

SPECIAL REPORT

by Debbie Reynolds

Hard to hear

DEBBIE, who is hard of hearing, runs The School of Sign Language and is a qualified British Sign Language interpreter. That means Debbie works with deaf or hard of hearing people, translating what people say into sign language.

Debbie, from Blackburn in Lancashire, is a successful businesswoman, but her story could have been very different because she left school at 16 without any qualifications.

Hiding problems with hearing

"I'm very lucky to have my own business and to love what I do. However my life could have been very different as I struggled through school and left without any qualifications. As I didn't admit how bad my hearing was I didn't receive any support at school.

"I just wanted to fit in and thought if I told my classmates I couldn't really hear they'd think I was different and I'd be alienated and go through school without friends. So I just used to smile and pretend I had understood what had been said.

"The worst thing was when the teacher was talking facing the blackboard, obviously with her back to me, I couldn't hear a word she was saying so I would just sit and talk to the person next to me. In all my school reports the teachers put: 'Debra has the

ability to speak and listen at the same time.'"

"I even fooled doctors into believing I could hear as I used to cheat during audiology tests.

"My message to anyone in the same position, or to anyone who's being bullied at school, is that it does get better as you get older. I know that might seem impossible now, if you just want to have friends and be accepted, but it's true.

"As a child I faced many barriers because of my hearing impairment, but not as many as deaf children who sign as a first language. As an adult that has made me determined to help children and young adults who are going through what I went through at school."

Learning British Sign Language

"BSL is used by around 70,000 deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. I'm keen that all children should learn to sign as studies have shown that BSL promotes a child's intellectual, physical, emotional and social development.

"I think teaching BSL in schools would raise awareness of deafness and could work towards getting rid of any prejudices towards deaf or hard of hearing children.

"This would have made a big difference when I was at school. I would probably have told people how bad my hearing was, rather than waiting until I was 21 to do something about it.

"I have two daughters – Tayla who is eight and Nastaha who is seven. They both have perfect hearing but I taught them to sign when they were very young. I taught signing language classes at their school Saint Pauls, Feniscowles, in Blackburn.

"If you're thinking what to do as a career there are only 469 trained interpreters in the UK and, take it from me, it's a great career. Learning to sign and taking my British School of Sign Language exams and training as an interpreter changed my life."

Debbie's hearing daughters have learned to sign

Tayla said: "My mum started to teach me to sign when I was about six years old. She taught sign

language at my school and some of my friends learned too. Sometimes they'll ask me if what they're saying is right and, if it's not, I can tell them the right way to do it.

"When I'm older I'd like to be like my mum and be an interpreter. I've said I'm going to take over her job."

Natasha, 7, said: "It is fun to sign and I've given the alphabet signing cards to my friend Leah at school. She's going to learn the alphabet. We'll be able to sign to each other."



Debbie Reynolds



seen to be heard™

British Sign Language Alphabet



To find out more about British Sign Language classes go to www.rnid.org.uk or www.schoolofsignlanguage.com or www.britishsignlanguage.com

In the UK there are

- 8,945,000 deaf and hard of hearing people
- One in 1,000 children are deaf at three years old
- There are 20,000 children aged 0 to 15 years old who are moderately to profoundly deaf
- There are 12,000 children aged 0 to 15 years old who were born deaf

Figures from the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID)