

A world of silence

“Listen beyond the crash of the waves and you will find beautiful music everywhere”- Blue Day Book.

It's been an interesting journey, living my world of silence, my life as a hearing impaired person in our ever-changing society. Over the years I've been growing up I've experienced some beautiful moments and some ground breaking lows that could have broken my spirit but somehow I found a strength to just keep breaking down the barriers and keep on moving forward.

My name is Claire and I have been hearing impaired with a moderately severe hearing loss since I was born. I was given my first pair of hearing aids when I was 4 and attended a state primary school, followed by a private girls college in Melbourne's north east, with the completion of a double degree at university this year. At the age of twenty-three, I have achieved goals and participated in events that wouldn't be considered the “norm” for hearing impaired people. But without the support of my parents and other major people who were influences on my life journey, I don't think I would ever get to where I am today.

Hearing impairment is the silent disability because while people know that it is there, they do not seem to understand it. And that's been one of the biggest challenges I have faced, as I grew older and wiser. There are so many different levels of hearing loss that each and every person who says they have a hearing impairment has a different loss and different needs to cope with their hearing loss. To me, that's been one of the biggest complications I have faced. I have come across people who have said they have worked or know someone who is hearing impaired but I wasn't like them. Of course I'm not. We're all individuals in society and it's the same with a hearing impairment. We are all different with different levels of hearing loss.

If I were given a dollar for every person who says, “I never picked up your hearing impairment” I would retire very happily by now. That's because I have coped so well with my hearing loss and more importantly, begun to understand how to adjust to different situations associated with my loss. Attending eight years of speech therapy starting at the age of 5, to execute my speech to perfection was just a small step towards that process. I know that I do have trouble with my speech at times when I'm really tired or really excited because while I can hear myself speak, I can't judge the tone or the speed at which it is going. Simply, it all sounds the same to me!

To me the biggest challenge of having a hearing impairment has been the lack of understanding, hence the term the “silent world”. While people are aware that there are deaf and hearing impaired people out there, they don't seem to understand unless they have a close affiliation with a hearing impaired or deaf person. Countless times I've come across people who have simply changed their voice patterns or tried to make things simpler and clearer when they don't need to be. People just need to be themselves and if I have a problem with their voice or speech, I have the courage to take a stand and say, “sorry, slow down, I can't understand you”. However, it takes a lot of confidence to do that, but I soon learnt that it was me that was missing out, not the other person.

People who want to change their perceptions of me after I've told them I'm hearing impaired, are people I don't want to associate with for they bring a negative response and create a negative atmosphere. I don't need that. It's their loss. I am who I am and I have achieved the things in my life because I wanted to and I believed that I could. I have lost the opportunity to make friends and meet potential boyfriends because simply, I think its fear. In today's society where we are expected to be able to do everything- hold a good job, have a good social life, keep fit and healthy and everything else, having what is considered a "normal" partner is also important. I have lost potential boyfriends because their mates or their families told them that going out with me would be a bad thing for their image. But the people who associate with me enjoy my presence for who I am and my hearing impairment is a large part of who I am. And I'm grateful for those people in my life because we all need friends and family to lean on for support.

Hearing impairment is no barrier to me. There may be things I might not be able to do, but I can work around them to be able to do them. I play three musical instruments, have my full drivers licence, completed a double degree in Human Movement and Management, won a couple of major public speaking contests and competed at the highest level in a dance sport even when I struggled to hear the music. I am now working full time as a before and after school care coordinator, where I'm in charge of 45 children and 3 staff each day. I have worked in hospitality for over 5 years. These are the choices I have made, and while there have been some difficult situations where my hearing loss has had a significant impact, there has never been an event in my life when I said I couldn't do it because of my hearing impairment. But I have said that for me to be successful in the situation I am in now, I need to be aware of my surroundings and these are the things and the processes I have to put in place to be successful. When people tell me I can't do things because of my hearing impairment, it's the ammunition I need to prove them wrong and to prove myself that I can do it. And so far, bearing my goals and objectives in mind, while they have taken some time to achieve some of those goals, the biggest satisfaction is that I have broken those barriers to achieve them.

Keeping the silent disability in mind, while I have achieved what I have achieved in my life, it is the silent disability because while people know about it, they don't know just how different every individual and their level of hearing loss is. Some people can't hear music, some people can only hear high levels of noise, some people like myself can't hear cars. My advice to people who come across someone like myself in the near future is to speak normally, and give yourself an opportunity to get to know them as a person. While we can be somewhat restricted in our hearing loss, we can still do everything a normal person does, sometimes we have to adjust our situations accordingly. Of course, just be supportive and aware that we will all have our bad days and we can get frustrated easily. That's not always your fault, it's our own lack of being able to hear and get out what we're trying to say because of our loss. My family and friends have put up with a lot of my own frustrations but they have given me every opportunity to have my say and help me cope and adjust in everyday situations and conversation.

One day I hope that we will all get the opportunity to learn more and more about what we call the silent disability. And the only way we can learn is not just through

scientific research, but also by talking or listening to hearing impaired or deaf people like myself, because we certainly do have a lot to say and feel passionate about our silent world. I certainly will continue to do my part and get involved where I can because I believe that I can help make a difference between people being aware and people understanding just how tough some every day situations are for me and others like me.

My opening line, “listen beyond the crash of the waves and you will find beautiful music everywhere” summarises my experiences of being hearing impaired all my life perfectly. Go beyond just being aware of having a hearing impaired or deaf person around you and take the time to listen, show empathy and understand just how difficult things are in everyday life for myself and others as hearing impaired people in our society today. As we seek to become better people by striving to have a balanced lifestyle with a good job, a great partner, social life and being fit and healthy, sometimes we do need to take a step back and realise that this is the silent disability. By listening to us and allowing us to help you understand ourselves, you will soon be listening to that beautiful music too.

Claire Bury
Melbourne, Vic