

Genesis

EDITED BY GLORIA TESSLER

Children of a lesser God speak out

The Jewish Deaf Association has launched a major fund-raising campaign. Gloria Tessler finds out what life is like for young people in a silent world

Have you ever thought what it must be like to be deaf — to live in a world slowed

down by silence, where reality is conveyed by mime and language reduced to a verbal shorthand?

Jacqueline Nead of Bushey was born with only 10 per cent hearing. When the doctor told her mother, Debbie, to put her in a school for the deaf and forget about her, Debbie responded by talking to her daughter non-stop as she sat with gadgets on her ears and box receivers on her chest. She described the garden, the chores, "anything, in order to get sound into her life." Fourteen years later Jacqueline's bedroom wall is papered with certificates from colleges of dance, music, speech, drama and poetry-reading, a total teenage testimonial. With the help of her hearing aid she plays the organ and piano and listens to pop music. Posters of Tom Cruise peer down from the opposite wall.

With slices of birthday cake around her on the kitchen table, the graceful teenager, her quiet beauty thrown into relief by her startling copper hair, sits assessing her life so far. "I think I'm quite a patient person, really, but I get upset if I can't catch up at school." Her parents, hanging on every word, burst our laughing. The teasing cannot mask the tensions of love, dedication and anxiety which have moulded her.

Jacqueline today does not need to sign, lip-reads fluently and speaks with only the slightest lisp. At her competitive private school, St Helen's in Northwood, where she plans to take eight GCSE subjects, she has to work much harder than anyone else, communicating with the teacher by hearing aid and a microphone.

Like the deaf heroine of Mark Medoff's play, "Children of a Lesser God," her life is a battle for recognition.

Jacqueline exhibits the sheer energy and tenacity you sometimes see in the profoundly deaf, as though losing her grip will condemn her to the silence of which those with no handicap have little understanding.

Sometimes that silence is truly golden. By taking off her hearing aid, Jackie is free from the incessant noise that assails the rest of us. Alone within the pulsating murmur that is her true experience of sound, Jackie is aware that most people talk too much, and can be insensitive. "They can talk around me, or

have a telephone permanently attached to their ear. As I can't use the phone, I write letters. But most people don't reply."

Most cruel is the enduring view that the deaf are stupid. The "deaf and dumb" concept has been largely discredited thanks to a Jewish paediatrician at Hillingdon Hospital, Dr Sam Tucker, who helped pioneer a computer cradle some 10 years ago which tested new-borns for deafness, enabling science to maximise their full hearing potential. But the ancient shibboleth persists. Debbie still asserts that many children who are deaf have simply not been taught how to speak.

The concept of deafness has barely entered the Nead vocabulary; all her life Jackie has mixed with hearing people. But when she was younger there were parents who refused to allow their children to play with her, as though deafness were a contagious disease. The excessive concentration she needs for schoolwork can be tiring. She finds English difficult because she misses the nuances of language; yet she compensates by reading as much as possible, favouring authors like Charlotte Bronte whose imagination and exciting language stimulate her.

Jackie is disturbingly grateful towards considerate people who "tell me what they are talking about. I have four very good friends, though, and I am drawn to people according to the way they are with me." Her fragile view of the world obviously cements the powerful female bond — between mother, daughter and supportive 16-year-old sister, Joanna. But some teenagers would balk at Debbie's protectiveness. Jackie, who goes to Habonim and BBYO, is not



Steven Bloomfield



Jacqueline Nead

allowed to go to clubs during the week, and if she goes out with a boyfriend, mum comes too, if only to collect the boy and take them both to and from the cinema.

"Sometimes my friends ask me to help them with homework, and I am always pleased to do so. But when I ask them for help, sometimes they think I only want to copy them."

Also she can't judge whether people are joking or being serious. "You can tell only by the tone in their voice."

Her relationships, Jackie says, are complicated by the fact that "sometimes I forget I am deaf." "Sometimes," interjects Debbie, "so do we. We shout at her because of something a deaf child would do."

Her expansive ambitions include activities like abseiling, windsurfing, and a desire to join the army and learn to use a gun. Despite the serenity of her features, she admits to a touch of aggression. And

although she only mixes in the hearing world, she doesn't think enough is being done for the deaf.

Is Jackie right? What is the Jewish community itself doing for deaf people? A rambling Victorian building in Stamford Hill is the home to the Jewish Deaf Association whose total UK membership is 200, with some 30 of them aged under 30. It seemed ironic that the bustling vitality of the place — a children's tea-party upstairs, a canteen for older members in the basement — should be a silent experience for the members. The JDA is a lively social club and a fund-raiser for most of the deaf community's needs: the minicom telephone system, an induction loop system for synagogues, and environmental aids. I met Simeon Hart from Peterborough, Steven Bloomfield from Hampstead, Leo Mansell from Edgware and Marcel Hirshman from Pinner, aged roughly 18 to mid-twenties.

All are keen sportsmen, most of them were edgy with the desire to communicate. But apart from Steven, who went to public school and was the most articulate, they all went to special schools for the deaf. Steven, who works as an antiques-restorer and meets clients from abroad, described himself as "coming from two worlds, the hearing and the deaf. I like to get information from both." Simeon, a computer programmer, comes from a deaf family and communicates by a combination of notes and lip reading. He believes that many deaf people are lazy. He exudes energy and rarely stops moving. Both he and Marcel, who is studying physics, maths and computer studies at Harrow College of Further Education, find it hard to commun-

icate with hearing people who, mainly "don't enunciate or make sufficient eye contact."

Steven, dark-haired with a calm face, became deaf from a smallpox vaccine at the age of three months. He threw himself into sport, captained the hockey team, but was refused the job of team manager.

"I understood," he said. "I didn't blame them." He didn't blame them, either, when they teased him. "It was natural," he said. "People make fun," agrees Marcel. "You have to face them and not run away."

The group debated their perceptions of the hearing world as showing impatience, ignorance and, in younger people, curiosity. They clearly sensed themselves as being seen in a time-warp, unable to keep up with the inexorable pace of the hearing world.

When it comes to girl-friends, they turn coy. "Some hearing girls are very willing to help. Some understand and try to meet you half-way," says Marcel. What is important to Simeon is the use of body language. "Deaf



Simeon Hart

people are like rubber, more flexible," he explains. "Hearing people are stiff."

Pat Goldring, JDA executive director, says: "Deaf people are the Cinderellas of the charity world. But they are proud. They don't want to be seen to rely on charity."

The best weapon against rejection is achievement. As the four eagerly list their sporting prowess, Simeon sums it up: "I'm proud that my parents brought me up to be independent, able to live my own life."

If you want to help the deaf, phone the JDA on 081-806 6147 or their PR Sharon Graham on 081-900 0475.



Marcel Hirshman



Leo Mansell



A deaf father, Simon Kaufman, with his hearing child, Neil, at a JDA party