



TURN ON  
THE LIGHT  
MUMMY  
I CAN'T  
HEAR

Written and Compiled by  
**ANNE HAILES**

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**During June 1988 an important document was launched at a press reception held in Belfast's Europa Hotel**

The author and project leader was SUSAN PHOENIX, research psychologist for the deaf who, with a team of four, surveyed for the first time the state of the deaf population in Northern Ireland with detailed reference to their educational experience, employment and social situation.

It took two years to compile all the statistics and altogether almost 100 people were interviewed.

The finished product was an attractive

brochure containing vital information for anyone involved with the deaf community and an interesting document for every member of the public who cares about their fellow men and women.

The team under Susan's leadership were, project supervisor - VALERIE SHANKS-PEPPER, interview team - RAYMOND HOLLYWOOD, MARY McKERNAN and CHRISTINE McDONNELL.

The recommendations, if adopted, would be wide ranging and would certainly improve the quality of life for many deaf people in the province.

## THE FIRST NORTHERN IRELAND SURVEY INTO THE LIVES OF DEAF ADULTS.

I met my first deaf adult friend in 1976 when moving into a new area and discovering that my neighbour was profoundly deaf. We were of a similar age and mothers of growing children. It was an education for me to begin to realise just how much I would have missed from my life if I had been born deaf like my friend.

With her encouragement I began to meet younger deaf people in local clubs and I really witnessed frustration in the lives of these intelligent youngsters. I had an idea that perhaps I could help in some way within the teenage population, but was not certain how to be constructively helpful rather than patronising at that time. I decided that I needed more scientific facts to look at causes rather than dive in head first with the wrong medicine.

It was 1982 before I was in a position to carry out a mini survey under the guidance of the Reverend George Grindle as a thesis for my honours degree in Psychology from the then Ulster Polytechnic.

The picture then, as now, was of a frustrated, sometimes bitter group of parents and teenagers looking for some kind of access to the real world that they envisaged should be theirs.

'Isolation' was a word that came easily to that early unpublished report. The teenagers were sitting at home either unemployed or under-employed, yearning for deaf friends to visit them and for any kind of communication that would teach them about life.

In 1987 I was delighted to be asked to

design a larger survey by my colleague Valerie Shanks from Dungannon Development Association.

My degree was finished and I had been involved in two separate pilot projects in the interim period. Those projects were with preschool deaf children and a group of seventeen year olds who needed social skills training and remedial help before having the confidence to go on to employment.

I had therefore begun to fill in more parts of the picture in a more intimate way. I had in fact drawn up plans for a training and further education unit for those deaf adults and teenagers who I now know desperately needed such help. I was also in the process of designing a series of parent workshops to support and train parents who were asking for help with their young children.

However, I know that facts were needed to convince Government Departments that more should be done for the deaf population, their families and also those professional supporters who had been striving to provide services in very difficult and isolated situations.

It was not an easy task to help deaf interviewers to draw up a suitable list of questions and then learn how to interview their deaf peers in the most effective way. We all managed to learn together in a mutually supportive way and the resulting team spirit was very uplifting.

Whilst the interviewers were out on the road I was able to continue my personal research and developments with school age

children and their families, whilst simultaneously developing the plans for some kind of training and further education scheme.

Life from 1986 to 1988 has therefore been far from dull!

I have seen my deaf colleagues develop tremendous resilience in the face of quite unwarranted criticisms from the most surprising quarters. We have all considered giving up on several occasions - indeed well paid jobs are very difficult to refuse when yet another broadside has been delivered from behind a barrier of mis-communication yet again. I personally hope that the publication of the survey by the Dungannon Development Association Team will provide a focus for many different groups to help build new foundations together in Northern Ireland's deaf world.

A publication was not intended in the initial stages, until I sat down at the Easter of 1987 and started to collate the information. I then realised that funds would be needed to print and disseminate such revealing thoughts from deaf people. It was very encouraging when the Royal National Institute for the Deaf agreed to pay for the launch and publication of this Report after a personal visit to their Education Officer whilst I was lecturing at a psychiatric unit for the deaf in London.

Since the report was published we have tried to initiate some of the thirteen recommendations on an almost non-existent budget. It has been very satisfying to see what a little money and a lot of motivation can do.

We have organised successful Parent Workshops in several country areas of Northern Ireland. Their success lies in the mixing of deaf adults and parents to help each other. Deaf people are slowly learning about counselling and social skills and the parents learn what they can expect for the children of future



Mary McKernan with the interim report on a pilot survey of deaf adults in Northern Ireland

years.

We have also initiated an adult basic education project - again with many willing volunteers, the good will of Rupert Stanley College, adult literacy departments and the support of Bryson House on allocating premises.

Thus 1988 has been a year of progress in many ways. The report has already encouraged some Government Departments to consider funding training schemes for deaf and hearing people in the future.

I am at long last being able to formalise those three year old tentative plans into a technology and communicator's project for 1989.

Co-operation between voluntary and statutory groups is slowly taking off with a little careful nurturing from several people from different areas of interest, hopefully all sharing a common aim - a better future for today's deaf children.

Susan Phoenix 1988.