



Unheard Voices: interviews with deafened people

Valerie Foster
Interviewed by Stephanie Pennell

British Library ref. C1345/35

IMPORTANT

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Interview Summary Sheet

Ref no: C1345/35

Collection title: Unheard Voices: interviews with deafened people

Interviewee's surname: Foster

Title:

Interviewee's forename: Valerie

Sex: Female

Occupation: Retired podiatrist

Date and place of birth: 1928

Date(s) of recording: 14th March 2009

Location of interview: The City Inn Hotel, Bristol

Name of interviewer: Stephanie Pennell

Speech to Text reporter: Julia Jacobie

Type of recorder: Marantz PMD660 on compact flash

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Interviewer's comments:

[Track 1]

This is Stephanie Pennell interviewing Valerie foster on Friday 13th of March for the Unheard Voices project at Bristol City Inn Hotel in Bristol. The Speech to Text Reporter is Julia Jacobie. Valerie would first like to ask me to give me your full name including your maiden name please?

Oh. My, full name is Mary, Valerie Foster. And my maiden name was Edwards.

Could you please give me your occupation or former occupation?

I am retired now, but I used to be a podiatrist for the health authority in Bournemouth.

Could you please give me the date and place of your birth?

The date of my birth was the 27th of July, 1928. And I was born in Wrexham in Denbighshire. W-R-E-X-H-A-M. That's it.

Thank you. Could you please give me your fathers occupation?

My father was a commercial traveller for tea and coffee.

And your mothers occupation?

Well I think she was a milliner.

Thank you. Right. Moving into the interview a little further, I am going to ask you now some background questions. About your family, and your family background. Can you remember anything of your grandparents?

No I never knew any of my grandparents.

And your parents?

My parents both died in their 70s.

And do you remember them?

Oh yes! Yes my daughter who has come with me today, she was 9 months old when my mother died. And she was 11 years old when my father died. And then I had there were two more children in the family.

So you become a sort of mother in your mother's place?

No I mean, I had 3 children. My mother and father had just had my brother and myself. So I didn't know any grandparents. So my mother and father brought up my brother and myself.

How did you get on with your parents?

Oh very well oh yes. I had a very happy life.

What sort of things did you get up to as a child?

Well my father had a car, we used to go we used to go, we lived in Preston when I was from about 2 years old, to 16 years old. I lived in Preston in Lancashire, and my parents used to take us out, in the car, up to the Lake District, oh we used to spend nearly -very weekend at St. Anne's-on-Sea, Blackpool, the Southport, and I had school friends but in those days we didn't have so many parties like they have today. And of course the war came and I was 11 years old. So then we all helped each other then. And my father was in the home guard and then he was in the special police, and ooh I think it was a very comradely time of my life during the war, when people used to help each other a lot more. Am I answering your questions as you want me to?

[06:14]

Yes absolutely. How did you get on with your brother?

Oh very well. We were very, very close, yes he was very protective of me. And he was 2 years older than me, and we used to do things together. He came down to Dorset, well he was in the RA F during the war, and then he moved to, Atomic Energy Authority in Harwell, and then he was moved to Winfrith, so he and his family moved to Dorset before my husband and myself and family, and then shortly 2 years after we moved to Dorset, and my parents had died then, my brother died.

And what did he die of? Was it a particular ...

All my family, every single one of my family, have died of cancer.

And how did this affect you?

Just devastating. I mean, I had lost my hearing then, and I always sort of blame myself partly for my mother's illness and demise because I was ill in Guy's Hospital, I was nursing at Guy's Hospital when I become ill with TB meningitis, and she would spend a lot of time with me, and I always feel that was the beginning of her illness. You know, and I felt a bit guilty and of course I felt very lonely because it was I was very close to my mother. Very close family.

Can I ask you going back a little bit, about your education? Can you talk about your education, and when you were young?

Yes I went, the first school I went to in Preston was Moor Park Wesleyan School and I remember when I was 5, and girls went in one way, boys went in the other way, you know. You were kept separate. Yes. And then I went to private school for a while, and then when I failed my, what was it the entrance exam for the grammar school I failed so my parents took we away from the private school, sent me to a mixed school for a year then I passed the entrance exam and I then went to the grammar school in Preston which was Preston Moor Park School, and that was just for girls. The boys were in another school further up the park. And then as soon as I got my what did they call it then ... it wasn't GCSE, School Certificate, as soon as I no it wasn't GCSE, it was School Certificate; we moved back to Wrexham where I was born because my father was working there that was just after the war.

[10:49]

And then after two years working in a bank as a bank clerk I realised my ambition to go to Guy's Hospital to start my nursing training. And it was after 2 years in my nurses training that I contracted TB and meningitis and then I was ill for 3 years. And at the end of that time, I had no hearing at all. And the consultant audiologist, oh they didn't call them audiology, ENT or something, consultant said to me "would you like to wear a hearing aid so that people know you are deaf"? I said "no thank you people expect me to hear if they see me wearing a hearing-aid", and in those days the batteries were that big you wore them banging between your legs like that! So, I never wore a hearing aid. And I went home to Wrexham, very dependent my parents. Because I was still having very severe headaches then. But I wanted to make use of the two years of my nursing training, I had no qualifications, and the Royal Schools for the, oh ... nursing college, would not allow me to take my final exams so my mother was looking round for somewhere where we could get some help. I'd had some lip-reading lessons when I was still confined to bed in the hospital, and so, we found out that I could have lip-reading lessons privately in Manchester. I had to pay for those. So it was that first person the lip-reading teacher, in Manchester that put me on the road to rehabilitation. I have missed something out because when I was recovering from my illness at Guy's Hospital they sent me to the Isle of Wight to the Royal National Hospital, where they put me in a room on my own. Completely on my own. And all you could see from that room was the balcony and the sea on the south coast, and I think that was probably the worse possible thing you could do for a person that just lost their hearing. And it became Christmas time, and my family were a long way away, nobody visited me. And I used to go out to the stairs outside the room, and sit on the stairs at night crying, and crying. It came to Christmas Day, and we had to walk along a tunnel to the dining room, and only on Christmas Day were the sexes allowed to mix. You know, the men and women were allowed to sit together. Only on one day a year. And I was made myself so unhappy, and so miserable there they sent me back to Guy's because I was a nuisance. And I was getting better then, and then I went back home and the lip-reading teacher was the first person in Manchester who really made me start to look ahead again. She introduced me to the hard-of-hearing club in Manchester. But unfortunately, I lived then during the week when I was going for lip-reading lessons, at the YWCA in Peter Street in Manchester. And at this club, there was a born deaf man, and he used to come to the YWCA, wait for me, and he frightened me terribly because at the time I lost my hearing I had never met any deaf people. And then one day when I went, I used to go home on a Friday, and back on a Monday, when I went home for the weekend one week end there was a knock on the door at home, and it was this deaf man asking for me. My mother was, well she was upset. Of course

I was upset and very frightened. Really, really frightened you know. So that was a very bad experience.

[17:04]

How old were you then that happened?

I was 22. And I had not had boyfriends up to then you know. And anyway, then my mother, not really want to go to the labour exchange but some how she went to the labour exchange with me I couldn't walk on my own at the time I was so unsteady then my balance was very bad. And met a person at the labour exchange who had a sister who was deaf, and she was the second person who I felt was a stepping stone to rehabilitation. And so I told her that I would like to do something where I could use my nursing training, up to that time, for a career. And so they got me an interview at Birmingham General Dispensary, School of Chiropody, and the principal there said "oh no I won't take her on I have got one deaf person she's not doing very well". So that was it and of course my confidence plummeted again. Then I got an interview at Manchester Foot Hospital, and School of Chiropody where Miss Grant Nisbet was the third person who took me on, and gave me a chance and I never looked back after that. So I did 3 years training and at the end of that training, I was accepted at Manchester foot hospital on the staff. And it was just after I become on the staff, at the foot hospital, that I met my husband who was also totally deaf the same age as myself, but he had lost his hearing when he was 14 years of age through meningitis, a different sort of meningitis that I had. And so 12 months after that we married. And we had 3 children. And then my husband bought this property in Dorset, and we moved to Dorset 1972. We built our own bungalow in Wool, and my husband found it difficult to get a job but we had this big, small holding property, and the children had, we like to the think that our 3 children had a good life there. Although education wasn't so good down in Dorset as what they would have had if they stayed up North, however my husband died 13 years ago. When we first came to Dorset we used to go to Southampton department of Hearing Research, we used to have those vibrating watches, I don't know whether you have ever heard of them. Weren't much help really. But my husband qualified as an accountant, although he had to lip-read everything. And, am I saying too much, am I going into too much detail?

[22:07]

Well, after my husband died I was one year in the bungalow, and it was quite remote really, because although we were on the edge of the village of Wool, there was fields all around and of course I felt a bit lonely and cut off, and my family lived in, my two daughters were both married then, and lived in Wareham so I moved to a new bungalow in Wareham where I live now, I am very happy there. I am happy to spend the end of my days there. So I have my 3 children all quite near, because my son lives in Parkstone in Poole which is about 20 minutes drive away and my daughters live within walking distance of my bungalow down the road. And yet we're not on each other's door steps so that we know what each other is doing all the time. And I am in touch with my 3 children with a Uniphone, they all have a Uniphone and of course we all have a computer now, and I can't think of anything that would make my life any happier. I have got 3 grandchildren, and 2 step grandchildren. That's about up-to-date.

Did you find you had any friends in the village you lived in, you said you felt lonely in the village, were there any neighbours that you were friendly with?

Well yes, oh yes I did have friends because when I retired from working for the NHS, it coincided with my husband beginning to have heart trouble. And he was not a very friendly person, really, and he sort of, I am outgoing he wasn't. And I did have friends and I used to when I retired, I used to do meals on wheels and do voluntary work. I threw myself into voluntary work. I had a part-time visiting practice, and so I wouldn't, I only had 1 or 2 very close friends, but I knew a lot of people. And of course I used to work, my part-time practice, in Wareham so when I moved to Wareham I also knew a lot of people. My husband was, he was resentful of his deafness. Really. I think. And he found it difficult to make friends. But he did have relatives that had moved down from Manchester to Dorset, so we used to go out quite a lot yes. But we had a big property you see and of course you can, as you know yourself, you can only do one thing at a time when you have no hearing. And we had a lot of work to do on the property because we had a lot of animals, and sort of, we learned the hard way. And he was always resentful that he was not employed, to his qualification you see. He always said he was paid like the office boy. And he was definitely he was resentful so he used to take it out on his family. Particularly myself. And he became very abusive in the latter years of his life. That's when I began to feel isolated because I was sensitive about him because I knew what people used to be saying. And I feel I am very, very fortunate person to have my family, my grandchildren all close by and very supportive and helpful, especially since my 80th birthday last year when my health has definitely taken a nose dive. I used to

enjoy my job because I used to travel all over Dorset with my job, and I think my husband was resentful that I was happy in my job and he wasn't. But then when he lost his hearing, during the war, well there just wasn't the opportunities for people who had no hearing. So he did very well really to provide for us like he did.

[29:08]

You mentioned a little while ago you kept animals what sort of animals did you have?

Yes well we had a friend in Blandford who was a teacher and she left, lived near a chicken farm. And she was a Primary school teacher, and at Easter time, the hatchery used to send a tray of little chicks to the school. And then when the school broke up for the Easter holidays, the chicks were taken back to the hatchery and gassed you see. So this one year my friend phoned and said I have got 24 chicks, will you have them? Of course at that time it was the old QWERTY phones, so one of the children answered the phone and my husband said "oh yes bring them over. I said oh no, no"! Anyway they came over and I had to rear them in the airing cupboard and out of those 24 chicks, about 12 survived.

Well, that was the chickens. And we had the farmer next door was a pig breeder, so we bought 2 pigs. And one goat. And three geese and 2 ponies, and 7 donkeys. My husband sent me to the New Forest to buy 2 donkeys, one was a Jenny, and then one of my patients gave me 2 donkeys. And all the females all the Jenny donkeys each had a foal. So we ended up with 7 donkeys. And I was working part-time then, and 2 cats I think that was all, oh no, my husband started breeding Chinchillas because his aim when we moved to Dorset was to be self supporting. He wanted a cow, and you know, self supporting. It didn't quite work out like that. And basically I had all the work of those animals. And of course, although we had 5 acre field which we still own incidentally, it had to be kept fenced and all that sort of thing. So there was always a lot of work to do. At that time friends used to come down from Manchester and stay in our caravan, and anybody that came down, friends and relatives, were roped into help with the haymaking, and all that sort of thing. But it was a great fun time. And good for our children growing up we thought.

[33:07]

And then, my husband's health began to fail, he retired from his work. He had been retired only a few months when he was diagnosed with heart trouble, he had a valve replacement which failed the first operation failed. And had to have it over again. And there again I feel he was discriminated against because of his deafness. Because after his operation, he was put in a room on his own. And he was very, very nervous of being in hospital, in the first place. And it was all very, very traumatic time, and then my youngest daughter was about to get married and he said he wanted to delay his operation until, he wanted to delay the operation until his daughter was married. And it was only months after she was married that he died. Since I moved to Wareham, as I say I have got the family around me, the grandchildren were small at that time, so I was roped into look after them while mothers went to work, in the early days. Now they are teenagers growing up, and I am not needed, they are not needing me, I am needing them now to help me. And the last 12 months I have not been able to go to Dorchester shopping like I used to do so I am not getting out so far. It's becoming quite difficult for me to get to Southampton for my tuning sessions now. But I belong to Concern with Hearing, the group which is the off shoot of hearing concern, and that in the Bournemouth/Poole area. And I was founder member of that. And we did used to have a group called the Wessex Association of Deafened People which was the local group of the National Association of Deafened People which I was a founder member of that group too. Ooh I have just started going back to lip-reading classes because I am so annoyed about having to, the education authority charging so much for lip-reading, that I am going to keep the class going because they have to have 10 people to run a class you see, so they only had 9 so to keep it going I said would join and pay the fee. But I very much resent having to pay the fee although I really realise how much my lip-reading has slipped, because I live alone. And how useful, how interesting the lip-reading classes are. And a third thing is you do meet people and they are people worth knowing they come up from SWANAGE. I am amazed that people will travel so far when they are older and pay so much to lip-read when it should be free.

[38:27]

Are you involved in religion? Do you have religious beliefs?

Not now no. I used to be. Church of England but ... no not now.

What about political beliefs?

I swing from one to another! Nothing radical. I support them the local councillor's but I don't go far into that no. I don't get involved.

[39:19]

You have talked in some length about your hearing loss and diagnosis, you didn't mention about any side affects. Did you suffer side affects like balance or tinnitus when you lost your hearing?

Yes. I suffered with my balance, not badly with tinnitus until just lately when my blood pressure went up a few weeks ago. And my balance has become rather poor of late. So I use a walking stick at home. It was a long time before I could walk on my own after meningitis. Yeah.

Can you talk about the meningitis that you had? What sort of illness it was apart from causing deafness, was it deafness as a result of that or the treatment?

Yes it was result of the treatment. I contracted TB because it was in the days when you used to have the Mantoux test, when I started nursing I lived in the country, I went to London and in the nursing school when we were in the nursing school for 3 months of every year, we lived in big Victorian houses at Earls court in London. And there were big empty houses, and we used to have 4, fire watchers beds in a big empty room with a little gas fire, you know high ceilings and travel to the hospital each day on the underground. And I think possibly that's how I contracted TB. And it was, it wasn't until I had been collapsing in the sluice when I was bagging the laundry, and over-sleeping when I should have been on duty, and people used to have to come and wake me up to take me on duty, I remember it was the alarm at side my room at one time and I didn't hear it, it wouldn't wake me up. And then ooh I don't know how long that went on for. When they realised that there was something wrong then, I was sent off sick. And it was even in the sick room for some time before, a long time before it was diagnosed. And then I was in an oxygen tent for sometime which is a terrible experience. And then I started having, I was having streptomycin, it was the early days of streptomycin called dihydrostreptomycin and a specialist came from the Radcliffe Infirmary Oxford, specialist in meningitis and they used the 3 spaces in my lumber spine that were septic, they were doing it with general anaesthetic every day, and then someone came from New Zealand and I had the

punctures in my neck. Then they made the 2 burr holes in my head, every day I used to have the lumbar puncture needle put straight into the ventricle in my brain, and the cerebral spinal fluid drawn out and the streptomycin and the penicillin put in, then I'd go to sleep and feel it go round my brain, then wake up and have, not be able to hear. I don't know how long that went on for before they decided that my hearing wasn't coming back. And they sent me for hearing tests. And they didn't ever say that my hearing wouldn't come back, but I don't think very much was known about it at that time. But of course they didn't talk about hair cells in those days, and I understood since then that it was the streptomycin that destroys the hair cells in the cochlea, which in activates the auditory nerve.

How old were you then?

How old was I? 21.

[45:09]

Yes. And what were the attitudes, how did you find the attitude of the medical staff who cared for you?

Diabolical. The attitude ... well do you know when I used to go back for check-ups to Guy's Hospital from Wrexham, go back every three months, it used to be those awful London smogs you know, and of course I had to stay in a hotel, and I was absolutely terrified. I can't remember anyone being helpful. I did have some lip-reading lessons when I was still in bed, that person yes I sort of relied on her but you know, I was isolated when I had meningitis; I was isolated in a room about this size. And of course more than most people that lose their hearing, I felt I was the only one in the world that had lost my hearing. You know? Although being young you do have more optimistic attitude but I was still having those very, very severe headaches long after the meningitis had gone, but it was definitely the streptomycin that caused my loss of hearing. Because I was clear of the meningitis by the time I'd lost my hearing.

Do you remember particularly apart from the lip person, were there any people you remember as being kind and helpful?

Only my best nursing friend, she was the only one that was allowed to visit me because as I say I was isolated because of the infection.

Can you remember who you saw, the series of referrals during that time? The audiologists, the consultants?

Yes, it was Mr Reading was the ENT specialist. He's deaf now. Yes, Dr Kenneth McLean was my consultant and Doctor Hardwick and then I wasn't ever referred to anybody else.

I don't know what you mean by referrals because I wasn't referred to anybody else I just had to go.

We talk about interventions, meaning things like hearing-aids; you said earlier you didn't have a hearing-aid. You chose not to. Had you ever considered?

Well there was no point in having a hearing aid I had nothing to amplify, nothing at all.

Have you ever considered having a hearing dog? Or other communication methods like a cochlear implant?

Yes I support hearing dogs, but no because at the time I moved to Wareham after my husband had died, I inherited a mongrel dog who belonged to my son until his marriage broke up you see, and so of course I wouldn't consider having a hearing dog when I had already got a dog and a cat. And then Roger was very, very helpful, and by that time we started WADP, Wessex Association of Deafened People, so I met people with hearing dogs and I have had, I have met people who don't love dogs and yet they had a hearing dog I have experienced so many tragic cases of people that have hearing dogs and its not been a great success. Or, too much of a success and I am very friendly with Maggie Woolley who used to be the presenter of the See Hear programme in London, she was of the original presenters, she lives in Poole now, and she has a hearing dog called Busy, and I see how terribly involved and dependent you get on a hearing dog. That I feel that I could not go through the trauma of you dog not living as long as I do, and you know when it comes to retirement age and friends of mine have had hearing dogs, who's dogs have died and they, like losing a child. And I just feel I could not go through with the emotions of it. But I would love a dog. But I resist having one. For another thing up until recently I have like to the travel abroad, and you can't really put a hearing dog into

kennels while you're away. And I am not, my family, you know I think it's too much of a responsibility. All those things, but I very much support the hearing dogs I like to share my friend's hearing dog, they come to see us quite often. We have a wonderful time.

You mentioned you have a Uniphone; do you have any other equipment to help you?

Yes, smoke alarm, alarm system, door bell system, my son is an electronic engineer, although I had mine installed by social services. A computer, use email a lot, yes I've have had a text phone right from the beginning of the telephone exchange for the deaf in Gower Street in London when they used to have it in the basement you know, they used to have a Qwertyphone at first.

[53:55]

What about a cochlear implant? Is this something you have considered?

I had my first cochlear implant in 1998. I went to an NADP AGM in London one year, Mr JG Fraser was giving a talk about cochlear implants. That was when they were funded by the Sir Jules Thorn Trust. I said to him suppose I am too old to be considered, he said certainly not he said. You just write a note to my secretary, saying you are interested and it went on from there. But it was a single channel extra cochlear implant. That meant it wasn't inserted into the cochlear like it is today. And they put that fixed that on the leg of my glasses. And there was no magnet, and I used to have to hold my finger on it on the processor behind the ear and it just wasn't a success. Then 2 years later, it became infected, and it had to be removed. So it was removed. And I was back to total deafness again. I couldn't hear anything. And, then I got another infection or something, and I went back to the Ear, Nose, Throat Hospital in Gray's Inn Road and Mr what's his name ... forgotten the specialist there, he said "oh everything is alright". He said "have you thought of having another implant"? I said "no I have had one chance there's plenty of people waiting" I said "no I had not thought of having another one". "Why not"? he said. So I said well, go and see your doctor, I was referred then for funding for another cochlear implant. That was, I had the first one when I was 60, and the next one ... it was 10 years afterwards. Then, of course the funding was difficult because it wasn't funded by the health service, and it took 2 years before the funding came through, and then I had this one and I think I have reached a stage now when I don't think it will improve anymore. Because having been profoundly and completely deaf, for 50 years, it was remarkable really that I responded at all to the stimulation of a cochlear implant. So, I was pleased with what I

got. And satisfied with what I have got. And my only gripe is that they do not tell you enough. You see, when I had this cochlear implant that time they weren't going to refer you for hearing therapy. Now, I had forgotten what a lot of sounds were over those years and there's so many different sounds today, all the electronic sounds that you have today like the crossings on the road, and things in the car, the lights flash the microwave, the oven, all these alerting sounds that I had never heard. And I felt it very important for when a person had been deaf like I had for such a long time, that support for the hearing therapist was very important. And at that time, it was soon after my husband had died, and I felt my husband had been discriminated so much in his working life and especially when he went to have his heart operation at Southampton. They wouldn't tell him anything, although he was a marvellous lip-reader. And the hearing therapist in Dorchester soon after my implant, she really helped me as a psychologist you know. I am still; I think the way of thinking is now to be automatically referred for hearing therapy when you have a cochlear implant. But it wasn't when I first had mine at all. and there's why I believe in the LINK centre, but fortunately though I have met Lorraine Gailey she used to give talks at our WADP meeting, I wasn't eligible to go to the LINK centre. I am sure I am very sure I would have benefited greatly from it, especially at the time when I lost my husband.

[01:01:04]

I would like to talk now about impact of hearing loss on yourself. About your self-esteem. When you become deafened, did you feel anything particularly about your identity, that you might have lost the identity that you had given the terrific change in your life?

Yes because when I was nursing my ambition was to qualify, and then travel abroad as an army or colonial nursing service, and I rather harboured a grievance for quite a long time when my career was cut short. I depended a lot on my mother until I went to Manchester, to the lip-reading teacher. She introduced me to people with hearing impairment, and the hard-of-hearing club. Then I began to feel better about myself, and as I say I was a great set back by that deaf and dumb man. You know couldn't even speak properly. That set me back a lot because I was frightened. And I suppose when I started at the Manchester Foot Hospital as a student I had to live in a flat on my own, and I had to, didn't get much help. Just had to copy the notes of the other students. Yes I did make friends, yes.

Were they supportive of you the other students?

Were they supportive of you ... not particularly no. No. One person was yes, one person was very supportive.

Do you feel that having become deafened, was any kind of label or of a disability status?

Yeah, I was very conscious of, I was very conscious of my disability not being able to socialise like I used to because I was fond of music when I could hear. I don't know how I did it really. I suppose it was meeting my husband, and being a student for three years before I met him.

You mentioned music, which was presumably one of your interests, did you have any other interests that you could perhaps pick up on?

Yes I have always been interested in art, and craft work, and I played badminton until I was 65. Sports. Yes after I lost my hearing, I just used to find my own hobbies. It wasn't until I was married and we moved down to Dorset that I played badminton. I was, I was involved in the family unit.

[01:06:41]

Finally if I can just move on, how do you feel today, about the future ahead of you? Firstly how do you feel today about interviewing and talking about your life so far?

I am quite pleased if its going to help the programme, anybody, I am pleased enough. How do I feel about my life today? Well, since I was 80 years old my health seems to be deteriorating, I am a little bit nervous on my own, but well, I am very happy really.

Thank you very much indeed for doing the interview, we have learned a lot and you have spoken very well, and I am very grateful to you. And to Julia thank you for supporting us in this. Thank you very much.

I would just like to say I am very, very grateful for the cochlear implant.

Thank you.

[End of recording]