

Falling On Deaf Ears – a story about campaigning.

[Low music plays]

RACHAEL 30S STANDS OUTSIDE A PRIMARY SCHOOL AND TALKS DIRECTLY TO THE CAMERA.

I'm here at Hillington Primary, a mainstream school where I grew up 40 years ago. From what's known about my deafness, which isn't a lot. I lost it when I was about three and was diagnosed in primary two.

Not a lot was known then about how to support deaf children in mainstream settings, and my Mum and Dad fought really hard to make sure that me and my sister had equal access to education and a teacher of the deaf. It took me many years of self acceptance and to see deafness in a positive light and even longer for it to become a part of my identity.

And that's because of the barriers that I experienced in work and in education. I'm really interested to find out what other generations of deaf people have experienced.

Are they similar?

And I'm interested to find out how have they self-advocated and campaigned for deaf rights.

[Music fades]

RACHAEL INTERVIEWS LILIAN LAWSON (60/70S) IN A CAFÉ ABOUT HER EXPERIENCES

LILIAN: I want to talk about how I became interested and involved in Deaf History I remember my first experience was at Mary Hare Grammar School Strangely, it was an Oral school system but I remember first term they taught us the subject of "Form Studies". The teacher would tell us about why the school was set up, the philosophy behind the establishment, and about Mary Hare herself. She was an oral teacher. A board of governors was also set up to help raise funds for the running of the school.

The residential dormitories had names on each of the doors. One was Alexander Graham Bell. We were told about him. He invented the telephone but he also taught his wife lipreading etc. There were lots of other names, one of which was Gallaudet.

He was American and he set up the University there. There were others too, but that's how we started to learn about Deaf, and some hearing, leaders of the world and history.

I learned that we have a Deaf history, and that's so important.

I think young Deaf people should have the opportunity to be taught that in school as part of their curriculum. Whether talking about history or Scottish history that's fine.. British history. Why not Deaf history? They should. There's plenty of books on the subject out there now. And I'm sure many Deaf people would be happy to go into schools to give talks.

I remember when I was working at SCoD (Scottish Council on Deafness). We had a school project called "Back to School" with a DVD, yes... and the DVD was taken out to schools where workshops were provided alongside clips from the DVD. They also took some equipment like old fashioned hearing aids with the wire and battery carried on the hip, yes.. (laughs) with the body worn aid. And we would bring these to the various schools. We were supposed to... under the funding conditions, deliver 6 workshops. But it ended up being 11 because there was just so much demand.

Yes...we travelled all over.

Oh their reactions... they were so interested, fascinated.

It really proved the need to incorporate Deaf history into the school curriculum in Scotland. I was most proud of when the BSL Bill was passed. Yes. I had been involved when I worked for SCoD and with others we campaigned because we wanted BSL to become recognised as an official language. We progressed the Bill, and it was presented to Parliament in 2015.

We were all there.

MSPs debated at length then voted and it was passed unanimously.

Oh...wow. It gave me goosebumps.

I looked round at the Deaf Applause, people were crying. So emotional. It really made me think, I was so proud, just a small cog in the wheel, but...I was there. Yes, I helped. I contributed to that whole mechanism and I really felt that I had achieved something. Looking back to Mary Brennan, we must thank Mary for her passion for BSL. If she had been there, she would have been so proud.

I'm sure she would be looking down saying

"Yes!..Yes!..It's finally become law, an Act!"

On campaigning...I've always...well, from the start education was my favourite topic. Way back when I first started in campaigning. I think because, when I was fortunate to go to a good school, Mary Hare Grammar School I had a good education. When I came back and saw peers of mine who had been in Donaldson's school from the same class.

We had both been equally intelligent...But for some reason I got through my exams and progressed in my education. That was possibly because I'd managed to lip read and pick things up. Also, I had then learned English and writing. Some hadn't progressed similarly in their comprehension so fell behind. At that time what had an impact on me was "Total Communication".

We have that now, but it was quite a new thing then. For teachers to be able to speak with a clear lip pattern and sign at the same time. People who were my class mates could have benefited from that style of learning and that use of language, It could have provided more opportunity for them to excel. That's why I've been so determined within education.

But one other thing with campaigning that's been frustrating is that in education, those that are policy makers are hearing people. And they never, I may be wrong, but they never ask Deaf people what they think. They might have asked but haven't taken heed. But it's interesting to ask, when they're developing training courses for Teachers for the Deaf if Deaf people were actually asked to advise on how teaching should happen?

No, they weren't.

Also, when Deaf.. No, ah.. when people become Teachers for the Deaf, in order to get onto the course they should be interviewed by Deaf people. Because I remember teachers whose lip pattern wasn't clear to read. They shouldn't be teaching unless, before training, they're assessed by Deaf people and if their lip pattern is problematic, then they're encouraged to use BSL. Deaf people aren't involved at all. Additionally, with policies and how to develop classes I think they more often listen to and focus on hearing people, for example hearing parents and Teachers for the Deaf. I think what's interesting is one of my good friends who is a Teacher for the Deaf feels that colleagues are frightened of them because they have been very successful. But they're a Teacher for the Deaf, the others should be benefiting from their learning. People should all share learning and help one another.

I spoke to a hearing Teacher for the Deaf and asked what they thought was going wrong here and they've said - it's partly fear of Deaf Teachers for the Deaf due to the difference in BSL proficiency by comparison, or a Deaf teacher being able to empathise more with the students. Yes. That's why I feel as strongly about education as when I started, there should be more Deaf people within the system. It's the same thing if you want to develop Mental Health Services for Deaf people.

You need to ask Deaf people who have used the services what they feel needs improved. Those questions need to be asked of and with Deaf people. To be involved in campaigning now you need to have knowledge of the subject, it has to be close to your heart. It's no use if it's something that's not a genuine interest.

There would be no point.

If you're campaigning for Oralism but you disagree with it, it wouldn't make sense. It has to be something you care about and that you really want to happen because you believe it will change lives. You have to make sure the subject is something you're completely engaged with. Also you must know the subject because people in power will ask you questions and it's no use if you're unable to answer. You must be ready with that information, like having a mental filing cabinet, to provide precise responses.

A good answer is when you say,
"I know specific evidence..."

or, "I have the statistics on that".

You will often be asked.

They'll say, "How many of...?"

So you have to be prepared and know how many people you're talking about. You have to know your subject very well. Next, assertiveness and confidence. You can't just let something pass. You need to be able to say, "Hold on, I want to tell you more about this." And you want to get your message across appropriately. You want to be able to stand your ground and make sure people pay attention to you. Another point is if you want to make sure your campaign is successful you need good interpreters.

You need a good voice over to be well represented with a high standard of English. I've had many experiences with this. I remember going to a work conference on one occasion. We were all taking turns between departments to present reports on what we'd been doing. Prior to my presentation the other presenters had been well received, the audience had asked questions and then applauded.

But I didn't receive the same response and there were no questions. I was puzzled. When I sat back down a Deaf person who hears quite well said the interpreter didn't match my delivery and sounded child like. It was a very unrefined interpretation with basic language and almost 'baby like' phrasing. It should not have been like that, it should have been a much higher standard of English being applied. It's important to me to ensure if I'm going to a key meeting and campaigning to have a good interpreter. Especially if I'm going on TV. I must have someone who is going to provide a good voice over for me and that the standard of their spoken English matches that of my BSL. It must be well matched. So that's important, engage good interpreters. And then there's training. I've been trained. I know in my heart I'm a campaigner, but training is so useful.

When I worked for the BDA, they had someone come along from a local television company. They set up a mock studio with 2 cameras and had someone ask questions of me on camera.

That was great.

I learned so much about how to respond and it was very useful. I think that people, young Deaf people should go through that type of training. Not just for television work but also for newspaper interviews or... radio. It might seem odd, but it happens. People listen to radio. Training is important on those elements.

It's really important, so that you have the tools.

[Bright piano music plays]

WE MOVE AWAY FROM THE INTERVIEW. RACHAEL STANDS OUTSIDE THE PRIMARY SCHOOL AND TALKS DIRECTLY TO THE CAMERA,

Pride and progress in the deaf community come in those moments when our lived experience is validated and the barriers that we experience are acted upon in a meaningful way. And deaf people are seen as holders of valuable capital. If we can put in place what Lilian said like having a knowledge of the subject matter and a confidence to challenge decision makers, then we can raise assertive confident deaf people. How does being around other deaf people help us grow our sense of self?

[Music fades]

RACHEL INTERVIEW WREN (20S) IN THEIR HOUSE

WREN = W

RACHAEL = R

W: When I was a kid, it was hard to have such a strong deaf identity because I went to a mainstream school. The first time I'd ever met another deaf person, that was actually a young person, was when I was in primary six because it was a little girl and think her name was Amy maybe, and she was in nursery and she had two hearing aids.

And then when I was in primary seven, they asked if I wanted to do the buddy system and they were like, we would really like to pair you up with Amy? Because it would be good for her to see someone deaf. And I was like, absolutely happy to do that.

But it's really hard to form a strong deaf identity when...no one around you ever gets it.

And when...for all the good my mum's done, she says it herself, she just does not understand what it is like to be deaf. So then I got to high school and I met some people and I was like, oh, cos I went to Dalziel. Deaf resource base. There was about 40 of us, spread throughout 6 years and it was really weird.

And then I kind of went all in, so severely in, I was like I am so deaf, ahh. Because everyone around me was like that, I remember meeting somebody and he was saying to me that, it was insane because it was within the deaf community.

And he said, 'you're not a real deaf person' because you wear hearing aids.

And I was like, does that, does that make me hearing now.

How did that make you feel?

Angry.

I was only 14, so I was only really getting into this deaf community. And then all of a sudden you're not really deaf, you're not a real deaf person.

You can't sign. And it felt very like I was being punished. But I couldn't change that because when I got diagnosed and it took like three and a half year for me to get diagnosed, 36 hearing tests.

Wow.

The 36th was the one that they finally got me on. You know, I was... I was tricking them. So I was having fun and that was hard for my mum mainly. That was really hard for my mum. For me it was hard, but I don't remember it.

But it's like... they're saying to my mum, don't let her learn sign language because she'll be stupid. She'll never be smart. She has to talk. She has to talk, she has to talk. Got to do this, got to do that, got to do that. And my mum didn't know better. She said it herself, she did not know better, because she couldn't.

So it felt like a slap in the face when I got told you're not really deaf, because. Because I can't sign isn't my fault. It's not my Mum's fault. It's the fault of a health care system that is so determined to fix deaf people. We have this common solidarity of being deaf and a shared understanding that the outside world is a bit not great sometimes with us.

We are not great with ourselves so it's fine.

Yeah, totally.

R: And do you know what I think it is as well, it's learning from other deaf people. I have learned from you, I have learned from Jess I have learned from Raysa, I have learned from Lilian. The lady I was telling you about. Clare, you know Clare in the office.

W:Yeah!

R: She taught me deaf culture. She taught me about me.

W: Yeah. And it's almost like that helps us a wee bit. In our own identity. Yeah, it's like when I do a lot of things now. So doing the Youth Commission on Mental Health Services, that was obviously 2017 - 2019, I want to say. And every time people would start saying stuff and I would be listening and listening. I would be like, right, OK.

And then they would come up with something, they would be like this would be a great idea! And I'd be like, that is inaccessible. Do you know it was the most random thing, people would go...I never even thought of that. It's like people do not realise that, see when the sign on the train breaks that tells you what stop you are at.

That is inaccessible, because you might be able to hear it but I can't.

It was my Dad dying, 2019 was one of the worst years of my life.

My Dad died... and I just fell into this spiral with my mental health. I actually did have a healthy, somewhat coping technique which was going to the gym 3 times a week. I worked out, I worked all my upset and anger out at the gym, but it also did not last that long.

So, yeah, I ended up going to the doctor and I was like, I need help.

And he was like, okay.

So I took, you will know this yourself, I have worked with the Youth Commission on Mental Health services. Where we produced the report, it was like 103 recommendations, 99 accepted by the government. So I done that. And I remember one of the things that we all learned, and we were also telling other people this. If you ever have to go to the doctor about your mental health the best thing you can do is write a letter. Write a letter and you know exactly what you are going to say. Or you do not have to say it you can just give it to the doctor and say, 'here you go'.

This is what I am feeling, so I did that. It was 2 pages back to back. Of all these problems. I even organised it into headings, how does this affect me. Why don't I like it. 'Heading one'.

R: Like an essay.

W: Uhuh, it was.

W: Genuinely it was like 4 pages, and I was like, here you go. And he was like, 'Ohhhh'. And he went, 'I did not think things were this bad for you.' And in my head I was like, you would have noticed if you paid more attention.

Do you know, the barriers could have been a lot worse - and this is one thing I will say about my mum - the barriers could have been a lot worse if it was not for her. You know I remember, there was a very vivid memory that came back quite recently. I was in primary four and the teachers used to wear the radio aid and it was a substitute teacher because our teacher wasn't well, substitute teacher came in and we were learning cursive writing.

And this teacher decided that she wasn't happy with the class, so she shouted at everyone. But she did not know how to work the radio aid. And she didn't have a very good understanding of it, which fair enough. But she chose not to turn the radio aid off.

And it's sitting right at her neck, Going right into my ear, and I was sobbing my wee eyes out.

She started saying I was acting like a little child, I was being a cry baby and all this. And I was just sitting there covering my ears, like, and I couldn't even verbalise it. And I can't remember who it was, but there was another student who came out of her own chair, shouted at the teacher for me, this, like, 7 or 8 year old kid. You're hurting her ears, stop it. Came round and hugged me, and was like turn your hearing aids off, turn them off. And I was just like, oh, my ears they hurt.

And I just remember going home that night, after school and I said to my mum,

teacher wasn't very nice to me. It was a substitute teacher, saying all this. The minute I said, she shouted at me, did not turn the radio aid off and called me a cry baby, my mum was hugging me, she was like, don't you worry.

Picked up the phone and the headteacher's name was Roddy.

'Hi, Roddy. It's Holly's mum.'

'I've just been...', and she just basically said what happened.

Then my headteacher just went, don't worry that will never happen again. Next day I went in, different substitute teacher who had obviously been told, if you're going to shout, turn that off. I am very lucky that my mum kind of, almost put me on her back and smashed, Hulk smashed, all those barriers for me.

But it was things like...I can't hear well enough and people are just deliberately taking the mick out of me for it. Horrible!

R: In school did you have a lot of that?

W:I had no friends. I had no friends, because nobody wanted to be friends with me. I can think back and I can think and I can say I got to play with these people at whatever time and whatever. But, outside of school. Nothing. Did you struggle to hear in school? Aye, sometimes. I had all the relevant equipment that I needed. Which that was great, like bare minimum, absolute bare minimum, but it was still so hard. Because there was not enough deaf awareness. I had an amazing teacher of the deaf though.

W: She was one of those peripatetic teachers.

R: Yeah.

W: Is that how you say it?

R: Peripatetic. Aye, aye, yeah.

Peri, yeah,

W:I do not know if I am saying that right?

R: Aye it is, Peri teacher yeah.

W: So she came in about three times a week and she was just amazing. Do you remember her name? Yeah, so her name was Mrs Duncan.

R: Mrs Duncan

W: Yeah.

I cannae mind her first name but I had another teacher. Primary 1, to... half way through primary 4. Then primary 4 - 7 with Mrs Duncan. First teacher was Miss Bush

W: And I keep in touch with her now.

R: Do you?

W: Her name is Helen Bush.

R: Helen Bush.

W: She, oh, phenomenal woman.

R: Amazing.

W: I've been meaning
to go down and see her.

R: Where does she live?

W: She lives down outside Lancaster.

R: Oh, she is English?

W: Yes, she is. She's got 2 cats, no, she had 2 cats when I knew her. She had a cat called Misty. I cannae mind the other's name, but aye.

R: What did she give you? What support did she give you,
that you never received from other teachers?

W: She gave me, it was somebody that just understood, that when you teach people things, not everyone can understand one way of teaching, but deaf people are also added on with a little bit of sometimes language is complex, sometimes whatever can be a bit challenging, and she just gave me someone that I could talk to. Mrs Duncan was the exact same, both teachers were they both gave me someone who would listen and I could cry about like, they said this, they are saying this about my hearing aids. They are saying this about my voice. They're saying this about the way I pronounce whatever. And both of them would just be sitting there. And I remember Mrs Duncan used to give me hugs a lot and being like, you are all good.

[gentle piano music plays]

RACHEL STAND OUTSIDE AND SPEAKS DIRECTLY TO THE CAMERA

Mainstreaming policy assumes that the mainstream itself is already accessible. And I've seen so many parallels between Lilian and Wren's experiences. But what about deaf children today? What's their experiences been like?

[Music fades]

IN KARA'S HOUSE SHE HOLDS A CLAPPER BOARD IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA. SHE CLAPS THE BOARD.

CAMERAMAN: Kara intro, take 1. Excellent!

RACHEAL INTERVIEWS KARA AT A TABLE

I am Kara and I am 16 years old and I am profoundly deaf, both ears. I have got cochlear implants and they are advanced bionics ones. I like doing deaf awareness on my videos and social media too.

R: So your journey making things more accessible. When did it start?

K: How I started is, I was young at the time. So in 2018 in June time, I started my first video, why I am deaf? And that's what made me start to realise, I want to do a video. 'Why I am deaf!' So when I posted on my Youtube everyone went, Wow, this is amazing. And a lot of people started seeing it, getting so much nice comments. And that's when I realised, I want to do more deaf awareness. So that's how it started. And I'm here now doing loads of deaf awareness, videos on my social media now.

The one I would say for me the successful one was I did a deaf awareness week video for deaf awareness week in 2020. And, that was when there was first lockdown and that is when I did a video with other young people and they tell why they are proud to be deaf. That's when a lot of people were commenting and parents been commenting about their young children. Proud to be deaf and that is when everyone like loved it. And it was on the news as well.

So I would say that one. And then Nicola Sturgeon, video too. And the Scottish Government to be paid masks, clear masks for the school. Because there should be clear masks. And that's when I went on news. Well, Nicola Sturgeon never said anything. She's just never said anything. But the Scottish Government got back to me with this big letter. But it never really mentioned anything about masks at all just about, cool with us and all of that, it never mentioned anything.

R: So how did that make you feel?

K: It made me feel disappointed. There should be support there. They should be having clear masks. Especially for all the schools. It made me feel a bit disappointed because...deaf people should be involved and learning and all that. Not just feeling isolated and stuck, 'Oh no, I don't know' but I would say it's a disappointing thing. I just remember that day I felt like, wow, I can't believe that Nicola Sturgeon just and the Scottish Government, I just expected that there should be clear mask paid out at all the schools. Well the challenge is the support in schools.

There should be more teachers of the deaf in the schools. So there could be one in every class. So, like helping or if...like for example the teachers wearing a mask doing that right

now. I think there should be a teacher of the deaf every class. So I would say more teachers of the deaf in schools.

R: What was your experience when you were younger in school?

R: What was it like listening in class?

K: I would say, well without the teacher of the deaf it can be hard for me. Just sitting there like, don't know what I am doing. I feel like, I need someone with me. Like, I don't know what I'm doing, but when there is a teacher of the deaf in class, I feel like safe, I feel safe when I have got someone with me. Then I know what I am doing. Imagine you had, you know, a magic wand. What would you use it to fix. My magic wand, would be I would just stop the Covid going on. That's what I would like, stop the Covid so we do not need to wear masks in schools or anywhere, so you feel more like...more so I don't feel like nervous and that like nervous and school days are like, oh no.

R: I do not know about you but I felt for the first time in my life, that I was disabled. When this started. That's how I felt with the mask.

K: So I would like the Covid to stop and then...people do not need to wear masks.

R: How did you help yourself when you felt isolated like that? How I helped myself. I need to think, I am proud of being deaf and I need to show out there...like me being confident to say, is it OK if you can put your mask down. Can you wear like a clear mask? So I just, what I did was being confident. Know what I am saying everyday, being like here we go. And sometimes when I go out shopping I wear sun flower lanyards saying I got hearing loss and then I just show the staff, like I am deaf. With the mask down so I know what you are saying, I lip read.

R: Do you have a deaf identity Kara?

K: Yeah, I would say my deaf identity...have I said that right? I would say my deaf identity is... Me, Cochlear Kaz, my social media - Cochlear Kaz. I would say I am a funny person, making funny videos, on reels, on social media and deaf awareness person. Like to support people, help people out there.

R: So, tell me inside your campaigner's tool box, what is in there?

K: Oh, my tool box, I would say is, being funny, being funny because that is in a lot of my videos. I would say that one, being funny, that is the most, yeah.

R: I love it, that is a brilliant tool. I was wondering what advice do you have for other deaf campaigners?

K: The advice I would give them all is be proud of who you are. Be proud of yourself. Just be yourself as well. Yeah, that's what I would give to people out there.

R: What issues are deaf children and young people experiencing still today?

K: I would say...subtitles. I think there should be subtitles everywhere. Especially cinema, I would say subtitles, the most big thing. And BSL in schools too.

WE SEE KARA AND RACHAEL ON A MOBILE PHONE SCREEN. KARA IS DOING A VIDEO FOR HER CHANNEL

K: So guys we just did the film and I have been interviewed by Rachael. And we are going to tell you what it is going to be. What the film is about?

R: So the film is for an organisation called Solar Bear and I am making a film about deaf children and young people and campaigners.

[low background music]

IN A PARK RACHEL SPEAKS DIRECTLY TO THE CAMERA

There's so many similarities between Lilian, Wren, Kara and myself - that's four generations of deaf people still fighting for equal access in education, in healthcare and in work. Deaf culture is so rich. And the thing running through all of this is how linked our deaf identities are with us as self advocators and as campaigners. When people are experiencing barriers, they can find respite by channelling them into positive things. And how deaf is done is about self-advocacy. And the thing I've learned, and it's quite funny, is that when our barriers have fallen on hearing ears, they're wilfully ignored.

But when they fall on our deaf ears, at least something gets done.

[powerful music plays]

Credits

[Music fades]