

Inside Ouch 17th March 2017
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Presented by Emma Tracey, Beth Rose and Damon Rose

EMMA You're listening to Inside Ouch and this one's all about sign language, which is going to be interesting as we're all in different parts of the UK and none of us can see each other. I'm Emma Tracey and I'm in Edinburgh, then we've got Beth Rose and Damon Rose in London. Hello.

BETH Hello.

DAMON Hello.

EMMA And then we've got William Mager in Bristol. Hi William.

WILLIAM Hi, hello there. Good morning.

EMMA But that's not even William's voice because William's deaf and he's speaking through an interpreter, Joe Taylor. And I never know whether to say hello to the interpreters, I never know what to do there. Do I? Do I say hello to them?

WILLIAM Yes of course you can say hello to the interpreter.

EMMA Hi Joe.

JOE Hi, hello.

DAMON That's weird, it sounds just like William.

EMMA It does, doesn't it? So William works at the BBC. What's your job William?

WILLIAM I work as a series producer for See Hear. It's a long running BBC programme for deaf people presented in sign language. It started 36 years ago and when it started off it was presented in a mixture of speech and sign language, but the way the programme has been presented over time has changed throughout the years, so it's presented mainly in sign language but our contributors range from those who speak and also deaf people who use sign language. So a whole range of people on the spectrum of deafness.

EMMA And you got in touch with us William when one of the biggest viral videos of the week came along and it was all about kids learning sign in school.

WILLIAM That's right, it's a very hot topic at the moment.

EMMA And that was something that you told us was close to your heart. Tell us why that is?

WILLIAM My experience growing up, I had no exposure to sign language whatsoever, or to other deaf children. So I only acquired sign language when I was in my 20s, but now looking back I think, or what I feel very much so, that at least some sign language or any sign language back then would have made life much easier for both me and the

hearing children that I was in school with. Up until my 20s I felt quite comfortable using lip reading and speech or whatever methods of communication, I realised very much though that when I learnt sign language it was actually much easier in many ways to use sign language to speak to somebody and also for comprehension. So sometimes when I use my own voice I always feel a little bit like I'm not expressing myself as well as I possibly could. Does that make any sense at all?

EMMA Yeah it does.

WILLIAM I mean, I swing both ways, let me just say it like that in terms of communication. Sometimes I'll happily chat to people and use my voice and lip read hearing people but then other times when I'm talking to deaf colleagues perhaps I'll use sign language.

EMMA Yeah. Beth and Damon, do you know sign language at all? I don't know any sign language at all.

BETH No. At school, probably about year ten or 11, round GCSE years, we did get taught the alphabet and a few really, really basic symbols, but I think that was just as an aside really and I did remember it for a little while but actually I kind of didn't really have cause to use it and I don't think any of my friends learnt it or did that module either. But it was quite fun, it felt quite empowering and exciting to be able to have this extra language and I do actually think it would actually be very useful because in London some of my colleagues are deaf and use sign language and it would be nice to actually just kind of chat to them much more easily.

- EMMA Yeah, and interpreters are wonderful - Joe, yeah, they're wonderful - but it would be nice, we have Paul in our office and sometimes it would be just great to chat to Paul in his language. It's not frustrating because he has a fantastic interpreter but there is still someone in between.
- WILLIAM Yeah, absolutely. We've organised a regular sign language class for hearing staff here at BBC Bristol, so we have about 20 or 30 people involved every week. And it's really lovely because now just sometimes you bump into random people around the building and they say hi, they sign hi, good morning, and you're able to have a brief conversation in sign language. And additionally they've started to come up with their own ideas for their programmes to include deaf people and include sign language. And I think kind of if you think about it starting small it can spread and have that kind of ripple effect.
- DAMON That's what they say isn't it, get some disabled staff in or get some deaf staff in and gradually ideas and knowledge and understanding spread. That's the word isn't it?
- WILLIAM Yeah, absolutely and I think one of the reasons I like using sign language is because I really like the idea of sign language being seen, so I don't know, if I walk around the BBC and I'm using my voice all the time and speaking, pretending not to be deaf then what's the point? What does that achieve? But if I'm going around using a sign language interpreter, being seen to use sign language, other people will see that and I think they'll be less frightened and less scared of interacting with deaf people and seeing sign language being used.
- DAMON So as you were saying, communication happens in lots of different ways with deaf people and it depends who they're with etc. Now, I remember a time back in the early days of

the internet I was a bit of an early adopter William, so we're talking about 1994, I was able to use the internet at home. And I used to go on loads of different chat forums and things like that, and I was just kind of getting into sort of deaf and disability stuff and finding it really interesting and I thought to myself, and you might find the rub here, I thought to myself, hey this will be great, because as a blind person, me, I will be able to speak to a deaf person for the first time properly, you know, using news group forums and things. But I soon discovered that this wasn't quite the case, because at the time I didn't appreciate the fact that English is not deaf people's first language necessarily and so using text and chat like that wasn't going to introduce me and help me make friends with deaf people necessarily.

WILLIAM

Yeah, that's a really interesting point because I spoke about the spectrum of deafness earlier, so on the one hand of the spectrum we've got what we might call the big D, deaf people, those who use sign language as their first and primary language, they're comfortable using written English but maybe not necessarily 100% comfortable because maybe that could be a barrier for them. Which is where we see on Facebook now, we see lots of groups like Deaf Land UK whereby users upload videos of themselves, short videos, presenting messages, short comedy videos, and Facebook now allows for so much video content that it's really, really deaf friendly.

DAMON

It's a funny thing, I mentioned earlier that I was blind and speaking with deaf people I find, Emma was mentioning it earlier, there's a little bit of an extra distance because I don't even necessarily know that the deaf person is standing there, I can't see the expressions on their face, I can't see the passion behind their signing etc, so all I can hear is the sign language interpreter talking to me or I can see words on a page. And it makes it feel a little bit difficult to actually start, for me, and probably for you as well William, to start a relationship with people who've got very different sensory problems. Because I don't know,

William, I think you're a bit of a top bloke really. I get these emails and things from you and I think do you know, I could get on really well with him, but I think, you know, should I ask him out for a beer or something like that? I mean how on earth would we deal with that?

WILLIAM ((laughs)) It's really interesting that you've brought that up because I've met both of you in person, I've met Damon and I've met you, Emma, and I think obviously you're both lovely people as well and I've always thought about inviting you both out for a drink and having a chat but I think for me the problem is eye contact. For me, for a deaf person, that's literally the most important thing. If I'm looking at someone when I'm talking and they look away I stop talking immediately because I assume that they're not listening. My mum often looks away when I'm talking to her because she's looking for something or she's doing something and I'll just stop talking. And she says, "carry on talking, I'm still listening to you," but when I meet you both generally you might be looking off into the middle distance somewhere and not looking at anything in particular so I never know quite if you're listening to me.

DAMON That's what blind people do sometimes.

BETH Yeah.

DAMON William, are you saying you can't go out for a beer with me?

WILLIAM I would love to go out for a beer with you, I would. And I think for me what I worry about is whether you'll understand me in terms of whether you'll understand my speech or not? The reason I say that is when I speak with hearing people they watch me and I think when I'm

watching them I'm trying to gauge whether they're actually following what I'm saying or not. The other issue with a blind person is that I can't think of any back up options so I can't write things down if you don't understand my speech, maybe with you I could use speech to text on your mobile telephone.

DAMON Right. And you can't bring your sign language interpreter along, because Access to Work pays for that?

WILLIAM Well, I think it depends whether they'd want to have a drink as well or not.

EMMA Yes, all this politics, all this politics.

DAMON It feels too awkward to ask Joe directly that question now doesn't it?

EMMA I've never heard your speaking voice William. Before you got in touch with us about the viral video I'd never heard you speak and I didn't even know that that was something that you do regularly.

WILLIAM Yeah, definitely. I speak really well, I can speak. My mum spent a lot of time when I was growing up teaching me physically how to speak and I think for a lot of people after they've spent a bit of time with me they can understand me, no problem at all. My son is hearing and he seems to be able to understand me completely, fine, no problems but I think it's a confidence issue with me.

EMMA Yeah, so I have a massive urge to ask you to speak. I actually really, really, really want to hear you speaking.

WILLIAM Would you like me to say hello?

EMMA Yes please.

WILLIAM Yes, sure. One moment, I'm just going to have a sip of water. Okay, grabbing the mic. Hello Emma and Damon, this is Billy here.

EMMA You see, I've actually never heard your voice and that's really nice.

DAMON It's the real Billy.

EMMA It's the real Billy Mager, yeah, exactly. And that's the voice that we would hear if we went out for a beer with you but then, you see it's complicated because you do speak whereas a lot of the deaf people we know and deaf people we might potentially like to be friends with don't.

WILLIAM Yeah definitely, and I think every person is different, so I don't know what other deaf people think about using interpreters or technologies to use speech to text or something like that. I mean do any of you guys use handheld communication?

BETH I know when I've been out to the pub actually with one of our colleagues who's deaf he is really into using WhatsApp, so everyone in the pub will be on this WhatsApp group which gets a bit confusing because you can imagine the huge number of conversations that are going on, but actually that's a really good way of doing it and you can kind of dip in and out as you sort of move around the room and talk to different people as well. So that was my main experience or just back to pen and paper, sometimes he reverts to that and goes old school.

WILLIAM When I go to the pub and I see - I'm using 'normal' in inverted commas - hearing people, sat opposite each other looking down at their phones and you think it wouldn't look totally out of place.

BETH No, it looks really normal because as you say, everyone is always on their phone anyway.

WILLIAM But I think it would be a shame if we all had to go to the pub and look at our phones all the time because I think deaf people prefer face to face communication wherever possible. The only thing I could try and do with you is to be more perhaps tactile because sometimes, you know, when I've met you before I feel like that is that gap, there's that physical distance between us, and I'm not sure how we could kind of bridge that gap, whether I should perhaps touch you or let you know that I'm about to speak or maybe let you know where I am physically?

DAMON I think so. I've found myself, and sorry, we're veering off talking about deaf people a little bit, but I've found myself occasionally, when I don't feel that I've got eye contact with somebody, obviously I will never have eye contact with anybody, but I've found myself subconsciously recently reaching out and just sort of holding their hand. I

know it sounds a bit weird.

BETH Really?

DAMON No, I don't think...

WILLIAM No, that would really help me, that would really help me, it would make me feel that we've got a connection in some way.

BETH Is it a bit like having a call sign? Often when you're going to have a chat with someone you go, "oh hey," or "by the way, did you know?" Is it just kind of setting it up, it's giving that grounding and then you launch into what you want to say?

WILLIAM Yeah, definitely. I think for me a lot of communication is non-verbal so things like nodding, when someone's talking, nodding along, making little noises of agreement or kind of showing that agreement or showing the understanding. And I think when I talk with blind people I just feel that I can't do that in the same way.

DAMON ?

WILLIAM

BETH What I've been amazed at actually with seeing all these different interpreters is when I first joined this team and I met Paul he had the same interpreter for a while and you

kind of think well I wonder if actually this is Paul's personality coming through or the interpreter's? And then he's actually got kind of maybe five or six men and women interpreting for him and it's definitely his personality that comes through, there's no doubt about it, it's the way he talks, the inflections he uses and I find that really remarkable.

WILLIAM That's because sign language is so expressive and it's a lot more expressive than people realise. Interpreters really take on what they see and they translate the message in its entirety, tone, and all of the different elements. It's really hard to believe but I do genuinely feel that good sign language interpreters create communication for deaf people.

EMMA So many conversations go on in our office all the time within different groups and through groups and the deaf person sitting in the room must find it really tricky to know that those conversations are even happening and to follow each one. And I'm very interested to know how an interpreter and the deaf person work through making the decisions on which conversations to be alerted to and how much of them to relay.

WILLIAM Yeah okay. Again, that's something that the deaf person will agree with their sign language interpreter generally. So I might tell the interpreter at the start of the working day, "oh if there's any gossip happening in the office today let me know, I'd love to listen in on that particular conversation," or I might say to the interpreter, "today, do you know, I'm really, really busy, I've got so much work on I just need to focus on my work, I don't need to concentrate on the conversations around me." And that's lovely for me because it presents me with an option.

DAMON There was an article in the newspaper this morning William that talked about the words that we use now like slightly more American words like awesome instead of brilliant, like us British people used to in the past and obviously there's various different memes and different things we say these days. And I'm just wondering, is there like a popular sign at the moment? Is there something that somebody's using all the time?

WILLIAM For the last probably 15 years I can remember some signs that have come and gone and signs that literally have no translation available into English. So I could give you some examples now but it would be really difficult for me to convey that I think on radio.

DAMON Give it a go.

WILLIAM There's something that we have in sign language that are called multi-channel signs. So multi-channel signs are signs that are really expressive, they express many English words in a very short sign, so for example if you hold out your left palm and you make a chopping motion with the other hand onto it and you make the mouth shape of alp, A.L.P. that means like "really? Are you serious?" But there can be so many different connotations to that meaning. So it depends on the facial expression that you convey that with.

DAMON Alp?

WILLIAM And how exaggerated you sign that particular sign. So for example if you did it very small and subtle that could be like kind of "really, are you sure?" Or if you did a massive ((gulps)) "alp" that would be showing genuine shock and perhaps even suspicion that the information you're seeing

isn't true.

EMMA Are we all doing alps?

BETH We are, yes.

DAMON Yeah.

BETH Yes, all of us, including Janet on the fancy technology stuff.

DAMON I love this, multi-channel I've heard of before and there's this Vee isn't there, because there was Vee-TV on Channel Four, which I think means brilliant isn't it? If you mouth the word, Vee when you're doing something else it means brilliant or something?

WILLIAM Yes, so take one hand with the thumb up, the other hand the palm facing upwards and you bounce the fist off of that hand and you make the mouth shape of vee, V.E.E.

DAMON ((muted clapping sound)) Yeah, William, you can hear us all tapping on our hands, it sounds ridiculous.

EMMA It sounds a bit like deaf clapping. ((laughs))

WILLIAM Yeah, well again deaf clapping is quiet because you literally just put your hands up in the air and you wave

them about.

DAMON I can see where thumbs up as we were doing just then sort of means yeah okay, fantastic, brilliant, but chopping your hand and saying alp? It seems a little bit detached from those regular gestures that we might understand.

EMMA Yeah, but it's a different language Damon, though.

DAMON Well I know, but where does it all come from?

WILLIAM I think it's really important to make the distinction between gestures and sign language, because actually when I was growing up before I learnt sign language I did use gesture quite a lot, I would gesture, I would point to things, I would use my hands but that was nowhere near the equivalent of sign language. So for example in Italy they rely a lot on gestures in their everyday communication, gesticular communication is part of everyday Italian language, but still that's not a sign language in itself.

EMMA Going back to the video that went viral, I mean it's had millions and millions of views, this lovely little video of some kids just learning sign language, some hearing kids and some deaf kids and one of the most lovely things about that video for me was a girl saying that when there's a lot of noise going on and maybe arguments or something happening in their house her and her sister will just start to sign. And they weren't deaf kids, they were hearing kids doing that. What's your thought on that and is your son teaching it to his friends etc?

- WILLIAM The interesting thing about my son is that up until now sign language hasn't been a massive part of his life, because my wife and I sort of switch between speech and sign language.
- EMMA So I'm surprised that you've not been vehemently teaching him sign language, you know, really strongly encouraging him to know it as a full blown second language, that's something I probably expected to be the case.
- WILLIAM I know, I'm a traitor to the deaf community. Actually I did start signing to him when he was a baby, we did, and his first sign was milk, but that's kind of a baby sign. The problem is most of the time he's exposed to our hearing family and hearing children in his school and he is hearing himself.
- BETH So do you always speak to him or do you speak and sign at the same time and let him take on board which is easiest?
- WILLIAM I speak to him most of the time but sometimes I'll sign to him as well. I don't know how much of it though he actually picks up but he definitely knows the sign for sorry, ((laughter)) he uses that one a lot. I would love it if they started teaching sign language at my son's school because I very much feel that he has a reason to do it, I'd like him to be proud of the language and to see that it's used on a daily basis in his school which is where he spends most of his time.
- EMMA Actually see other people using it out in the world.

WILLIAM Yeah, exactly.

EMMA That's it for this week's Inside Ouch. Thank you so much William Mager and interpreter Joe Taylor for joining us in Bristol.

WILLIAM Okay you're welcome, it's an absolute pleasure.

EMMA And thanks to Damon and Beth, Damon Rose and Beth Rose, I was going to say Damon and Beth Rose there, I'll say it again. Thanks a lot to Damon Rose and Beth Rose in London.

DAMON Thank you.

BETH Pleasure.

EMMA Coming soon on this podcast feed will be the results of our Ouch storytelling live event so we'll be posting the stories one by one on the feed over the next few weeks. If you want to get in touch with us you can email us, ouch@bbc.co.uk, like us on Facebook, find us on Twitter @bbcouch, and read more of our stuff on bbc.co.uk/disability. Bye.

BETH Bye.

DAMON Bye.

