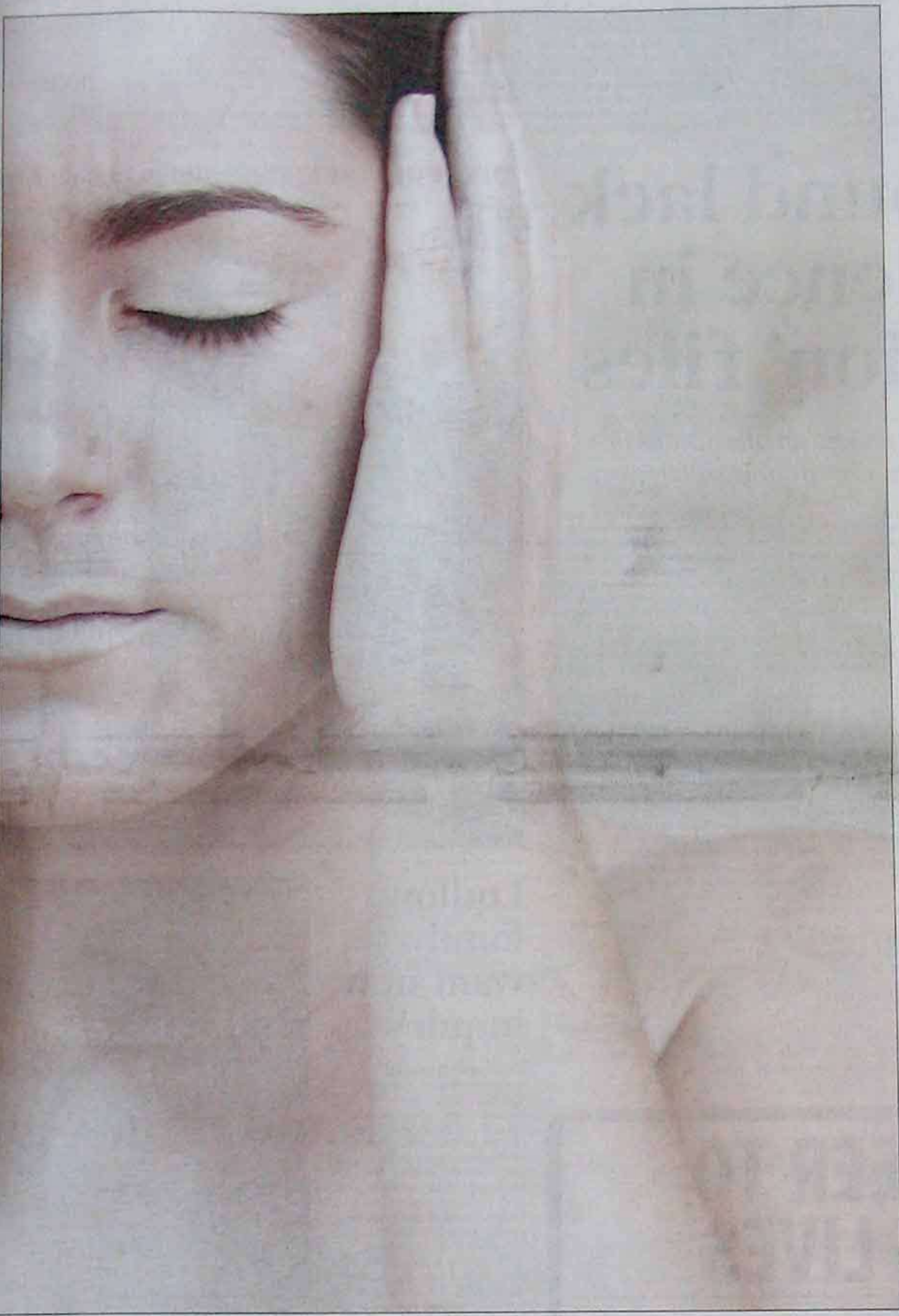


Deaf, not dumb

The students of St Mary's School for Deaf Girls are tired of people assuming that they can't speak – or, worse, are stupid. That's why they've set out to improve understanding between the deaf and hearing communities, writes Gráinne Fallor



How to talk to deaf people

Did you know that more than one person in six suffers from some form of hearing loss? So it seems strange that we're not more aware of it. There is a spectrum of hearing loss, ranging from mild to profound. Many people suffer hearing loss as they get older; it can have a profound effect, as deafness is not just a loss of sound perception. It can interfere seriously with your ability to interact with the world.

There are simple things everyone can do to improve their communication with people who are hard of hearing or deaf. You can make conversation much easier for everyone, for example, simply by using some common sense.

- ◆ Face the person. If they can't see your lips, they can't understand you.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to attract their attention if they're not looking your way.
- ◆ Make eye contact and don't start speaking until they're looking at you.
- ◆ Can the person see you properly? Are you too far away? Is there enough light on your face? Are you on the same level?
- ◆ Avoid communicative noises such as "Mmm." Instead, nod and use body language where appropriate.
- ◆ Don't move your head too much, though. Speak clearly, perhaps a little slower than usual, but use your normal rhythm of speech.
- ◆ Don't shout or over-enunciate, which changes the way your lips move – and can embarrass the person you're talking to.
- ◆ Keep your hands away from your mouth.
- ◆ If you're stuck, write down what you want to say.
- ◆ Learn a little sign language. You never know when it might come in handy.
- ◆ Above all, relax. If you're concentrating too much on these tips you're not going to have a very interesting conversation.

◆ Adapted from www.irishdeafociety.ie and www.nadi.ie. These are good sources of general information about deafness and hearing loss, as well as providing information about sign language and classes

When I ask how it has been going, the girls give a polite and universal reply: "Okay."

"Ah, now, tell the truth," says Higgins, laughing.

"Okay, it's hard," says Caroline. "We all decided to have the same hair and make-up and to wear the same T-shirt, and we were trying to get the perfect background for TV. We started with one colour, but then we tried three other backgrounds and asked people's opinions. We changed it over and over, and then we ended up deciding on the first one anyway."

"We've been filming all week," says Higgins. "We don't have the proper equipment, so we have to be really careful to make sure that the signs are clear." Just as hearing teenagers use slang and mumble when they talk, deaf teenagers do the same when they sign. Precision has been an issue.

"We didn't realise ourselves how difficult it was going to be," says Higgins. "We have to do exactly the right signs," says Lynn Fitzpatrick, another student. This is easier for some than for others. Emily Brennan found it particularly hard. "I'm left-handed," she explains. She has had to reverse her signing in order to make her right hand dominant.

With filming finished and the cover designed, the DVD, which is called *Deaf With a Voice*, is ready to be sent to schools. Normally, each member of a mini-company contributes €5 as a starter fund. As there are only seven of them, they have given more than that, which makes it particularly important to use the money carefully.

Instead of mass-producing the DVD, therefore, the girls have written to 50 schools, offering it as a teaching tool; they will make only as many DVDs as they need.

With the two projects on the go, the girls have been working extremely hard to make themselves heard. "We're not dumb, I'd like to tell people that we have an opinion and we have a voice," says Caroline. "It's hard work. But hopefully it'll be worth it."

done surveys of deaf people, and most of them find it insulting, too."

The girls' campaign is attracting publicity. Shirley Higgins, their transition-year co-ordinator, says: "The girls have to be allowed to speak for themselves on something like *Nationwide*, on RTÉ. I really think it's important to also get the point across that just because you're deaf, it doesn't mean that you can't speak. Some of the girls have really excellent speech."

The idea is to change people's ideas about what it is to be deaf. The students want to present their research to the National Association for Deaf People and the Irish Deaf Society, which can

continue with the awareness campaign after this year of research is complete.

Last year St Mary's came joint second in the Young Social Innovators competition. Its project, *Deaf Proud*, produced a learning-resource DVD for schools that wanted to teach sign language. The students, who had never filmed anything before, were satisfied with the content but unhappy with the quality of the DVD. It was decided afterwards to keep the format but to give the filming another go.

This year's transition year decided to remake, market and sell the DVD as their mini-company project. Even with the experience of last year, filming has thrown up some interesting problems.

Where to buy 'Deaf with a Voice', the St Mary's DVD course



Sign of the times: St Mary's seven transition-year students

Sign language is a popular choice for transition-year students, particularly if they are doing the President's Award or a similar scheme. Neale Whelehan, whose Gaisce experience featured in these pages before Christmas, did a 16-week course. "It was hard to grasp at the start, but once I got into it, it was great," he says. "There was a guy on my football team who was deaf. He could read lips, but having a few signs definitely helped."

One of the obstacles for many schools is finding someone to teach sign language, so St Mary's timing is good. Its DVD, *Deaf with a Voice* (right), teaches the basics of Irish Sign Language, with modules on the alphabet, numbers, greetings, pronouns, questions and telling the time. It costs €30 from St Mary's School for Deaf Girls. Contact Shirley Higgins at 01-8385359, 01-8386064 or info@stmarysdeafgirls.ie.



Transition year is often based on teamwork, on classes working together and people pulling their weight. In a big class, a project such as a mini-company isn't too taxing if people co-operate with each other. Split the work and there's plenty of room for other ventures. By that rationale, students in smaller classes will end up with bigger workloads. So a class of only a handful of people would be wise not to be too adventurous, right? Wrong, if the experience of transition-year students at St Mary's School for Deaf Girls, in north Dublin, is anything to go by.

What the seven students lack in numbers they make up for with ambition. The girls are in the middle of two remarkable projects that they hope will improve understanding between the deaf and hearing communities.

First on the agenda is a Young Social Innovators project called *Deaf Not Dumb*. The meanings of words change all the time. Most people know that "gay" used to mean merry and light-hearted, but did you know that "silly" used to mean blessed? "Meat" used to refer to any type of food, and "undertaker" was a general term for an entrepreneur. Likewise, "dumb" used to mean somebody who couldn't talk. Now it is more often used negatively, to insult somebody's intelligence or – as in "dumbing down" – to suggest a decline in standards.

The girls at St Mary's want to raise awareness among the hearing community that the term "deaf and dumb" is no longer acceptable. One of them, Caroline Grotty, says: "The word 'dumb', if you look at it in the dictionary, means stupid. This is the 21st century. It just shouldn't be used any more... We're all deaf students, and we find it insulting. We've