

## Worlds apart – hearing in a deaf society

A CONVERSATION with ROSEMARY LIPMAN, interpreter for the deaf

By Sharyn Marchant

09/11/2008

For most of her childhood, Rosemary Lipman felt torn between the deaf community and the hearing. A 'CODA (child of deaf adults)' with perfect hearing, she understood both worlds but struggled to find her place.

"The issues that a CODA has will always be the same, because we are different," says Rosemary, an interpreter and pastoral care worker at the Ephpheta Centre, the Sydney agency for the deaf.

"We are not deaf, although we are brought up in a deaf house; we hear, but we are not brought up in a hearing house, and it's often hard to find where we fit in."

Rosemary is the eldest daughter of a partially deaf father and a profoundly deaf mother, Robert and Mary Profilio, who never thought they would be able to have children.

"Bob and I never thought about our disability having any impact on us as parents," Mary says. "We felt pretty normal just like everyone else only we cannot hear."

"To tell the truth I loved being pregnant and looked forward to the birth of each child."

With four siblings – Paul, Michelle, Caroline and Andrew – and a 13-year gap to the youngest, Rosemary was given a lot of responsibility at a young age, from interpreting at Mass for her parents to helping her siblings communicate with their parents.

"I remember my youngest brother, Andrew, as a little boy and trying to explain to him that Mum can't hear. That was hard, because he could call any one of us and we would come, but if he called Mum she wouldn't come."

"He didn't believe that she was deaf, he just thought she was ignoring him. It took a lot of time to explain it to him, because he would call and call and she wouldn't answer."

These responsibilities, combined with being bullied at school and a desire to protect her parents, were often a burden on Rosemary as a child.

"There were times that I would get frustrated and ask why it was always me, especially making phone calls for Mum, because there were five of us and they could talk too."

And she was angered by the 'deaf and dumb' label given to her parents by her classmates.

"It came about because a lot of deaf people didn't speak and dumb means mute. But to kids, dumb means stupid so I got teased by kids saying Mum and Dad were stupid, which was really hurtful."

At the height of the bullying, Rosemary sought refuge in what she describes as the "wrong crowd".

"The 'good' group of people teased us, and all the troublemakers didn't, so the troublemakers were who we formed friendships with," she says.

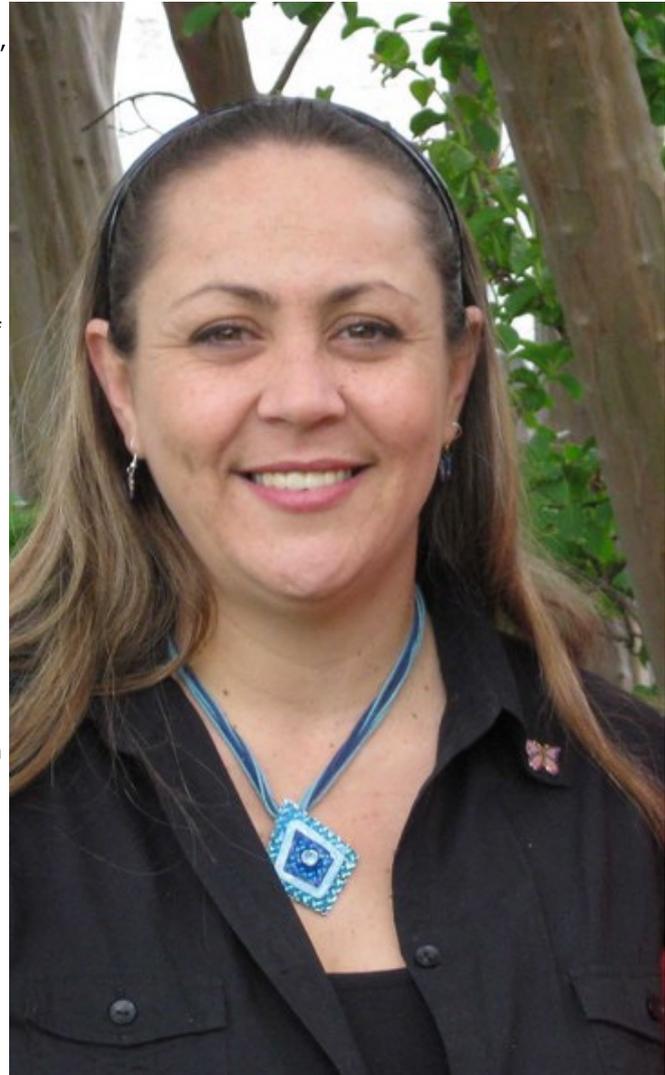
"They influenced my brother Paul and me to run away and leave all our problems behind. We thought we would be happy but we weren't; we were very confused and just trying to find out identity."

"It was hard to say to my parents, 'I'm not happy because you're deaf, I hate you both for being deaf'; I said that a few times."

"I used to take all my anger and write it down and put it in Mum's pillow, because it was just too hard to say it. I hated that Mum and Dad were deaf; I hated it, because I couldn't fit in anywhere."

As Rosemary got older, she felt that the responsibility she had shouldered for much of her life gave her independence.

"Because I had a lot of responsibility, I thought I could do what I wanted, so that got me into a lot of trouble."



STRUGGLE: Rosemary was torn between two different worlds as a child.

"When everyone was in bed I would sneak out because Mum and Dad couldn't hear me, so I would sneak out of the house and catch up with friends."

Growing up in a signing house also meant Rosemary wasn't academically confident, because Auslan (Australian Sign Language) and English are structured differently.

"With English being my second language, it was difficult," she says.

After finishing school, she found herself drawn to working with the deaf community.

"Growing up I always wanted to be a teacher for the deaf. I had the benefit of hearing and the ability to sign, and I would have loved to teach deaf kids to become independent; that was a goal I had.

"I was working as a teacher's aide in a primary school when someone first suggested I become an interpreter.

"I always did interpret for Mum but it was never labelled as interpreting, and the profession was only new, there were only a few interpreters around."

Upon entering the world of professional interpreting Rosemary found herself learning about boundaries and ethical concerns for the first time.

"Becoming an interpreter and learning the ethics and the boundaries I needed to have was difficult.

"When I started working professionally as an interpreter, many of the people I interpreted for were friends of Mum, and they would always tell me to say 'hello' to Mum. But the jobs are confidential and I really couldn't go home and say that I saw so-and-so today because that was against our ethics.

"It is really difficult to maintain that professionalism while still belonging."

Called on to interpret anything from police situations to counselling sessions, Rosemary also had to learn to distance herself from the job.

"I did a couple of jobs with the police and that is always difficult. Part of the difficulty is that I have a lot of empathy; I know that a lot of deaf people are discriminated against and misunderstood, and I see things from their point of view.

"It is difficult to see them socially and I had to teach myself to turn it off, because if you keep it and build up that bank of interpreting difficult situations, it weighs very heavy. "I started to share my experiences with other interpreters when I started to learn more about debriefing, and I discovered that others had similar experiences."

In 2003 Rosemary's father died suddenly, leaving a void in both the Profilio family and the Sydney deaf community.

"He was an earth angel, just one of those people that could do anything, accept anyone, regardless of background," she says.

"He always reminded us that there were other people worse off, and we were very lucky because we had each other.

"He taught us so much and it was only after he died that you start to realise how he accepted situations that most of us would complain about.

"We were never a wealthy family but there was never a time when we wanted for something; they would always find a way to give us what we needed."

While the whole family agrees that he was taken too soon, Rosemary regrets that he never got to meet his grandson.

"Dad passed away in January 2003, and Jarrad was born in November the following year, so they missed each other by nearly two years," she says.

She also misses her father's wisdom and support in caring for Jarrad who suffers from cerebral palsy after a difficult delivery.

"My son has cerebral palsy, so the biggest challenge for me is teaching him to sign with limited movement in his hands.

"That was the biggest hit to me. I was so excited, "I was ready to teach my baby to sign, but he has severe quadriplegia, and his muscle tone is quite tense."

She is grateful for the support of her husband, Andrew, and his willingness to embrace Auslan and her involvement with the deaf community.

"My husband signs, he gets along really well with Mum," Rosemary says. "That was one of the important things for me in picking a husband; they had to be open to communicating.

"I taught him a little bit but a lot of it he has picked up just being around, coming to social events with me."

Rosemary started working at the Ephpheta Centre in March, and says it was like coming home.

"When the opportunity came to work here I was very excited, because the Ephpheta Centre has been a second home for our family growing up," she says.

"The opportunity to be a part of the centre and carry on those traditions is very exciting."

She is also eager to see a full-time signing priest for deaf Catholics in Sydney – "a priest who can interact and guide deaf people so we can all just enjoy the Mass without having the responsibility of working".

"Our Catholic deaf community has really strong faith, but we need to encourage it more," she says.

Rosemary now visits schools to increase deaf awareness and move past the years of bullying and intolerance she suffered.

"There is a lot less injustice now," she says.

"I find that when we do this awareness training in schools so many people are interested and it's something that they have always wanted to know about but have never had the opportunity."

Copyright © 2008. Catholic Weekly - Sydney