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## John Smith, deaf comedian, 43, Nottingham

**I became deaf after contracting meningitis at the age of three.** All of my family can hear and not one of them could sign, but I don't blame them for that. They looked for advice and were told by doctors that it would be best if I learnt to speak.

**The education system completely failed me.** We were all forced to speak and listen – I'm profoundly deaf so how could I have done that? It was hell.

**We weren't allowed to sign at school, despite the fact that there was another deaf child in my class.** When the teacher's back was turned, we would sneak in a few signs to each other. We would hide behind trees in the playground, or sign in the toilets.

**My first language is British Sign Language (BSL),** but when I asked my teacher about using sign language I was told it was for people with mental health issues and monkeys, not clever people like me.

**Like most deaf school leavers, I left school with little knowledge of English.** My level was probably around that of the average seven or eight-year-old. It was only when I finished school that I began to learn.

**I got into stand-up mainly through friends encouraging me to do it.** Comedy came naturally to me, but I was extremely nervous initially. I admire anyone who can get up on a stage and entertain a crowd through comedy.

**I saw hearing comedians doing stand-up which focused on their own lives,** and I thought I had what it takes to talk about being in a hearing world from a deaf perspective.

**I was so scared doing my first performance.** I was

walking to and from the dressing room with detours to the gents. At the beginning of the show, my mind went completely blank.

**One of my best gigs so far has been in Prague.** There were people from all over Europe that came to watch. They said my act was true to most deaf people's lives, which is really good to hear.

**People can expect a mix of emotions in my show.** Overall, it's a real laugh and I like to build a rapport with my audience. When there are hearing people in the audience it can make them think about what it's like to be deaf, and they are usually quite shocked.

**I am very worried about deaf children attending mainstream schools instead of schools for the deaf.** They don't really have access to signing, which should be a fundamental right. Many of the deaf schools in Britain are closed or are closing, and that makes me uneasy.

**As with any language, it's better to learn sign language early in life.** If a hearing child has deaf parents they learn quickly, but learning as an adult takes a lot of time and practice. If you are hearing, you need to mix with deaf people to keep your signing alive.

**I believe schools should teach sign language** in the same way they do French and German.

**Interview:** Gillian Nelis  
**Picture:** Anthony Stocks

**John Smith** will perform at the Mill Theatre in Dundrum on September 10 to mark the Irish Deaf Society's National Signing Week and as part of the Bulmers Comedy Festival