

MPs TARGETED DURING DEAF AWARENESS WEEK

MPs were put through their paces during Deaf Awareness Week in May by Julie Ryder and colleagues from HearFirst – a training company set up by Julie in 2002, after she became profoundly deaf in her mid 20s.

At HearFirst, all trainers are passionate about teaching the hearing world to understand more about the communication needs of deaf people. The organisation is now celebrating the training of over 25,000 people in businesses and organisations across the UK in the last ten years, including running a long term programme in the House of Commons.

Julie talks to Drum about her deaf awareness training programmes.

What do you hope HearFirst will achieve?

I founded HearFirst as a direct result of becoming gradually profoundly deaf in my 20s. I had a cochlear implant in my 30s and felt change was needed, particularly across the public sector to give their workforce skills and confidence to meet the needs of deaf customers and colleagues.

HearFirst aims to deliver workplace training that will result in real changes being made for deaf and disabled people when they access services or when they are in their employment. Deaf and hard of hearing employees are often isolated at work and are expected to perform at the same level with minimal support. We fully understand what that is like and many of us at HearFirst have been in similar positions.

We deliver tailored half day deaf awareness sessions to hearing staff, developed around the job roles and specific communication preferences. Even over a half day we can see people's attitudes change as they start to understand more about deafness and communication. The sessions help people open up, discuss the issues in a positive way and move forward to work together more harmoniously. In other situations, where the deaf person is the customer or a member of the public, the training is geared up for front-line staff and focuses on a

range of communication methods, preferences and likely scenarios.

Whilst everyone enjoys attending a HearFirst training course, we want participants to go away and actually change what they do once they return to their role.

How do you run HearFirst?

I run HearFirst with my husband Matthew. He keeps the office organised whilst I am out and about at meetings and delivering training. We also have a team of professional tutors who continue to deliver outstanding training. Many of them are deaf or disabled themselves.

My weeks are always varied and tasks include delivery of training courses anywhere in the UK, developing new and bespoke training, chasing up clients for new training dates and liaising with our clients and tutors.

How effective is your work in the House of Commons?

Last autumn we won a contract to supply deaf awareness training to staff at the House of Commons. We then contacted our local MP Jake Berry and he subsequently supported us in putting on a special one-off deaf awareness event for MPs at Westminster during Deaf Awareness Week in May.

We were impressed with all the MPs who attended the deaf awareness event in May.

Many of them spent longer than we anticipated learning more about deafness and communication methods. They were really interested and open to new ways of working.

Can you give an example of a scenario a deaf tutor used in training with the MPs?

We gave the MPs four scenarios which included different types of deaf people in various familiar situations. We asked them to think about communication barriers and then discussed solutions to improve access.

1. A hard of hearing person (who has hearing aids and lip reads) attends a public meeting.
2. A deafened lady meets you in your constituency office to discuss a controversial planning decision.
3. A British Sign Language (BSL) user is having difficulty accessing the information on your website.
4. You are on the election trail and call at the house of a deafblind person.

Chloe Smith is MP for Norwich North and she has experience of holding surgery appointments using a British Sign Language interpreter for her constituents. She commented, "I fully support initiatives like

this run by HearFirst which are aimed at improving understanding of the needs of deaf people. Learning about the communication needs of people who are deaf or hard of hearing has helped me to understand some of the difficulties people in Norwich and across the country have to live their lives on a daily basis. I encourage others to join me in ensuring that the correct support and awareness is in place. Many people may not realise the barriers faced by people who are hard of hearing and how small changes can significantly improve communication."

What is life like for you outside HearFirst?

I'm a busy person and I love that! Apart from working full time, I am mum to two teenagers. They both play in a local Scout brass band and because of their involvement I am often there volunteering in all sorts of roles. I'm also a member of Rossendale Disability Forum which aims to bring local disability organisations together to give them a stronger voice. Also, after a training session I delivered to staff at a charity supporting young homeless people in supported lodgings, I was asked to become involved as a trustee which I am now also enjoying.

To find out more about HearFirst visit: www.hearfirst.org.uk

At the age of 21, Julie Ryder began to lose her hearing whilst at work and initially found some help from hearing aids. However, over a period of seven years, she reached a level of profound deafness in both ears.



In 2002 Julie received her Cochlear™ Nucleus® implant system and she says that this was a moment when she felt her life had begun again. Julie has since been very active in setting up organisations to support children and adults through deaf and disability awareness training.

Julie has won the Sound Barrier Star Awards 2009, she was regional winner of Barclays Trading Places Awards in 2008 and runner up in the Disabled Entrepreneur of the Year in 2007. HearFirst were finalists in the EVA Awards and the Digital Entrepreneur Awards in 2012.

Julie, who is now 42, lives in Lancashire with her husband Matthew and two teenage children.