

**Freestyle Note:** Kia ora whanau – use this space to write a message & let your loved one know why you thought they'd be interested in this article.

### Put yourself in my shoes: **I'm Deaf & in Prison**

**Like all Opal's I met a wide-variety of people during my years in prison. The memory of one person remains vivid in my mind even though many years have passed between now and then. This person was a friend of mine even though we'd never shared even one conversation ... because she was deaf.**

Every-day was a trial for her because of her inability to communicate her needs. At time's her frustration would spill over into what the guards would call 'difficult behaviour.' And so she was constantly getting into trouble and being segregated from the general population. Seeing this cycle repeat over and over made me realise that life for a deaf person or any person with a disability in prison automatically makes your time a hell-of-a- lot harder.

**&** If you're a prison guard please don't think I'm having a dig at you, because I'm not: Being confronted with someone so frustrated that they want to lash out at you would be enough to try the patience of a saint!

#### **So what's the answer?**

Okay well I don't have any magic answer, but here's some ideas for us Opals to think on:

- Be mindful of any Opal people who're deaf, because they're doing it 'harder than we are.'
- Set yourself a project of learning some basic sign language skills so you can communicate.
- Try not to get angry if ever a deaf person gets angry at you. Once the person I knew got violent towards me after a miss-communication. Normally in the setting (prison!) I would have responded bluntly - but I held my temper in check. Why? Because I would have been wrong to re-act and I know that if I had re-acted that I would've been forever regretful.
- Try and assist any Opal deaf person with the prison staff - because you'll get to know them a bit better.
- Knowledge is power - learn as much as you can about as much as you can:

To help build your knowledge bank - Suss out this article I found for you:

## The Isolation of Being Deaf in Prison

By JEREMY WOODY as told to [CHRISTIE THOMPSON](#)

SOURCE: <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2018/10/18/the-isolation-of-being-deaf-in-prison>

When I was in state prison in 2013, I heard about a class called “Motivation for Change.” I think it had to do with changing your mindset. I’m not actually sure, though, because I was never able to take it. On the first day, the classroom was full, and the teacher was asking everybody’s name. When my turn came, I had to write my name on a piece of paper and give it to a guy to speak it for me. The teacher wrote me a message on a piece of paper:

"Are you deaf?"

"Yes, I’m deaf," I said.

Then she told me to leave the room. I waited outside for a few minutes, and the teacher came out and said, “Sorry, the class is not open to deaf individuals. Go back to the dorm.”

I was infuriated. I asked several other [deaf guys in the prison](#) about it, and they said the same thing happened to them. From that point forward, I started filing grievances. They kept denying them, of course. Every other class—the basic computer class, vocational training, a re-entry program—I would get there, they would realize I was deaf, and they would kick me out. It felt like every time I asked for a service, they were like, fuck you, no you can’t have that. I was just asking for basic needs; I didn’t have a way to communicate. And they basically just flipped me the bird.

While I was in prison they had no American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters. None of the staff knew sign language, not the doctors or the nurses, the mental health department, the administration, the chaplain, the mail room. Nobody. In the barbershop, in the chow hall, I couldn’t communicate with the other inmates.

When I was assaulted, I couldn’t use the phone to call the Prison Rape Elimination Act (a [federal law meant to prevent sexual assault in prison](#)) hotline to report what happened. And when they finally sent an interviewer, there was no interpreter. Pretty much everywhere I went, there was no access to ASL. Really, it was deprivation.

I met several other deaf people while I was incarcerated. But we were all in separate dorms. I would have liked to meet with them and sign and catch up. But I was isolated. They housed us sometimes with blind folks, which for me made communication impossible. They couldn’t see my signs or gestures, and I couldn’t hear them.

They finally celled me with another deaf inmate for about a year. It was pretty great, to be able to communicate with someone. But then he got released, and they put me with another blind person.

When I met with the prison doctor, I explained that I needed a sign language interpreter during the appointment. They told me no, we’d have to write back and forth. The doctor asked me to read his lips. But when I encounter a new person, I can’t really read their lips. And I don’t have a high literacy level, so it’s pretty difficult for me to write in English. I mean, my language is ASL. That’s how I communicate on a daily basis. Because I had no way to explain what was going on, I stopped going to the doctor.

My health got worse. I came to find out later that I had cancer. When I went to the hospital to have it removed, the doctor did bring an interpreter and they explained everything in sign language. I didn’t understand, why couldn’t the prison have done that in the first place? When I got back to prison, I had a lot of questions about the medicines I was supposed to take. But I couldn’t ask anyone.

I did request mental health services. A counselor named Julie was very nice and tried her best to tell the warden I needed a sign language interpreter. The warden said no. They wanted to use one of the hearing inmates in the facility who used to be an interpreter because he grew up in a home with deaf parents.

But Julie felt that was inappropriate, because of privacy concerns. Sometimes, we would try to use Video Remote Interpreting, but the screen often froze. So I was usually stuck having to write my feelings down on paper. I didn’t have time to process my emotions. I just couldn’t get it across. Writing all that down takes an exorbitant amount of time: I’d be in there for 30 minutes, and I didn’t have the time to write everything I wanted to. Julie wound up learning some sign language.

But it just wasn’t enough.

My communication problems in prison caused a lot of issues with guards, too. One time, I was sleeping, and I didn’t see it was time to go to chow. I went to the guard and said, "Hey man, you never told me it was chow time." I was writing back and forth to the guard, and he said he can’t write

because it's considered personal communication, and it was against prison policy for guards to have a personal relationship with inmates. That happened several times.

I would have to be careful writing notes to officers, too, because it looked to the hearing inmates like I was snitching.

Once they brought me to disciplinary court, but they had me in shackles behind my back, so I had no way to communicate.

Two of the corrections officers in the room were speaking to me. All I saw were lips moving. I saw laughter. One of the guards was actually a pretty nice guy, one of the ones who was willing to write things down for us deaf folks. He tried to get them to take the cuffs off me.

He wrote, guilty or not guilty? But the others would not uncuff me. I wanted to write not guilty. I wanted to ask for an interpreter. But I couldn't.

They said, "OK, you have nothing to say? Guilty."

That infuriated me. I started to scream. That was really all that I could do. They sent me to the hole, and I cried endlessly. It's hard to describe the fury and anger.

Prison is a dangerous place for everyone, but that's especially true for deaf folks.

*Freestyle Notes Area* : use this space to write down any notes or ideas that you have: Do you know any deaf people? Do you think Jeremy's experience was usual or unusual for Opal people & most importantly - what can YOU do to make a difference?

