



Unheard Voices: interviews with deafened people

Heather Stagg
Interviewed by Fran Walker

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IMPORTANT

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Interview Summary Sheet

Ref no: C1345/11

Collection title: Unheard Voices: interviews with deafened people

Interviewee's surname:	Stagg	Title:	
Interviewee's forename:	Heather	Sex:	Female
Occupation:		Date and place of birth:	1967, Sheffield

Date(s) of recording: 13th December 2008

Location of interview: The Westminster Hotel, Chester

Name of interviewer: Fran Walker

Speech to Text reporter: Laura Harrison

Type of recorder: Marantz PMD660 on compact flash

Recording format : WAV 16 bit 48 kHz

Total no. of tracks: 1 **Mono or stereo:** stereo

Total Duration: 36 min.

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Interviewer's comments:

[Track 1]

This is Fran Walker interviewing Heather Stagg on December 13th 2008, for the Unheard Voices Project in Chester. The speech-to-text recorder is Laura. Okay, before we start the interview proper, I would like you to just to tell me your name, your occupation, your date and place of birth, and then a little bit about your parents and then we'll start the interview proper.

Okay, my name is Heather Joy Stagg.

Where were you born?

I live in Stockport. I was born on 14/9/67 and I was born in Sheffield.

Okay and if you could also give your occupation of your mother?

My Mum is retired. My father is no longer with us. I am a student at the moment at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Okay right well, we will start by getting a little bit of background about you and then we will talk more, in a bit more detail about your hearing. So tell me a little bit about your home life when you were growing up and your family?

Erm, well, as I say, I was born in Sheffield. I was six years old when my family moved to Manchester. So I have grown up in Manchester really. I do have quite a few friends back in Manchester who I have tried to keep in touch with, in Sheffield, sorry.

But it's really got down to sending birthday and Christmas cards now: my best friend being Marie in Sheffield.

[02:26]

I was fourteen years old when I went deaf. That was due to the illness that I had. I had a brain tumour. At first we didn't know what had caused the hearing loss and the Doctors thought it might have been either the brain tumour or the chemotherapy of radiotherapy, but nobody was certain, and the fact that my grandmother had become deaf in her teenage years, we thought it

might have been hereditary. But to this day, nobody really knows why, apart from the fact that just recently I think more and more research has come in, and the fact that chemotherapy causes hearing loss has become more apparent. So it might have been that I had a full dose of chemotherapy and radiotherapy at fourteen years old, and that was like an adult dose, as a child.

At the time, was it sudden or did you notice it over a period of time that your hearing going? Was it sudden or did you become gradually aware of it?

I was suddenly aware of it. I could not really understand why I could not hear things properly. One of the first things I noticed is that I got noises in my ears which was tinnitus that I came to learn. It was like birds singing in my ears but it was winter and there were no birds about. So why did I have birds singing in my ears in the middle of winter?

And your hearing, was it you that noticed it or other people?

I think it was myself, and it's quite frustrating really. My parents didn't understand it either. My Mum and Dad used to get very frustrated with me. They used to shout at me and say "oh, we can't get through to you!"

And so what happened? Did you go back to the hospital?

We kept going back to the hospital because I had other appointments and, as I say, the Doctors at Christie's Hospital could not work out whether it was the actual tumour that I had had or the radiation or the chemotherapy, or if it was hereditary from my grandmother: we have never known to this date why it had happened, but chemotherapy does cause deafness.

Apart from not finding the cause, how did you feel and how did they treat you?

From the Christies' Hospital I was referred to Manchester Royal Infirmary to a consultant who was called Dr Farrington, and he did a lot of tests on me which I found very frustrating being a fourteen year old locked inside a cabinet on my own which was sound-proofed and big head phones on. He was the one that came out with the fact that I was quite severely deaf.

And how did you feel about that?

I hated myself. Why, why me? What had happened to me?

And what happened as soon as you found out that you were deaf, what happened?

Well I was given hearing-aids which I struggled with. Different sorts of hearing-aids I have gone through since I have come up through my hearing, and I used to hate wearing my hearing-aids in school. I used to get taunted by the kids at school. When I came out, I wanted to take them out and throw them on the floor! Throughout, and since I have been deaf - and I mean I am forty one now - I have learned to live with it basically. Basically I put it down to the fact that it's other people's attitudes towards hearing loss that disables a person; not the disablement itself.

[07:48]

And can you tell me some of those attitudes that you have experienced? Can you tell me a little bit about some of those attitudes that you have experienced?

Well, there is one or two just recently that has happened. Once I was Christmas shopping with my Mum, and we went into cafe, the cafe we usually visit, and it was absolutely choc-a-block full. We had ordered some food and we had got two cup of coffees on the tray but the food was coming to our table when it had been done. So we were looking around for somewhere to sit down and although most of the tables and chairs were full, there was a very long table at the end and there were three people sat on it; it could have taken about eight to ten people this table, so I put the tray down, on the table, and said, "Do you mind if we join you?" The lady sat there, who was quite young, turned around and took one look at me and said "no!" And I said, "There is room for two more people on this table - it will take about eight on the table" and she said, "No, you can't sit here". I put the tray down and I sat down, and she looked at me and she said, "I am going to get the manager". So, then the manager came and I explained to the manager that it was a long enough table for two more people to sit down other than these other three that were sat there, and she brought another chair for my Mum to sit down. At that point, the young girl got up and walked away from me. She was quite bad mannered, I thought.

Yes definitely, yes.

Erm, and then another reason, a bad experience I have had, just recently, was at the train station in Stockport. I was enquiring about travelling to York and how many times I would have to change, and because there was a screen in front I could not tell what the person was saying. I had my hearing-aids in and I asked him to write it down for me, where I had to change. He said, "No, you change...blah blah blah blah". I could not tell what he was saying and I asked him three times to write it down for me and he said, "No". I just came away from that station absolutely frustrated and upset. I have actually written to the station about discrimination.

You have got a good case there.

[10:59]

Okay, tell me a little bit about growing up and your friendship group?

Well, at twenty-one years old I joined, or at least my Mum and Dad help me to join in a group, because basically I was living at home with my Mum and Dad in my teen years. At twenty-one, I joined a social group which were all hearing people. But we get on okay, and I have been in that group up until today, and I am forty one now! We have gone out; we go out for meals; go out for days out, and a Christmas meal we had last night together.

When you go out for meals, how do you manage? Are people deaf aware, or...how do you manage in those situations?

Since I started in there, one or two other people have managed to be more deaf aware. One lady in particular, who I think is beginning to realise that her own hearing is going, she is more deaf aware towards me, as I am towards her, because I think she realises. She will repeat to me or tell me what the story is, and what is being said. Or, we just chat together.

Yes. I think most of them now realise that, you know, I need to be part of the group and be, you know, yes...

Do they make any special effort to include you?

Yes, yes I think they do, they do these days, if I have not heard they will say, "Heather did you hear that?"

Good. And, at school, how would the other students treat you when you were at school, from coming back from being ill?

At school, some of the children would taunt me and bully me and whilst there were two other girls that would sort of stick by me and say "Are you okay?" They would make sure I was not being bullied, if they could.

What about teachers? How were they? The teachers?

The teachers, erm, I don't know to be honest, come to think about it.

Did they...

I don't suppose they were deaf aware, although at school, the senior schools I went to...

They didn't encourage you to sit at the front or anything?

No. There was a hearing centre but, by this time, I had not been included because there were other girls that used to wear the pieces around (indicates), but I just wore the hearing-aids.

They had the radio thing?

Yes they used to wear the pieces.

And do you feel...how did that affect your education do you think?

Well, I was [laughs] - trying to think - I started first year in senior school, and within a couple of months I was taken seriously ill and I didn't go back until the third year, during which I had had my operation, and been poorly with chemotherapy etc. I had home tuition at home to keep

me up, and the second year and went back in to the school in the third year.

By the time I had got to fifth year, my head teacher commended me for keeping up so well.

[15:40]

Good. Yes, that is good. So what did you go on to do after school?

Erm...I wanted to go into catering. But I went on a YTS to start with and that was within the Alexandra Hospital in Cheadle and that was basically nothing to do with catering! I worked on the wards doing the filing, and in the medical records office, and in the administration office. It was all just learning.

Yes a bit of everything [Laughs].

Yes, and then I started with catering and I worked in old people's homes and schools in catering. The last job I had in catering I was made redundant: which brings me to going on to this course at Manchester Metropolitan University that I am doing now.

And what are you studying?

Lip-reading, lip-speeching to adults [laughs].Lip-reading and lip-speeching to adults.

Yes, oh right. Tell me a bit about that course?

I started in September 2007. Very, very interesting at the beginning; we learned all about the ear and about repetitions of people who need repetition. We did observation classes in other lip-reading classes that we were sent to so that we could learn how they worked. Then later on, we were told we had to teach in those observation classes. So I started doing some teaching. I think those finished about September last year. I have had a little bit of backlog work to catch up with. I passed my three exam: two written and one oral exam. In the oral one all the people from the observation classes came into the Manchester University, and we had an audience, and it was a very big audience and some of the education people came in to mark and I passed that one, brilliant! Yes, yes it was the second written one that I failed and I had to re-sit it, but I have now passed it.

Yes, right, is that something you are going to go on and do?

Sorry?

Is lip-teaching something you are going to go on and do?

Yes, I would love to be able to go into lip-reading classes and teach lip-reading.

[18:58]

Before you went to these classes, had you been to lip-reading classes yourself?

Yes, when I was fourteen my Mum and Dad encouraged me to go to lip-reading classes, that was fairly local to where I was living, and that was when I was fourteen, and I used to go to them once a week. Then, of course, I moved up in school and going in to my jobs, but, more recently, I heard about a hard of hearing club in Stockport which I have started going to, and some of the ladies that are in that hard of hearing club were the ones that were in my lip-reading class when I was fourteen years old!

How did you find the class?

I enjoyed it; it was very good, yes. I think since I was fourteen years old, that is how I have become a lip-reader, and I have learned to lip-read.

Yes, and did you carry on going after you were fourteen? Is it something you carried on with or did you just do it for a little while?

Sorry?

Did you carry on going? You started when you were fourteen. Did you carry on?

Erm, I think it filtered out as I went through school and carried on with my jobs. I wished I could have done, actually. But perhaps, now, I should be a lip-reading teacher, yes!

So what kinds of ways of communicating with people did you use? You were lip-reading them, and what else did you use to get people to talk to you?

I suppose really I have been quite shy. I have always kept myself to myself. As a teenager, I stayed a lot at home with my Mum and Dad, and it's only through doing this lip-reading course at University that has made me realise communication with other people that it's not me that is quiet, but it's them that have to understand that I am deaf. It's not the deafness that disables people; it's other people's attitudes towards deafness.

[21:50]

Yes. What about your family? You talked a little bit your family, how did they react to you?

I think it was very frustrating for them as well as for myself. When I first went deaf when I was fourteen, as I say, we didn't know whether it was the tumour chemotherapy or the radiation or the fact that my grandmother who is my Dad's Mum who had been deaf since her teen years, and it might have been hereditary. Even the Doctors at Christie's Hospital could not work out why, but recently there has been research into chemotherapy and it does say that chemotherapy can cause hearing loss.

And in day-to-day life how does your family react? Were they supportive?

I don't think they are very deaf aware, actually. My brother tends to have a very, very deep voice and he speaks very quick. Erm, I can't catch him if he is talking quickly and then he will say to me, "Well, why are you so quiet Heather?" [laughs]. And my Mum tends to shout at me from a different room! [laughs]. That is difficult.

And you need to be able to see.

Yes I have just come to realise - what is the word?

That they need to...

Yes what is the word? Come to terms with my deafness over the years, yes.

The practical side and emotional side. Yes, yes. And your brother has got little children?

Sorry?

And your brother's family, you were talking about your brother's family?

Yes my brother's family, well, when we were in a family get-together, there are three children with rabble, rabble, rabble, and I can't join in a lot.

So you feel they don't always take your needs into account at all?

My Mum is partially-sighted and I think she feels the same way; although I am deaf, and my Mum is partially-sighted, so we can never join in!

They make it hard for you to join in, yes?

Yes. I am thinking about having a hearing dog. I have had dogs throughout my life whilst I was a child, and the course I am doing in Manchester University has made me more aware of hearing dogs for the deaf but I was thinking more of the fact that it's not fair to have a dog at home whilst I am out all day. But, apparently, I have learned that a hearing dog can go with you to work or to University.

Yes, I think they have to follow you everywhere.

That is something that I am thinking about and the dog would be a good companion for me as well.

Sounds like you feel a little lonely at times.

Well, erm, I am not always lonely; I am quite happy to be on my own, but I wish there was somebody there as well, or, a dog, or a companion. Yes.

[26:23]

And in your working life, have you ever had any special support to help you in the different jobs that you have done?

Apart from when I was referred to the DEA in the Stockport job centre, who is the person that works with disabled people to find a suitable job. Erm, the jobs that I have been through I have worked in old people's homes and schools in catering, and I have found that, basically, in old people's homes they are more caring towards you because they are old people who have hearing problems. In schools, it tends to be a little bit different because you are working over the counter with dishes and spoons.

Yes, much noisier.

Yes, noisier.

Yes, that must be quite a difficult environment. I think you mentioned you were going to a hard of hearing club now, would you like to say a little bit about that and how you got involved with that?

Yes, it was one of the observation classes I went to whilst being in University that one of the teachers in the observation classes recommended me going to the Stockport hard of hearing club. So I started going, and there we are: there are some girls there in the lip-reading class that I used to know when I was fourteen! We have things and we go for meals. This year I have been to France with one of the girls, and I have also been down to Torquay with another three of them; that was an early Christmas party 'do'. That was nice.

And do you find it supportive, meeting other people with the same...?

Yes.

Tell me a little bit about your plans and how you see the future. You say the lip-reading course has really opened your eyes?

I would love to be able to do the lip-reading teaching. I think I've got to wait now and find out. I have given my last essay in; I got a bit way-laid with all the paper work and I have just given

my last essay in, so fingers crossed I have everything passed now. I passed my three exams and all my paper work is in. Hopefully next year I will be going to graduate!

Yes, I hope so.

Do you want to stop for a bit?

[30:03]

Going back to the support that you had from the audiology department - and I know you said when you first ill they didn't know the course - I wondered, since then, have you been back much? Have they taken any interest into account since then?

When I went first deaf, when I was fourteen, I was referred to Manchester Royal Infirmary and then my Doctors fitted my hearing-aid. Since I was fourteen, I've had different hearing-aids: behind the ear, in the ear, and I've now got the new digital ones which are very helpful - digital.

When did you get your digital aids? Can you remember when you got them?

Yes, I didn't like it when I was fourteen wearing a hearing-aid: it was horrible and being in school as well, I used to come home and throw them on the floor, and run upstairs into my bedroom! Yes. I had one experience with an in the ear aid, where the aid was actually too big for me and it gave me an awful lot of pain in my ear. But, now I've got the digital ones and they are okay.

Things like that, when it gives you pain, when it was hurting you, did you find that people would help you sort it out, or were you expected to...

Even then my Doctor could not work out what it was, but I think it was the fact that the aid was made too big for my ear so it was causing pain in the back of my ear here (indicates) and because of the fact that my brain tumour I have had, I have an

Right. Do people understand that? Do people understand that? Or, did you feel you had to keep going?

I had to keep going back to the Doctor because he thought it was the tube in my ear, in the back of my ear, from the shunt here [indicates] that I had in from my tumour. He thought it was that, but I think it was the hearing-aid. I took my hearing-aid out and I didn't wear it for a while and eventually it went away, the pain, so it was definitely the hearing-aid, if you think about it.

So, again, you felt they were not really listening to what you were saying?

Yes, that was an in the ear hearing-aid that gave me the pain.

[33:25]

Tell me, what else have you been doing? You were working in catering and things? What would you do at home in your spare time?

I suppose, once again, I was very quiet as a teenager and I would stay at home with my Mum and Dad. Up until I was about twenty-one years old, I kept myself to myself. I didn't go out much, and then my Mum and Dad encouraged me to join a new group who I have been with up until now, and I am forty one now. I suppose in the beginning they didn't realise about my hearing. But, throughout the years, they have become more aware of it and a couple of the girls will repeat to me or ask me if I have heard what has been said. At least one of them, I think she is beginning to lose her own hearing now, although she does not admit it, and I think she is beginning to realise what it's like for me as well.

[34:52]

Yes, okay. Anything else you think we need to talk about? Anything else? Any other areas of your life where you think it's had an impact?

I heard about the Link Centre, and through the Manchester Metropolitan University that I am studying at the moment, I would love to go down there to do the programme. I have filled in a form and sent it off. Apparently, my Doctor is filling in the forms as well and the last time I saw her she said it's like writing a novel for me! That is because I have got a lot of history!

Yes.

I would like to go down there.

Yes.

And go on this program. I have recently had an outreach person from the Link Centre come to my home and talk to me about it.

Right, yes, and that has inspired you?

Sorry?

That has inspired you?

Yes, he has given me a lot of information. I've got a home computer at home and I would like to learn more about computing. He has told me if I go to my local library I can have a free computer lessons because I am on Disability Living Allowance, so that is something to look to in the future.

[End of recording]