

### DEAFvibe – a learning experience

Before I found out about DEAFvibe, I had little to no contact with anyone with a hearing loss. I was unaware of the struggles that deaf people face on a day to day basis and spending time with the organisation has really been an eye opening experience for me.

I remember my first day at DEAFvibe, I was clueless to how I was going to communicate with everyone there. As soon as I arrived I was greeted warmly and was made feel very comfortable. I had the opportunity to meet deaf people, hear about some of the problems they face every day and see how DEAFvibe provide support for them and their families.

Firstly, I learnt that deafness affects everyone completely differently. There are varying degrees of deafness and different types of deafness. Some people are born deaf, some become gradually or suddenly deaf, others are hard of hearing and some are deafblind. Everyone has different ways to manage their deafness, not just a 'one size fits all' method, as I previously thought. I also used to think that hearing aids could restore normal hearing, and I think that is what most people think, however, I have learnt that this is not the case.

I learnt that deafness can be isolating. Many of the people I talked to mentioned how their school years were the hardest as other children were not very accepting of their deafness. Other people would assume they were stupid simply because they could not hear. Deafness not only affected their hearing but it also affected them socially and psychologically.

At the first DEAFvibe café I went to, the group was addressing local MP Rob Ffello, to raise awareness of what needed to be changed in order for deaf people to have equal opportunity in the community. Things were brought up that I previously took for granted, for example the intercom at the local job centre was not suitable for deaf people. How are deaf people able to access these services if there are not appropriate facilities to allow them to enter a building?

Other things that most people take for granted, like using a telephone, hearing a door bell and hearing a fire alarm, are problems for deaf people on a day to day basis. Only with specialist equipment can these problems be overcome.

I learnt that reading and writing cannot be done by all deaf people and for some signing is their only method of communication; therefore it is not always appropriate for someone to ask a deaf person to write something down. Also signing is not universal across the country; there are different variations in different regions.

I was surprised to hear that even in medical settings, like at the GP or in a hospital, a lot of health professionals were ignorant to the needs of deaf people. One lady I met had been to the GP and was provided with hearing aids for her deafness. However she was not shown how to put them in, so she was going on for weeks without being able to use them. Only until she attended a DEAFvibe HUB was she properly shown how to put them in.

I feel that if I had not attended DEAFvibe, even throughout my 5 years of medical school, I would not have had the opportunity to really understand deaf people. I believe that there should be a strive towards providing the education for all students, so when we qualify, we have all the tools necessary to communicate with everyone equally.

From my experience at DEAFvibe I feel I could act appropriately as a health professional in the future. Things I think are important are:

- Looking at the person when talking
- Speaking clearly with normal lip patterns
- Not shouting at the person
- Finding a suitable place to talk, e.g. away from other noise
- Asking them if they need an interpreter, and organising one if necessary

I think DEAFvibe provide a great service and I know there are a lot of people who have benefited from it. DEAFvibe has a real community like atmosphere and is a great way for those with a hearing loss to find and support others who have hearing loss as well. I know that DEAFvibe aim to create a community in which all people are treated equally and have equal opportunities and I believe their efforts have really empowered deaf people around Staffordshire.