



Speaking out for sign language

MY brother, Conor, who is two years younger than me and my only sibling, was born profoundly deaf. It must have been incredibly hard for my parents when they were told Conor would never be able to hear. I still remember how they explained it to me. "Picture a field of wheat," they said. "Now when the wind blows, the wheat moves. But if the wheat stalks were snapped they wouldn't move. Inside your ear is the cochlea, it's covered in thousands of tiny hairs which move when sound reaches them, making you hear. But in Conor's ears, the hairs are broken. And that's why he can't hear."

As children, Conor's deafness never seemed anything but normal. There were the obvious things we had to be extra careful of, like cars when playing out on the road. But sometimes he had an advantage over me — if mum and dad were giving out to him, he would sneakily switch off his hearing aids then continue to nod seriously while hearing nothing but sweet silence.

Conor has had hearing aids all his life, they don't stop him being deaf but they do enable him to be more aware of his environment. As Conor got older, technology made it possible to completely replace his damaged cochlea with an artificial one.

But to our complete amazement, he didn't want the op. Conor explained that his deafness was not just the disability that we saw it as; it was an important part of his identity. His language was sign language. And it's never stopped him from doing anything.

Conor is a hairdresser now. He did his Junior Cert and Leaving Cert and went on to study fashion at Bradford University. All of these achievements are an absolute testament to his determination and to

To mark the beginning of

**Signing Week,
Sinéad
Desmond
talks about
growing up
with her deaf
brother,
Conor**

my parents' devotion to helping him achieve all that he wanted despite his deafness.

In our family, like many other families with a deaf child, we never learned sign language. This was mainly due to my mother's total and utter dedication to teaching Conor to speak, which included a spell in the States at a special clinic for profoundly deaf children.

Every day, I would come home from school and mum would be sitting at the dining table with the back of Conor's hand raised close to her mouth so that he could feel the different breath expelled as she made the noise of letters like m, p, b, k. Then she would hold a mirror in front of him, so he could see the different shapes his mouth made for different sounds.

Lipreading is an amazing skill. Try it for just a few minutes. At home with your family or in the pub with your friends tonight, put your hands over your ears and try to follow the conversation by lipreading alone. Imagine that was your only way of working out what most of the people you encounter are saying to you.

That is the reality for most of the 60,000 deaf people in Ireland. Most Irish people are great and do make a real effort with Conor, but

there's always the one who thinks he's slow or stupid, or is too embarrassed to try and understand him and that kills me.

Conor has good speech but a lot of his friends don't, which is the main reason why I want to learn sign language, so that I can chat with his friends.

But sign language matters for more reasons than just the practical one of being understood.

There was a time when our own language in this country was ignored by those in charge. We didn't like that so much because Irish matters to us. Irish sign language matters to the Irish deaf community, which is why they would like to see it recognised by the Government as an official language. But I'm not asking you to lobby for this — the deaf community is more than capable of achieving this on its own.

I would like you to consider learning a little bit of sign language, just a couple of phrases. So the next time you come across someone who is deaf you'll be able to communicate with them in their language. Even if it's just to say, "Hey, how are you doing?" or "Thank you".

I can communicate better with Conor than with most of the people I meet everyday, but that is down to how close we are. Our ability to communicate so well sometimes means that I forget he has certain needs as a deaf person. The other day Conor asked me if could he bring a sign language interpreter to our wedding — Conor is one of my fiance Davie's groomsmen.

I'm embarrassed to say I asked him, "Do you really need one?" "Yes," he said "If I can't understand what's being said, the day won't mean anything to me, I won't be a part of it." Which is obvious if you think about it, but I hadn't.

That's something we do in this country everyday; we overlook the deaf and sign language. In an age when we hear more languages spoken in this country than ever before, shouldn't we take the time to hear one more?



Sinéad with her brother Conor, whose profound deafness has never held him back from doing what he wants in life.

Getting involved in **Signing Week**

Signing Week runs from September 6-13. For information on how to learn sign language, email isclasses@irishdeafsociety.ie or call 01 860 1878 to learn more about the **Irish Deaf** Society's Irish

Sign Language Academy. You'll be able to benefit from a pool of qualified teachers who not only teach Irish Sign Language, but also **Deaf** awareness and culture training.