

# The Two of Us

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Alison and Rowan set up DEAFvibe to enable Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deafblind people feel positive about being Deaf – just like they feel positive about their own deafness. The reason why DEAF is in capital letters is not to shout it out for others to hear but to simply say Deafness equals Equality and Access equals Fairness. And that is all people with a hearing loss want – to be treated with equality and fairness in all aspects of their daily lives and to receive accessible services and communication.

## **Where did you meet and how old were you?**

**Alison:** I moved to Stafford from Sheffield in 1994, at the age of 28 and decided I wanted to make new friends through learning Sign Language as I didn't know anyone in Staffordshire. Our life paths had crossed a number of times through the Sign Singing Shows that Rowan used to co-ordinate throughout Staffordshire and Rowan lived in Stafford during that time unbeknown to me!

**Rowan:** I moved to Stafford from South Shropshire in 1993 at the age of 24. I started to teach Sign Language part-time at Stafford and Newcastle Colleges. I met Alison in 1996 when she became one of my students at Newcastle-under-Lyme College at the Level 2 British Sign Language class.

## **How long have you been deaf?**

**Alison:** I went deaf at the age of 4 through German Measles however there is deafness in my family – my mum, brother and sister are all deaf. Over the years my hearing has deteriorated and I am now profoundly deaf, wear 2 NHS digital hearing aids and rely on lipreading and speech to communicate. I also prefer to use British Sign Language to communicate with others.

**Rowan:** I was born deaf for reasons unknown to my parents. I am the only deaf person in my family. Like Alison, my main communication is lipreading and speech to communicate. I wear 1 NHS digital hearing aid in my useful ear and am recognised as being profoundly deaf. I am fluent in BSL having achieved my Level 4 NVQ qualification.

## **Why did you click as friends?**

**Alison:** It took us a while to click as friends initially as I had issues around my deafness. I remember Rowan telling me once that I was like a deaf person who was trying to be hearing! Our friendship was one that developed once Rowan helped me to overcome my barriers around my deafness and made me realise it was acceptable to be deaf.

**Rowan:** I recognised that Alison had issues about her deafness which I had already been through and accepted in my "deaf" journey through life through belonging to the Deaf community. I could see a lot of myself in Alison when I was younger and wanted to support her to make this journey less difficult. I felt it was important to share my own life experiences with another person and as a result of this our friendship developed.

### **How has your friendship helped one another?**

**Alison:** We have been there for each other through ups and downs in our personal lives and when we struggled to cope with daily barriers and frustrations as well as attitudes towards deafness in general. This has made us stronger as people and strengthened our friendship.

**Rowan:** We have the same empathy and connection linked to the daily battles with being deaf. More importantly, we are good friends not only because we are deaf, we have the same interests and goals in life in general.

### **Describe each other's personalities?**

**Alison:** Rowan is very supportive and dedicated. Rowan does not let things faze her and she is a calming influence. She is a good listener and loyal in all aspects of her relationships. She is focussed and determined to achieve her targets she sets herself. All in all, she's a very special friend.

**Rowan:** Alison is very passionate and hardworking. Her goals are to try to make people's lives better one way or another. She is very committed and always thinking of others around her. She is prepared to help people to fight battles and loves to see deaf people empowered. We have different personalities but compliment each other very well.

### **What was it like to give Rowan away at her wedding / for Alison to give you away?**

**Alison:** It was a spur of the moment thing! I found out the day after the wedding that Rowan had planned to walk down the aisle on her own but it was like she had a last minute panic so I offered to give her away! It was a very special moment and one to be treasured!

**Rowan:** Like Alison says it was an instant decision but it was the right one for me. I felt it was meant to happen considering all we'd been through as close friends.

### **What prompted you to set up DEAFvibe?**

**Alison:** We'd talked about developing a project together for a long time as there are very few services in Staffordshire for Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deafblind people. As well as being friends, we also work as Rehabilitation Officers for Deaf People in Staffordshire.

**Rowan:** Because of our own deafness and our job roles, we are very much aware of the gaps in services generally for people with a hearing loss. We wanted to set up a project that would enable people to feel proud, confident and to feel able to participate in the Community again along with their family, friends and carers.

### **Why did you choose the name DEAFvibe?**

**Alison:** We spent a long time trying to think of a suitable name for our project. We wanted to have the words DEAF but were very much aware that Hard of Hearing people do not see themselves as deaf as there is a stigma attached to deafness. So we decided to have an acronym that included the word DEAF.

**Rowan:** We chose the word “vibe” as this links with the feeling of sound through vibration, picking up on vibes through visual clues and the sharing of experiences of knowing what it is like to be deaf. We then asked Alison’s brother who is also deaf to design our logo!

### **Is it common for people to find it difficult to come to terms with deafness?**

**Alison:** Yes, very much so particularly those who lose their hearing over time through age or noise related deafness or those who lose it suddenly through accident or illness. Hearing loss can leave you with feelings of not belonging because you can no longer hear. It can also be very traumatic life-changing experience.

**Rowan:** Families and friends get frustrated very quickly particularly when you struggle to understand what they are saying or you have to keep asking them to repeat even when wearing your hearing aids. There is a natural assumption that hearing aids will restore normal hearing – sadly they don’t. DEAFvibe aims to work with people to develop their own coping and communication strategies.

### **Does society make much provision for deafness? What problems have you encountered?**

**Alison:** This is a tough one! There are worries over the future of British Sign Language and Lipreading classes as these are being cut. Without the access to the appropriate communication support, deaf and hard of hearing people will continue to experience communication breakdowns and the current Government cutbacks will certainly not help.

**Rowan:** Deafness is an invisible disability and the biggest problem is people’s attitudes or lack of understanding around the issues of deafness and how it can impact on someone’s daily life or their ability to communicate. People just don’t realise how hard or tiring it is to lipread on a daily basis. The speed of all aspects of technology is rapid that the needs of people with a sensory loss are not always acknowledged.

### **Has your friendship changed your lives?**

**Alison:** We certainly have come a long way since 1996 when we first met! I don’t know what my life would be like without Rowan in it!

**Rowan:** Alison has taught me the meaning of true friendship – I’ve never had anyone look out for me in the way she does.

### **What can other people learn from you?**

**Alison:** That it’s acceptable to be deaf! We meet people with a hearing loss on a daily basis and many say they wish they could be like us but what they don’t realise is that we too have had our struggles and difficulties to get where we are today.

**Rowan:** Being deaf is not the end of the world! Due to our own positive attitudes with our deafness, we are able to empathise with them as well as their families, friends and carers to offer support, advice and guidance in accepting their deafness.

## **What does the future hold?**

Alison: We were successful in securing funding from the Big Lottery Fund - Awards for All and from Robbie Williams - Give it Sum which enables us to run the DEAFvibe Café for 12 months. This funding will end in January 2012 and already we are working hard to secure further funding for the long-term future. It is important to us that DEAFvibe continues to be deaf-led to enable deaf people have a voice and be heard.

Rowan: We have every confidence that DEAFvibe will be a success and will meet the needs of Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deafblind people living in Staffordshire. We have a committed Board of Trustees who either have personal experience of deafness and/or work with deaf and hard of hearing people in the Community and our volunteer base is growing from strength to strength.

The DEAFvibe Café is held at Newcastle-under-Lyme Library on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of every month (Meeting Room 1 – downstairs). There is a small charge of £3.00 to cover some of the costs.

The morning Café (9.30am – 12 noon) is for British Sign Language users. British Sign Language interpreter available.

The afternoon Café (1.00pm – 3.00pm) is for those who are Hard of Hearing. Loop system and Electronic Notetaker are available to assist with communication.

Those who are Deafblind can attend either Café depending on their preferred communication method.

### **For more information contact DEAFvibe at:**

Post: DEAFvibe, PO Box 3511, Stoke-on-Trent ST6 9EF

Text or Tel: 07923 489800

Email: [info@deafvibe.co.uk](mailto:info@deafvibe.co.uk)

Website: [www.deafvibe.co.uk](http://www.deafvibe.co.uk)