



So...podcast – Episode #9

Brent Phillips

You're listening to So...podcast with John McKenna

John: Greetings. John McKenna, So...podcast. I'm with Brent Phillips today. Brent, thanks for coming on the show.

Brent: Thank you. I'm very excited to be here. Thanks, John, for inviting me. Some of you may be wondering why I am Brent but I have a female voice. But I'm actually a Deaf person and I use Auslan, Australian Sign Language, as my first language and so I have a professionally qualified interpreter voicing for me today. Her name is Melissa. So we're really excited to be here today.

John: So that's good. Take all the questions out of what's going on from our listeners, of course.

Brent: Yeah, absolutely.

John: When we talk about listeners, I must remind everybody that all our podcasts are on YouTube. So my website is johnmckenna.com.au, so with YouTube of course you've got access to closed captioning and subtitles, and also you're able to print off transcripts of all my episodes. So it's something that I'm very passionate about and of course, I guess that's one of the reasons I've invited Brent on my show to discuss this further, how to make sure podcast is inclusive to all audiences.

But Brent, before we do that, let's talk a bit more about yourself. Do you want to give a bit more background please?

Brent: Yeah sure. So as I mentioned, I'm Deaf and I'm third generation Deaf in my family. So my parents were Deaf, grandparents and my partner is also Deaf. Interestingly enough, I have two children who can both hear. So it's





a bit of an oddity in my family to have people who can hear, but it's fair to say that I am culturally and linguistically Deaf. Was born and raised in the Deaf community and I have a very strong passion and identity about who I am and I'm a very proud Deaf Australian.

I am actively involved in the Deaf community and at a voluntary capacity I'm involved in committees. Also, my professional role is as an executive director at a large service provider here in Australia where we provide support to Deaf and hard of hearing people around employment outcomes, interpreting services, audiology, capacity building and it's a really exciting time, particularly with the role out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and what opportunities that brings to Deaf and hard of hearing Australians.

So in my personal life I'm a passionate AFL supporter. I follow the Bulldogs and I'm actively involved in sports, and my kids keep me very busy as well.

John: Brent, can we dig deeper into all those myths around people who are Deaf. And there's lots of them out there but I'm sure that I really don't want to waste this opportunity having someone like you who's very savvy and lived experience. Can we talk a bit more about the myths of people who are deaf, please?

Brent: Yeah, there are a lot of myths out there. Some of the myths out there are that Deaf people are all the same, they're one and the same, which is absolutely not true. If you think about the fact that there's a spectrum and there are Deaf people who are culturally and linguistically Deaf like myself, who identify as part of the Deaf community who use Auslan as our primary means of communication. Then you may have people who have a bit of a hearing loss, but can speak and they can use the phone, depending on the environment. And you have people who have late deafness or lose their hearing through workplace accidents. They're all very different and there are just different degrees of hearing loss.





In my experience, my perspective comes from the culturally linguistic area. There's also a lot of misassumptions. I've been asked questions like, "can Deaf people drive", "can Deaf people get married", "how do you as a Deaf person, how were you successful at uni, or how do you get a job if you use Auslan"? So the Deaf community is reflective of the broader community. There are people with varying literacy skills, and part of that is largely because of the educational system. Around 95% of Deaf people in Australia are born to hearing parents. So they face challenges around communication from day one, even in their own home and it impacts their learning, their education, because they simply haven't had that communication at home.

I'm one of the 5% who were born to Deaf parents, so I had communication from the day I was born. It was always a seamless flow of communication. There are people in Australia who are Deaf who are Olympians, or who are professionals who have executive roles, and sports people. Those who are high achievers and it's just around ensuring that Deaf people have access to communication and that it's provided in their first language and they have access to supports and services, and receive appropriate education. And around the mainstream community showing a positive attitude towards Deaf people.

John: Brent, when we talked about some of the medical interaction, and I'm going to bring up the word cochlear, when that first came out. I know that's a long time ago, but when it first came out it wasn't actually received positively from everybody, was it. Could you explain that?

Brent: Yeah. So you mentioned that it was quite some time ago, about 20-30 years ago. Melbourne was the birthplace of cochlears and it's now, as you know, world wide. There was a period of time in the Deaf community here where we were very resistant to the cochlear implant, but more broadly we were resistant to medical intervention, because we are very proud about our culture and our linguistic identity. We saw the cochlear, at the time, as being a means of fixing deafness. But over the years we've started to embrace it. There are a lot of Deaf people who identify as members of the





Deaf community who are Auslan users who have cochlear implants now. So our acceptance has changed and what we're more concerned about now is genetic testing, and that type of new medical intervention.

Cochlears, we see now as assistive technology, like hearing aids. They are embraced in the community nowadays. The critical part is the medical versus cultural model of Deafness. Like I said before, 95% of Deaf people are born to hearing parents, so they diagnose deafness in one or two days after birth and medical intervention steps in and offers speech therapy and hearing aids, cochlears, right from day one. Rather than giving the parents access to make an informed decision where they're presented with opportunities, where there's a different language and a different culture. That's not happening now. People often enter the Deaf community late in life after the education or medical system has failed them. And that's probably our issue that we're battling, rather than the cochlear itself.

John: How are you going on with that battle?

Brent: Yeah, it's a very slow journey. I have an example where my daughter is now 7 years old and she can hear, and when she was born, on her second day on the earth we had the newborn early screening program. So it's a government funded program here where they assess the hearing. So we had a nurse come and visit my daughter, when she was only a couple of days old, and they performed a hearing test. Straight away she put her hand out and said, "congratulations". And my wife and I, there was a moment in time where we tried to work out what does the nurse mean by "congratulations"? What, that our daughter can hear? Or congratulations, our daughter identifies as part of our community?

John: Wow.

Brent: As being Deaf and being part of the Deaf world, we really struggled with that. And then we twigged that she meant it's because our daughter can hear. So that led us to wonder, what would she say to the parents whose children were diagnosed as Deaf as those hearing screenings? Obviously





she wouldn't say "congratulations". There's that negative connotation established from the very, very start. "I'm sorry to say, you're daughter or your son can't hear". So that's something that we're trying to shift.

There's some great training and awareness programs with those people who do the screenings, we need that to happen to ensure that they provide a more sensitive approach and support parents regardless of whether their child can hear or not. That's an ongoing battle.

John: Really powerful story, Brent, thank you. Like I said, I guess as a person in a wheelchair myself, I can relate to something similar where people came up to Mum and Dad and said, "it's okay, there is a home where he can go". So it is all about that education needed for medical staff when being confronted in the hospital when someone comes out a bit different.

Brent: Yeah, absolutely.

John: I'm always - look, I've been involved and got some friends who are Deaf, of course. When we talk about rudeness about the language that English people use about deaf and dumb, I think we made a note earlier, we were having a chat before we went on the microphone about unconscious rudeness. I guess, what do we do? If we focus on the word, yes it's unconscious, so we're not out there to be rude, but at the same time we need to somehow just be really mindful about words that come out when we refer to, "hey what's going on, can't you hear me, are you deaf?"

Brent: Mm.

John: I don't know how to address it. Any thoughts on how to? I think it's just something we all need to consider.

Brent: Yeah. We have come a long way, but hundreds of years ago people called Deaf people, deaf-mute, or deaf and dumb. And Expression Australia, the organise I work for, were established in 1870/1880, and we were called the Adult Deaf and Dumb Mission. And so that was how society labelled us





back in the day. That view has shifted and people have started to realise that we just say deaf, we don't say deaf and dumb anymore. The PC way of referring to people who are deaf, or have hearing loss, is deaf or hard of hearing. So it's around a lack of awareness in the mainstream community around people and how to communicate around Deaf people, and how to communicate. There are so many times I walk down the street and someone will come up to me and try and ask me what the time is, or how to find Flinders Street Station, and they would talk to me and I would sign and say "oh sorry, I'm Deaf", and I point to my ear to gesture, and they run a mile. I have the answer, I can easily assist, we can be creative with how we communicate. I can pull out my phone or we can gesture but I think a lot of people are scared or they don't understand how to communicate with a Deaf person. And it's not their fault, it's just you don't know what you don't know.

But I think some of the great work that my organisation has done around advocating for interpreters to be televised for emergency situations, such as bushfires and briefings has gone a long way in building the community's understanding of the critical role that Auslan has in our community. People are starting to say "oh I saw on an interpreter on the tele", and they're starting to learn about the language, and starting to want to enrol to learn Auslan because of the exposure. So that's a great outcome. But there are still so many people out there who have never met a Deaf person, or has no idea how to communicate with a Deaf person.

John: What you say is so true. Sadly, things like the bushfire, people are seeing interpreters, and overseas where there are big announcements, where the media is covering different stories, you do see Auslan. Sorry, what's the sign language called? Just called International Sign Language, is that right?

Brent: There is International Sign.

John: How many sign languages are there? You've got International, you've got Auslan. How many others?





Brent: That's another myth. People quite often think that sign language is universal, and people are quite often gobsmacked when they find out that Australian sign language is different to American sign language, and so on. Each country has their own local sign language but they have commonalities. So in Auslan, our Auslan was brought over from British sign language, and that was through the First Fleet. There was a Deaf person on the First Fleet. So it's evolved over the last 240 years, but America have their own sign language, ASL, and that's adapted from French sign language. So there are a few key family trees of where sign language originated, but quite often because Deaf people, we are very well adjusted to visual communication, so we will travel to Italy or Japan and we always find a way to communicate visually, because that's something we're adapted to. We probably travel easier than people who can hear because as people who can hear, you're fixed with the verbal communication. Whereas, as Deaf people we're used to visually expressive communication. So travel for us is actually quite easy, quite seamless.

John: A lot easier than travelling in a bloody wheelchair. [laugh] I'll tell you that, for sure.

Brent: Yeah.

John: Anyway, Brent. I do want to close pretty soon but I think it's really important that we have a bit of a chat about accessibility. Especially as the growth in podcasting. I know it's something that a lot of people say it's very empowering and it's great that people are able to engage with podcasting, but the Deaf community of course need to be considered. Obviously captioning, subtitles and interpreting is part of it. You and I are actually working on a bit of a taskforce as the moment, which is really good to get interesting members aware of when producing a podcast to keep this in mind. Youtube, so people are listening to it, reading et cetera. Are the Deaf community embracing podcasting?

Brent: Yeah. Not as much as we possibly could or should, to be honest. And we've spoken about this before, John, where I'm very keen. I'm an active





follower on social media. I see a lot of great materials out there, and a lot of them are podcasts, which are audio only. There are footy clubs who have regular podcast interviews with their players and I would love to be able to follow those and access those, as a very interested member of society, but a lot of them are not accessible. So I'm thrilled to be a part of this taskforce to try and ensure that podcasts are genuinely available. Not just to the Deaf community, who use Auslan, but more broadly. At the end of the day, if we're building accessible and inclusive societies then there's a better chance at collaboration and better outcomes, which leads to a better quality of life and more people will be more engaged with their day-to-day activities. So I'm really keen to be a part of this and to see where it goes, and to ensure that the Auslan community can access key information to build their knowledge and awareness around various issues, ideas or topics.

John: Brent, I've really enjoyed having a chat with you. It's very insightful for me and I really do hope our audience enjoyed it. So thanks very much for your time today.

Brent: My absolute pleasure, John. I look forward to working with you moving forward. Thank you.

John: Thank you.

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