pressure on Claire. With the large number of people watching my progress with both high and low expectations I was determined not to put too much pressure on Claire as my experience made me resentful. I wanted her to progress through the education system as a regular child. Obviously I do keep an eye on how things are going, and she knows I expect her to apply herself and do well. I do take an active interest in her education, and all her school related activities.

PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITY EVENTS

Participating in school community events has always been a challenge. The main form of contact between parents obviously is by telephone or standing outside the classroom or on the sidelines at sporting events. Other parents were always fantastic in making sure I understood what was happening, what I needed to know, do, bring etc. This was great, but it is the small talk that counts more! It is in the small talk where the real information is shared as people discuss impressions, experiences, observations, events, etc. This is the information we missed out on. I remember going to a lolly-lei making evening prior to a school fair one time. I focused on my task, while the other parents chatted and chatted and chatted! I was probably the most productive person present that night, I was happy to assist with the fair but couldn't really participate in the small talk related to the event. It is this 'small talk' that draws people into community events. I was fortunate though to be in touch with a small group of parents who did ensure I had access to some of this 'small talk' after the event. Being me though, I made sure I knew what I had to know by asking lots of questions!

Claire likes it when I attend events and functions at her school. I don't enjoy them at all but will attend. If there is a sports meeting on, I often feel that it is not appropriate to bring an interpreter out for what may be just a twenty minute meeting. Claire will attend as well and often attempt to interpret the

discussion. She is quite good at this, however, I say I prefer for her to listen to everything, to record the main points and let me know later.

OUR HOME

Our home is very much a Deaf home in terms of its set up. When we were looking for a home to purchase, high on the list of desired features was a house which was 'Deaf friendly', that is one which is more open plan and with lots of light for communication purposes. Naturally, our table is round with a light directly above it. The phone of course is a fax/phone, the TV is a Teletext television, and the computer is in the main living area too. From the lounge one can see shadows come to the front door. If I am in the kitchen and don't respond to the door then visitors will walk to the kitchen window and give me a heck of a fright! All the bedrooms etc are upstairs. Here's a story though, one time Claire had spent the night with a friend. In the morning they wanted to check that it was OK for Claire to go out for the day with them. Well, I was fast asleep and as I don't have a door alarm pager system set up they had no way of waking me. So the ingenious trio climbed onto the garage roof and pushed a long window cleaning brush through the window. Imagine the fright I had with the bristly blue brush pushing at my hip!!

DEAF VISITORS

Deaf visitors always sit at the round table. From there they can see in the kitchen and through to most of the lounge. My small round table, meant for four, has often had up to ten people around it. This is still far easier than sitting in a square arrangement in the lounge. Another good thing about my house, smokers can go outside and stand by the dining room window and continue to converse with those of us still inside.

My Deaf visitors always converse with Claire, her receptive understanding of sign language is not bad and she knows that my Deaf visitors tend only to talk about Deaf politics which naturally bores her to tears. She will go and find some other activity to do. Claire has never said anything at the time, and it wasn't till quite recently that she began to articulate what it really is like for her when I have my Deaf visitors. In her words: 'You don't know how bloody loud they are, you hear squealing, squeaking, banging, stomping, knives, forks, plates, cups etc clattering, lots of laughing, it's like a pack of dogs barking on and on!!'. And amidst this noise, my darling Claire would fall asleep! I guess over the years she was sensitized to this noise through our constant contact with the Deaf community. She has been dragged around many a party, gather-

ing, political meeting etc over the years. Everyone in the community knows Claire, and often when she goes out with her friends she often sees people she knows through my contacts.

Most of the time there would be other children of Deaf adults present so Claire would happily play with them. As Claire grew, it was important to allow Claire to bring a friend with her for company. I was though, choosy about which of her friends I allowed her to bring, so most of the time it was Rosie. Rosie was not at all overawed by the Deaf people present. Rosie would come with us to the family camps and other events and the two girls would participate happily.

HEARING VISITORS

Moving on to hearing visitors, they tend to come to the lounge (not the dining room) and the degree of interaction has with them varies depending on who they are. When Claire visits my parents, she really enjoys being part of the conversations they have with other hearing people. Perhaps it is because their conversations have no connection at all with Deaf education, Deaf politics or Deaf events!

From time to time we have had boarders, usually these people are Deaf. Currently we have a hearing boarder and it has been a culture shock for both Claire and I. Claire has had to adjust to the fact that there is someone in the house who can hear! No doubt our boarder is also making some adjustments too with being in a Deaf household.

At the same time, I was aware that I couldn't expect Claire to always have to be part of my world. Sometimes it was important for me to move into her world. We were part of a small group of families who did a lot of activities together. These parents were very accepting of the need to develop different strategies to keep me included and we had many wonderful events with them over the years.

OTHERS WHO LIVE BETWEEN THE DEAF AND HEARING WORLDS

When I began my MA Study, I was studying with another Deaf teacher who for her project, focused on the characteristics of children of Deaf adults. She was interested in their experiences particularly within the school environment. The finding of her study was to say that children of Deaf adults do indeed have unique experiences and often their classroom teachers are unaware

of the features that also have an impact on their learning in school. Obviously, I took an interest in this study.

I also take an interest in hearing the comments made by others who either live in or work between both the Deaf and hearing community (i.e. other children of Deaf parents or, interpreters etc.). Where possible, I would also facilitate an interaction between Claire and these people. Adults were more likely to be able to articulate the characteristics of the situation and take the Mickey out of me for the things I do as a Deaf adult! It is important for Claire to have a moan or laugh with someone who can see how things are from their shared perspective. Many of these people would share funny stories from their experiences growing up, or make comparisons between life as a child of a Deaf parent then and now.

MODELS FOR THE COMMUNITY

If Claire was sick and the school needed to call me to collect her Claire would always have to explain to the school nurse that they couldn't telephone me. They would need to write a fax or as in more recent years, text me. Children of Deaf parents become natural educators. They are in a position in the community where they can model appropriate communication strategies and attitudes to those around them. Claire, and others like her, deserve more credit for their role in this area.

CHANGING ROLES

When Claire was around nine or ten years of age I noticed something changing when we visited shops and service centres. It took me a while to click what this change was. When Claire was younger, the shop assistant or person I was dealing with would communicate directly with me. Now that she was older, they began to communicate directly with her and expect her to relay the conversation to me. They would also expect my response to be relayed through her. At first, I would be miffed as I was effectively being demoted from my role as parent. However, in time I relaxed and if Claire looked like she was enjoying the interaction, then I would let her. This was not really a good thing to do as it meant she was put into a power holding position... but if it meant the transaction happened quickly and easily... so be it.

What was worse was when both Claire and I would be by-passed and my parents were cast in the role of spokesperson for us!

RESPONSIBILITIES

I must be honest and say that Claire still had to take on board a number of responsibilities that should have been my role. If I wanted to go out, Claire would ring people to find a babysitter from an early age (five years). Claire would handle telephone calls from other parents to organise social events and would have to act as the go-between for that parent and me. On occasions I would visit the other parent or they would come and visit me so we could talk and make arrangements face to face. Most of the time Claire made arrangements over the telephone with me standing right beside her. Obviously this was a very 'trusting' process, these kids could have been tricking me and made alternative arrangements! I knew which questions to ask so made absolutely sure their plans matched the information I was being given! Interestingly, it was Claire's friends who tried to abuse the situation. They were always surprised to be caught out! Nowadays, most of Claire's friends have my mobile number on their phones so they, and Claire, can contact me anytime.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

It is worth mentioning here that Claire has a hilarious sense of humour. It was not surprising when a computer programme suggesting future careers popped out with the suggestion that Claire could be a stand up comedian!! Obviously, many of her jokes are based on the English language, which means they are hard for me to understand. However, Claire has the knack of repeating her jokes to me carefully and slowly but using her eyes to check that I understand the joke so far, and then delivering the punch line with the same expressions as if she was telling the joke quickly but really delivering it slowly!

Claire says one really good thing about having a Deaf mum is that she can get really mad at me, yell in her bedroom, calm down then return to me. Of course, I had no idea that she was so mad!

EYE CONTACT

I mentioned using eyes as a communication tool. Eye contact for Deaf people is such a vital tool for sending and receiving messages. Claire and other children of Deaf parents on the whole are able to maintain excellent eye contact. I often wonder if this is why so many of these children are excellent communicators. If Claire goes away on a school camp or stays with another family for a full weekend she returns home very 'heary'! It takes a moment or two to remind her that I am here and that she needs to look directly at me. One time

when she was younger she would talk to me facing me but with her eyes looking past mine. I would ask if she was talking to the wall or to me! Her face is very expressive which is great. Sometimes however she talks like the hearing person she is and tends to beat around the bush. Often I have to ask just what point is it that she is trying to make and tell her to say it without taking the long way round!

A HEARING ME??

During Claire's upbringing she has had a lot of contact with my parents. She enjoys their company and they hers. When Claire was younger, my mother and I guess others who knew me as a child would often comment on how alike Claire and I were at the same age (except for the Deaf expressions and the frustrations!). Claire would be referred to as the 'hearing version of Rachel'. I was always intrigued by this comment. Was it a throw-away complimentary comment or did it mean something more?? My guess is that it is a combination of both.

CHILDREN OF DEAF PARENTS

Naturally, I look at the other hearing children of Deaf parents in the community. Many of them, including Claire, become very independent from a young age. They mature more quickly and are excellent communicators. They also tend to have a strong streak of 'justice and fairness' in their blood. If they see a situation where someone or a group is being marginalised or disadvantaged in some way these young people will present a perspective which seeks to equalise the situation and one which promotes clear communications. Some of these CODAs go on to forge a career within the Deaf Community i.e., New Zealand Sign Language Interpreters and social work related occupations. Others live independent lives. However, the link with deaf people and the community will always be there as it featured so strongly in their upbringing.