



You can't ask that series 4: deaf

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INTERVIEWER: How are you feeling?

RUSTY: Oh, a little bit nervous and excited.

NES: What does being deaf feel like? Can you hear anything?

DION: Not a single thing. Nothing. Sweet silence.

RUSTY: Being deaf means I can't hear anything. You can't hear at all.

ANDY: Without my Cochlear device, no, I can't hear anything.

RUSTY: But sometimes I hear a ringing noise.

DAMO: There might be a ringing like tinnitus. Some people have a problem with that.

ANDY: There's always sounds, there's internal sounds like clicking or tinnitus. There's always weird sounds in there. There is never silence.

BEC: With my cochlear implant and my hearing aid I can hear most things I think. But without my devices I can hear a little bit, I think, but I can't understand speech.

DAMO: My right ear doesn't work. It's completely 100 per cent deaf. In my left ear, when I have a hearing aid on, I usually hear loud noises, for example a plane or engine machine noise.

NES: Yes, I can hear things. I'm actually not completely deaf, which means that I can hear a door slamming, or a car, or a dog barking.

WESLEY: I was born deaf. I'm profoundly deaf.

RUSTY: I was born completely deaf but I grew up with a cochlear implant and sign language.

DION: I had hearing aids when I was three. My mum was trying to communicate with me and getting stuck and frustrated because I couldn't speak. At five, I was cochlear implanted and I didn't like it.

NES: I was born blind. I only had 20 per cent vision. When I was about seven, I started to lose my hearing.

BEC: My hearing just gradually got worse and declined as I got older. At the beginning of last year I had a sudden drop in my hearing, which led to my cochlear implant.

NES: By 15 or 16, my hearing really dropped. Then I started using an interpreter.

ANDY: I lost my hearing and became deaf in April 2007. I was at a nightclub and I was walking home with my girlfriend and things were said and I got coward punched. As my head hit that gutter, that was it. Everything just shattered. My hearing was instantly taken away. Smashed all my equilibrium. It was pretty severe.

BEC: My Dad's the youngest of four and all of his siblings have hearing loss and, of the six of us in my generation, four of us have hearing loss and two are hearing. We don't really know why.

DAMO: My children are hearing, my wife is hearing and my parents are hearing. I'm the odd one out.

WESLEY: I was the only one born deaf in my family. My wife is deaf ,and I have five deaf kids. We enjoy being noisy. It's a noisy household. We have a good time.

ANDY: I was deaf, completely deaf, for six months before I got the implant. So a bit frightening.

BEC: I was devastated when my hearing dropped because it really interfered with my ability to communicate. I couldn't do the same things that I used to do. I couldn't go out for dinner with a group of my hearing friends and be able to keep up with the conversation.

NES: I have to use an interpreter for most things. I'm not just missing one thing. I'm missing two things so it can feel quite isolating.

DAMO: How do you swear in sign language? What are the funniest signs? Oh, here we go. We can spend hours on it.

RUSTY: I sometimes swear in sign language to friends but not in front of my parents.

ANDY: I mean everyone knows how to swear in sign language, right? Everyone does it. You look at out of your car in a traffic jam and you'll see it.

NES: Everyone in the world knows what it means.

BEC: It's a full language. There's more than just the swear words. And people always ask about the swear words.

DAMO: Auslan itself is a beautiful language because it's so visual. It's like miming.

RUSTY: Sometimes the signs match the words, like "pineapple". The sign shows the shape of it. "Elephant" because they have a big trunk.

BEC: Politician's names are always really funny.

DION: "John Howard".

BEC: Yeah, eyebrows.

DION: "Tony Abbott"

BEC: Yes, the ears.

ANDY: I never learned to sign. I neglected the fact that Auslan is a real art. It's something that is really expressive and it's something that I realised I missed that opportunity.

RUSTY: Some people use big expressions, and people who are shy sign more reserved.

DION: In Auslan, facial expressions show the tone. So, for example, if a person arrives home late – "Finally! You've arrived". Or if they want to show excitement, they would go, "Yay! You've arrived!"

RUSTY: Auslan is my first language. I've been brought up with that. English is very difficult for me. It's very confusing.

BEC: One of the things that I'm still trying to learn is the language structure of Auslan. So, a lot of the time you actually ask the question words last instead of first, like in English. So you say in English, "What is your name?". In sign language, it's "Name what?". There's also less words, so it's kind of quicker and more direct.

RUSTY: Not all people sign the same way. Some people sign according to their state.

DAMO: In Perth we sign "hungry" like this. In Melbourne, that's the sign for "sex" or "sexy".

RUSTY: Obviously people know how to sign "Hi" and "Bye", "good", "bad".

NES: "Thank you" is the same sign all around the world. Lots of cultures understand "thank you".

DION: Some signs in Auslan we have gotten rid of. For example, the sign for "Asian", you don't use that any more. We've cut that out.

NES: I'm very proud. It's a real privilege and an opportunity to be able to learn sign language. I'd love more awareness in Australia about it.

DAMO: Your turn.

WESLEY: Oh no, me.

DAMO: Doesn't matter.

NES: Do people avoid you because it's all too hard?

BEC: Yes.

DION: All the time.

ANDY: Yeah, you really figure out who your mates are.

DION: Most hearing people can't be bothered to talk to us because of the barriers.

ANDY: In restaurants and clubs and stuff like that, for sure. They'll try and make conversation and they realise there's not much in return, then for sure they'll avoid that.

RUSTY: It's awful. I get quite upset, sometimes angry. I feel like I want to punch a wall.

NES: Because I've always got an interpreter with me and usually I have a guide with me as well, I think people get scared of that and they back away. Different language, different culture, different life.

BEC: I think for me it's most isolating when I'm in predominantly hearing spaces and there's a group conversation because I'm trying to lipread and I can't hear where the sound is coming from, so it takes me a second, when the conversation jumps, to find where the next voice is coming from to lipread. And all of my effort is just going into figuring out what's happening, which I'm not always getting right either. There's no opportunity for me to jump in and be a part of the conversation.

RUSTY: Most of the time I look at my friends' lips so I can understand them. But sometimes people turn their backs and talk to another person. That annoys me because I can't be included in the conversation.

DAMO: If you meet a deaf person don't be frightened.

DION: Just speak normally, normal. And speak at your own pace. Don't under, or over enunciate words. Just be normal.

WESLEY: Don't speak softly. Don't speak too loud. You don't have to get too close to my face. Just speak normally and clearly so I can lipread.

DION: Be flexible. Don't be afraid to use gestures. Don't be afraid to repeat things. Don't be afraid to, you know, be determined to communicate.

ANDY: Having said that, this is what trips me out and something that really shocked me is Botox. You can't read their face. There's no signs. They look like they're doing 110km in a convertible the whole time, like you can't. They're just stuck there, like their face is so fused that it doesn't tell a story.

RUSTY: I prefer face-to-face conversations but I am used to texting on the phone.

BEC: And we're all really flexible with making our methods work for us. Like, we've had a lot of practice.

DION: We won't bite. We don't have fangs.

NES: What happens if I try to talk? Now you know.

DION: What happens if I try to talk?

NES: I can talk. I just don't always, because I'm not comfortable with it.

DION: It's rare for me to use my voice. I don't like using my voice.

NES: But I can, because I've grown up speaking before I learned sign language.

RUSTY: I always talk. When I talk, it's easier for me to sign.

BEC: A lot of people are always like, 'Well if you're deaf, then how come you can speak?' They don't understand that hearing doesn't actually connect to your voice that much. It only connects to learning to speak and I had better hearing then.

DAMO: I can talk too, but really ... really ... funny.

NES: I think over time I've lost confidence with my voice because I can't maybe hear myself 100 per cent.

DAMO: Hearing people think my voice is different. They ask: "Where are you from? Are you from China or America?" I say, "No, I'm just deaf." My voice is broken, well not broken. I can talk but not very clearly.

ANDY: What really shocked me about the deafness, and if I was to read that out loud, was when you do lose your hearing how quickly my voice started to roll when I wasn't finishing words. I didn't really get control back of that until I got the implant.

RUSTY: I always worry about my voice because my friends, when I try and talk to them, if they can't understand me, they might not like me.

WESLEY: I try to read lips. Then I try and talk back to them. I just try my best.

BEC: I definitely have always had a habit of speaking louder than I need to, because I have no idea what volume things are at.

ANDY: My friends and my family would just say that I was yelling, because that was the only way I could hear the vibration I'd have to constantly keep my hand on my chest.

DION: I laugh really loud. My wife tells me my laugh is really high-pitched. I didn't really care until recently about having a loud laugh, but at the same time I have to be aware of other people's reactions. People look at me say "Shhhh". Oops!

WESLEY: Has the cock ear?

DAMO: Cochlear.

WESLEY: Has the cochlear implant cured your disability?

BEC: No.

DION: No.

ANDY: There was nothing to be cured. But, it's enhanced my quality of life, I'll say that.

BEC: Like it's incredible that the cochlear implants exist and that they work, but they don't fix it. I'm still deaf. I'm never gonna hear as well as a hearing person.

RUSTY: I'm still completely deaf. If the cochlear battery goes flat I'm back to being deaf.

DION: It has not fixed me 100%. It is not a cure, but it's a tool. It helped me at times to hear, but did I enjoy that experience? No.

NES: Yeah it's a bit of a controversial topic. I don't like to argue with people about it, because lots of people have really different opinions on this.

RUSTY: I got my first cochlear implant when I was two and a half years old. It was different, completely different to what I was used to. I could hear everything. I am happy that I can hear and have conversations with people.

DAMO: Parents, if you have a deaf child, don't panic. The doctors might give you some misinformation. When a child is born deaf, the doctors want to implant straight away. You don't need to do that. Wait until the child understands what a cochlear is. Parents need to sign. Sign language is the best thing you can give to the child.

DION: That's what happened to me when I was growing up. I spoke. I signed. I had the cochlear implant and had the benefit of all three.

BEC: When I was switched on two weeks after the surgery, it sounds like R2D2 yelling in my left ear.

ANDY: It was one of the worst, most probably deflating times in my whole journey when they switched that on. It was robotic, it sounded like I was in a computer game. I couldn't recognise sounds straight away. It was grinding; it was internal. The sound felt like there was vibrations in the skull. I could hear myself, I could interact with crew, but there was a lot of work in it.

BEC: It was, like, six months of rehab training to learn how to hear again. I'm not 100 per cent there yet. I'm still learning how to hear.

ANDY: So this is my cochlear implant, all right, so basically there's two parts of it. There's an internal part, that's the implant. This external part, that's the processor. That's like the microphone that picks up the sound and brings it into the ear. So it's just like a mechanical, a bionic ear.

BEC: It's not R2D2 any more but it is harsh digital sounds. So it's like this sharp filter over every sound in my left ear. It's not natural sounding.

RUSTY: The new cochlear has a system that can link to your phone, so you can listen to music or listen to the teacher's voice. I love it.

ANDY: So now, like with all Apple music or anything on the Net, all my phone calls stream straight into my head. As the implant's improved, it's upgraded. The clarity of it is phenomenal. I can hear my kids whisper. Like, I'm functioning at the highest level I could possibly function at with it within what I consider to be hearing. And that word "disability", that's not the case. I'm actually more abled in a lot of situations now.

DION: I made the decision to remove the cochlear, I just felt disconnected from the whole experience. I've since had 16 years of life without it. I love my identity. I'm very proud of my deaf culture. That's my identity.

ANDY: What's your favourite band and how you do you experience music?

RUSTY: Well, I love music. I love songs. So my favourite music is hip hop and rap.

DAMO: I don't really have a favourite as such. I don't really have any interest in music any more.

NES: One Direction. But you know, they don't exist any more! That band's finished.

BEC: I like Taylor Swift. A lot of pop stuff. Because I'm using my ears, it takes me a while before I can enjoy a song. So I've got to hear it enough times that I know what's happening to enjoy it.

WESLEY: Oh man, I'm an AC/DC fan. Heavy metal!

DION: My experience of music? None. As long as it's got good bass and I can feel the bass, that's it.

ANDY: The language of sound, for me after that instant loss, turned into vibration. And I crave that. Definitely crave some kind of feedback like your body would do anything to get some kind of feedback when something's lost.

RUSTY: I like to feel the speakers. Sometimes, in the music class at school, I put my head on the speaker and feel the vibrations and the beat. And it makes sense.

DION: One thing I love is to walk up to the big speakers and feel the vibration really close to my ear. I love that. It doesn't hurt my ears, which is great.

WESLEY: I play AC/DC music very loud! With bass on. I've got a 7,000 watt home theatre sound system with a massive TV with four subwoofers. It's awesome! Some of my kids will walk in and go "Shhh I'm sleeping" because they can feel their bed vibrate with the bass.

DION; I can dance. As long as the music is on the floor. With timber floors, there are good vibrations and it's perfect. If it's concrete I won't feel it.

BEC: Do people treat you like you're stupid?

RUSTY: A lot of people think I am stupid.

ANDY: I don't personally feel that just due to my circumstances that anyone would treat me stupid, it's only by my actions am I treated stupid and that's deserved.

NES: People always assume I'm stupid. They think that my brain is not okay. They think I am stupid because I can't speak.

DAMO: A lot of people treat me like shit.

RUSTY: Hearing people think deaf people are stupid, but deaf people also think hearing people are stupid.

BEC: Now because I communicate well, I don't experience that so often. But I definitely struggled with that a lot in school, like, my teachers would be the ones who would assume my intelligence was really low.

DAMO: Some people bully a deaf person. I used to get into lots of fights at school when I was growing up, especially in high school. That's why I didn't have many friends growing up.

RUSTY: I get a lot of bullying and I really hate it. Most of the time I don't want to go to school because of that. But I still go to school, because I know that it's important for me. But I don't feel safe sometimes.

DAMO: When I was 11, I met more deaf people, I got more involved with the deaf world and I started signing a lot more. I became more involved with the deaf community and my sign language improved and my life turned around.

RUSTY: Sometimes I try to make new friends with hearing kids, but it's hard because hearing people don't know how to sign and some people don't understand my voice. I just have to accept that.

DAMO: Unfortunately I lost my job six months ago. I was looking for a job day and night, up all night sending emails. When I apply for a job, I never say that I'm deaf. When I go into the interview and tell them I'm deaf, their expressions are like this – "Ahhh ..." and they panic. They don't know what to do. I say, "I can work. I've got hands. I'm physically fine. What's wrong?" And their expressions are like "Woah!"

WESLEY: Same with me. I'd been looking for a job. Plastering, concreting, bricklaying - and I couldn't get one. I gave up and bought myself a business. Get fenced! I got myself a fencing business.

RUSTY: I want you to know that deaf people are not dumb. That's it.

ANDY: Is it hard to flirt in sign language?

NES: I would not know.

BEC: I've never tried.

DION: I have. Heaps of times.

NES: I'm good at doing it through writing. I use my skills with words to flirt.

RUSTY: Sometimes I send GIFs or short videos on a text. It's a bit similar to signing, so most people will understand.

NES: It's really hard because you can't flirt through an interpreter. I don't want a third person in the room. What happens if you want to have sex? You don't want an interpreter there.

DION: I have a few signs—I'll pick them up.

DAMO: That's an easy one.

WESLEY: You and me, we'll have a drink? We'll go for a walk? Have a drink?

DAMO: Easy as.

DION: It's a deaf thing. We're very blunt.

ANDY: I've been way more flirtatious since I was deaf than what I was beforehand. You're forced to adjust to communicate, to have that eye contact and yeah to be face to face. There's no distractions if you're in a conversation with somebody that's deaf, and the ladies seem to like that.

RUSTY: I'd prefer to have a hearing girlfriend, not a deaf girlfriend, because I want to be a normal person.

WESLEY: It's easy to flirt. You just say, "Do you want to learn to sign? I can teach you the alphabet." That's how you pick up a woman and go home.

RUSTY: Well, I'm single now.

DAMO: I've had a few successful nights too, teaching sign language.

WESLEY: But we're already married. Damn it!

NES: What do you wish you could hear?

BEC: Fire alarms so that I don't die.

RUSTY: I wish I could hear without my cochlears because that would be easier for me.

NES: It would be nice to hear people's voices.

DAMO: I'd love to hear my children laughing. I see them smiling, but I can't hear their laughing. I can feel their voice when they do it, but I don't hear them. With a hearing aid on, it's not the same.

DION: I wish I could hear my wife singing. I wish I could listen to my wife's big family's in-depth conversations. I'd love to be involved.

WESLEY: I wish I could hear my kids' voices and the car mechanics tuning. I want to hear the tappets.

BEC: I kind of get anxious when I meet someone who could have an accent because I don't know how I'll be able to communicate. And same with speaking on the phone, I get really anxious before

answering or making a phone call because I don't know how well I'll be able to communicate. So to be able to hear well in those two situations would be a real game changer for me, I think.

DAMO: Sometimes I wish I was hearing, but most of the time I prefer being deaf. It's peaceful. Sometimes I wish I had a switch I could turn on and off.

RUSTY: I always want to be hearing. I don't like being deaf. Me, I don't like it. But unfortunately I was born deaf.

ANDY: Wish is a pretty powerful word. I wish for a lot more things other than my ability to hear. You know, for my kids' health, happiness, to have time and have space, and those things. That's what I wish more for, but yeah, nothing to do with my hearing do I have any wishes.

DAMO: Last one. Yeah me, you, okay me, whatever.

DION: When do you use being deaf to your advantage?

WESLEY: Oh yes, all right okay. Many times, all the time.

ANDY: I use being deaf to my advantage daily. Especially like at home with stuff I don't want to do, with my wife, you know, she's asking me to do chores. I use it.

WESLEY: When my kids or wife are arguing with me, I just turn around and walk off.

RUSTY: I can take my cochlear implants off any time I want, like, if there is a baby screaming.

BEC: Sometimes when I'm on the train, I'll just switch off because there's all this noise, everyone's sitting down and talking, and it's too much. So I'll just switch off and be like Yep and read my book.

DION: At night time when I'm sleeping, I'm out of it. It's perfect. I don't have to worry about outside noises. I don't have to worry about background noises like sirens.

RUSTY: When I don't want the teacher to know what I'm saying to my friends, I just shut my mouth and sign to them, "This teacher is annoying me."

WESLEY: At nightclubs, when you walk in the door, they say "\$15 cover charge". I say, "No, I'm deaf. I'm not paying to go in because I can't hear the band. I'm just spending money on alcohol. That's it." "All right, in you go."

DION: When I'm around the deaf community, the Deaf Club or deaf events, I have a strong connection. It's like my second home. This is my language, my culture. I don't have to worry about talking, or English. Nothing. Freedom! Connection!

DAMO: I'm proud to be deaf. That's the truth. Because of the language, sign language. Signing, miming - the language is beautiful! It's different, it's expressive, it's awesome! I love being in the deaf community. I want to see deaf and hearing people working together as equals. That's the goal.

NES: Most people think you'd need to be able to hear and see to do everything, but they never try to put themselves in my shoes. I'd like people to try to walk in my shoes for one day. You know, it's not as bad as you think. It's different.

RUSTY: I want hearing people to know that deaf culture is awesome. And we're not stupid. And it's easy to talk to us. Just learn some signs. That's it.

INTERVIEWER: Cool, that was awesome! Hey, it was fantastic talking to you, thank you.

ANDY: Oh no, thank you.

INTERVIEWER: Well done.

BEC and DION: Yay.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of those questions?

RUSTY: Some were a bit weird. Some were okay.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel after the interview?

NES: Exhausted.

INTERVIEWER: thanks, guys.

DAMO and WESLEY: Thanks, my friend. Thank you.

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