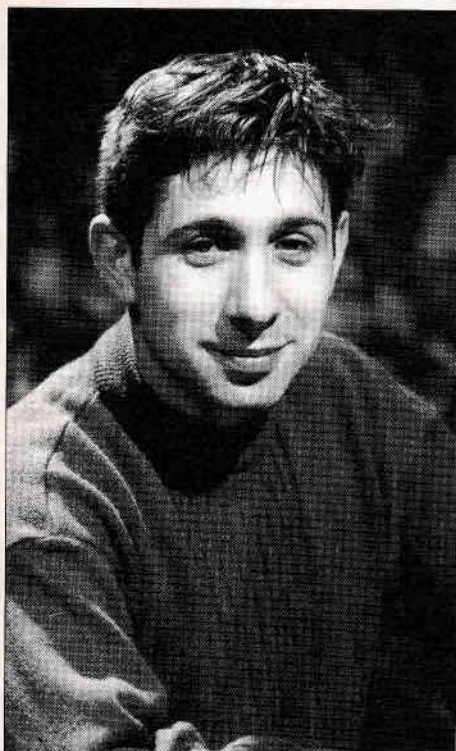




# Face to Face

with Ramon Woolfe



## Ben Steiner

*Ben Steiner has moved from a career interpreting for the BBC TV See Hear! programme to a new post as lecturer at Wolverhampton University, teaching on interpreting issues. Ramon talks to him after baby-sitting with his daughter, Oriele, at his new home in Wombourne.*

**R.W.:** You are entering a new phase of your life. What are the main changes that you are experiencing?

**B.S.:** After leaving school I started studying fine art at University. From there I moved on to interpreting. I felt like a true 'interpreter', working on local jobs in the community, and doing one to one interviews. Then came my career with the BBC. The BBC changed my interpreting role dramatically, influencing my style and my regional signs. I had the eyes of the nation on me and acquired various new skills. Now, as a lecturer, I am glad to share the experiences with my students.

**R.W.:** Could we go back to the changes in your life?

**B.S.:** Ah well, sorry about that. I do tend to waffle off the point. Erm . . . the kind of stresses are now different. When interpreting on See Hear! I used to get stressed processing information, transcribing, signing on CSO (Camera Shot Over), travelling and meeting new people, getting involved in politics and

carrying the interpreter's label. Now, as a lecturer, I work with a different group of people, students on an interpreting course. I pass on to them my experiences and look forward to my students leaving University to work with deaf people. It is an on-going process. In the past, after an interpreting job, I could analyse whether the job was good or bad and the next day I would work with new people and face a different job. But now my everyday actions affect my students' future.

**R.W.:** Can you please share one of your childhood memories with us?

**B.S.:** Erm . . . let's think of one. Oh, yeah. The teachers at my school were strict, they punished naughty children by making them hold heavy books in outstretched arms in the corner of the room! As a child, I was a dreamer and in one maths class I was so deep in a dream that I marked my own work with ticks. All the books were then collected and we were told to do some work while the teacher corrected our work. As the teacher looked at my work, he called out to me and asked how my work had been marked. I replied, "Maybe a fairy did it?" "Uh huh a fairy?" he asked me and I answered, "Yes". He ordered me to put my palm out and he hit it with a ruler. I cried and ran out of class!

**R.W.:** That was a bit cruel! I am absorbed in this picture on your wall which I believe you painted yourself?

**B.S.:** Yes, that is of my mother who was deaf. She died when I was only six years old. People tell me that my sign style and the way I think and appreciate things is just like how my mother did them. I have not seen her for twenty years. My memory of her has become somewhat fragmented like the cartoon character of the big lady in Tom and Jerry cartoons - you only see her body but not the face. I can recall her hands signing but cannot recall much of her face expression. However, she has been the main influence in my life and, like my super ego, she supports me in my everyday decision-making processes. The absence of my mother has helped me to be strong to confront difficult situations in my life, but I feel she is actually behind me encouraging me to do the right thing. She has a deaf brother.



Ben with his Uncle Mika.

**R.W.:** Who?

**B.S.:** Mika Brojer. My Uncle Mika and I became more close when I was aged 14 after I saw him on the BBC's See Hear! programme. I wrote to him asking him to support me with my language as I felt that there was something inside me waiting to develop. Mika met me. We had met before but this time we were on our own. At first I could not sign that much but after meeting him everyday I developed my sign language. Somehow the memories of my mother's image came flooding back and that cartoon fragment image became clearer. Now the rapport between me and my mother has slowly gone and Mika has taken over. He has missed his sister as much as I have missed my mother. He is my inspiration and has enabled me to discover my first language and has helped with problem solving, sometimes acting as my agony uncle. Now that I have reached the age of 26, Mika has let me go a little more and now tells me that it is time for me to take up my own responsibilities. I know it is time for me to grow up!

**R.W.:** How did you meet your girlfriend, Yasmin?

**B.S.:** My uncle worked at the Job Club in North London and Yasmin was there working as a volunteer helping people to write their CVs. I came to see Mika one lunch time and saw her. At that time I had a hearing girlfriend, Yasmin, who is deaf, used to be a dispatcher before becoming a volunteer at the Job Club. When we met for the first time we discussed the Fine Art with Psychology course and she saw me as a young boy. I soon broke up with my girlfriend but never saw Yasmin again until her party to which she invited Mika and me. On the invitation my name was written in small letters whereas Mika's name was in capitals! However, Yasmin was too preoccupied with organising the party and we never got the chance to talk much.

**R.W.:** What happened then?

**B.S.:** We did exchange phone numbers, but I never called her as I thought she would consider herself too old for me, but we met again at another party. This time we had the chance to talk and we became very good friends for the next 3 months. Then one day we realised that what we felt was more than just a great friendship. That day I went to interpret for Gay Pride. I asked Yasmin if she wanted to come along with me and she agreed to it. Deep down I thought she was a lesbian and assumed this even more because she went to the Gay Pride. I did not think that she actually came because of me. She also suspected that I was gay as I had agreed to interpret at the event. Later on we had a candle-lit dinner and I explained that I wanted more than just friendship. She did not understand at first, but she gradually got the message and it developed further.

**R.W.:** Tell me about the birth of your daughter, Oriele.



Ben (right) doing a voice-over.



Yasmin and daughter Orielle.

**B.S.:** Yasmin was pregnant, I could see her tummy growing but I could not believe the fact that I helped to make it grow. I stayed with her through her labour and communicated with her by squeezing her arms, although we had not planned this kind of thing. No words or signs can express my feelings when I first saw Orielle's head. A few days later I drove us all home in the car. I was driving slowly, about 2mph, as I constantly turned round to look at Orielle. It took me about three or four months before I overcame the shock.

**R.W.:** What was your first interpreting experience?

**B.S.:** Gosh! I was about 16 years old, inexperienced and sweated after only five minutes and continued to do so for three hours. Next I was asked to give an invoice (I did not know what an invoice was!) and assumed that the pay rate would be similar to my father's pocket money allowance but I was shocked when I realised that it was more than that!

**R.W.:** As a child what did you want to be when you left school?

**B.S.:** I had always wanted to be an architect. As a little boy I loved art and was quite talented at it. When I was aged 7, my father was wanting to make an extension. I designed the extension taking into consideration the light produced by the sun, the foundations and all the other important factors. But unfortunately we could not afford to have that extension! I had a passion for perspective drawing and,

while my colleagues at school drew two dimensional pictures, I always made my pictures more of a three dimensional image. I loved drawing anatomies like that of the Incredible Hulk with his detailed muscular figure. I went on to college on a Fine Art and Psychology course where I did many figure paintings and

oil paintings. I graduated with a 2.1 degree before I decided to follow a career as an interpreter.

**R.W.:** This question is a request question from a student from the University - what was the most embarrassing moment of your interpreting career?

**B.S.:** (Surprised) Well, erm, one day at a conference I was on the platform after returning from the toilet. I continued to interpret then I noticed that a piece of my white boxer shorts was sticking out of my open fly! (Who was that student!?)

**R.W.:** Tell us about your experience with

the BBC TV's See Hear! programme.

**B.S.:** I worked with them for two and a half years and enjoyed it and learned many new experiences. Working with the TV crews and travelling to different places can be exhausting. It was a struggle sometimes to meet the time limits - to interpret a great deal of information in the short time allowed.

**R.W.:** Why did you decide to leave See Hear!?

**B.S.:** The job at Wolverhampton University came at the right time with perfect facilities and highly motivated students. I felt that with my experience I could contribute a great deal to interpreter training. It has been my dream to see a proper training centre for interpreters where they could learn about the many issues involved and learn from their mistakes before entering the real interpreting world. The training course is a safe place to go through mistakes and learn. Moreover, the life within the University environment is something that I had missed in my time and I really love it. The students' motto is 'think hard and play hard'. Students are the only people who know how to party! Maybe as a lecturer I can't fit in with them but I can always watch them!

**R.W.:** Like goldfish in a bowl! Thanks for agreeing to take part in this Face to Face interview.

**B.S.:** Thanks old friend.

**First of all, I would like to say how delighted I was to receive letters and faxes with various positive comments on my column. This has encouraged me to write more articles about everyday life and issues surrounding Deaf children and their families. Thank you all very much indeed.**

One Deaf mother from London wrote me a letter about her struggle to keep the club for Deaf children and their hearing siblings going. Fortunately it has expanded since 1989 to fifty children, half of whom are Deaf. The club organises various events throughout the year for the children.

The highlight so far was a trip to Finland to see Father Christmas. How about beating that?

The reason for setting up this club was that this mother found her Deaf son feeling very isolated during the weekends and holidays. She commented that he now has the confidence to travel to see his friends, both Deaf and hearing, in his home area. This mother thinks there should be similar clubs nationwide for Deaf and hearing children of Deaf and hearing families.

Thank you, and please send any more ideas or comments to me c/o. 'Deaf

Mother's Column', British Deaf News, at the address on page 3.

Now, how many of you saw that harrowing programme 'Return to the Dying Rooms' on Channel Four recently? It was about China, where some parents abandoned their baby daughters just because they were girls. The babies were put in 'orphanages' where the nurses had the power to decide which children could be tied up and left to starve slowly to death.

The film crew came across a 'Deaf mute', a tiny little girl about two years old, tied to her bed frame and left to die. What was more shocking

was that the nurse explained how the Deaf girl was so quiet, thus 'mute', because she did not scream in agony like the others.

It made me wonder - was it really because of her deafness or 'handicap' that the parents rejected her, or was it because she was a girl? We will never know, but how many other little Deaf children end their lives that way in the large and secretive China?

There was an hour-long debate after that documentary, but there were no subtitles. How's that for Deaf parents' access? Frustrating!



**A Deaf Mother's Column**  
by Tessa Padden