

ATTENTION; KIM GUSBERTI - KIM , HEREWITH AS REQUESTED THE FINAL AMENDMENT OF MY TALK AT DARWIN PARLIAMENT HOUSE ON 27TH MAY:

I've been President on and off of the Deafness Association NT for the past 15 years I have a very severe hearing loss and went deaf at the age of seven years, firstly through the middle ear infection which affects so many indigenous people in the Territory, then through noise in the London Blitz. Fortunately my hearing loss was diagnosed early and I sat in front of the class and became an expert lipreader, as there were no hearing aids in those days. I have a small amount of conductive hearing left so I can answer volume enhanced phones with the help of a very powerful bodyworn aid. I mention this because I was not born deaf: I could hear perfectly till the age of seven and was fully verbal. The difference between my loss of hearing and those who are born deaf is wide: those born deaf have never heard sound and so find lipreading very difficult - signing is generally their main means of communication.

I was fortunate recently to attend a Forum at Macquarie University addressed by Donna Lee Sorkin from the USA who was President Clinton's appointee on the US Access Board, which advises the US Congress on the Americans with Disabilities Act - sadly, it seems that American law gives a wider cover for people with disabilities than at present in Australia.

## EDUCATION

I need to speak about the incidence of hearing loss in the Territory. It is estimated that one in seven people in Australia has a significant hearing loss: up here that figure is one in three, because there is such widespread loss among Aboriginal people. They represent almost 30% of our population, and it is estimated that a quarter of the adults and half the children are hearing impaired through the middle ear infection that cost me my hearing when young.

I wish I had a dollar for every time I'm told by people visiting remote indigenous communities that they were moved to tears about the lack of accommodation in the classroom for the children's hearing loss. There are assistive listening devices, primarily the Sound Field system which raises the general level of sound in the classroom. This not very expensive system is provided by limited funding through Australian Hearing (Commonwealth), the State Government not contributing. There is very little understanding of teaching children with a hearing loss, both in the rural and in the urban schools. When I visit classes in Darwin I always ask the children how many of them have suffered from hearing loss when they were young through middle ear infection and invariably about a third of them put up their hands. The teachers are always astonished. Luckily for children in urban areas this infection can quickly be cured with antibiotics: in remote areas it is untreated and goes on to produce a permanent hearing

loss. There is little or no understanding about the fluctuating loss that accompanies this condition. I have had Aboriginal mothers come into the office saying that they have been told their child has little or no hearing loss but they know they have. If I offer a similar bodyworn aid to the one I use, the mothers return saying their child has heard birds/cats/other noise clearly for the first time.

Of particular concern is the lack of special Units for children with a hearing loss. Three years ago our Association applied to the NT Anti-Discrimination Commission because there was no special Deafness Unit after primary school, deaf children being expected suddenly to integrate with mainstream following their very good program of Total Communication at the Stuart Park Primary School deafness unit. This caused serious confusion and depression, and following our application a Hearing-Impaired Unit was set up at Darwin High School, thus enabling deaf children to progress to tertiary education. A year after the Secondary Unit was formed, the Primary Unit at Stuart Park School was closed down. There is a strong philosophy of oral teaching in the NT Education Department, despite (as I said above) children who are born deaf not being able to lipread. It is likely that we shall once again have to approach the Anti-Discrimination Commission to reinstate the Primary deaf unit as it is a disgraceful thing that when I am asked by Interstate parents what facilities we have for their deaf children I have to reply that there is nothing at that level. This lack of early intervention to help our deaf children is unique in Australia: there is no other State or Territory which does not provide specialist teaching for deaf children at both primary and secondary level. Last week I was approached by a speech therapist at Daly River in a remote area for advice on where a profoundly deaf Aboriginal boy of 8 years could be boarded and had to refer her to the Townsend School in South Australia. This is not the first time this has happened.

An excellent report was prepared by Bob Collins 'LEARNING LESSONS' three years ago commissioned by the NT Education Department but little seems to have been done to implement its recommendations. Ongoing effects of absenteeism from classes and subsequent educational under-achievement are profound, with unemployment, depression and suicide resulting. A far cry from the US requirement to provide for "unique" needs.

#### DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Our Association is well aware of this problem, one outstanding example being the tutor of our Signed English class. He came from East Timor when he was young and became severely deaf at the age of six years through over-use of antibiotics. He came from a different language background and had a severe hearing loss, but he was enabled through attendance at the Stuart Park Primary Deafness Unit and through the Secondary Deafness Unit we had then to achieve a Year 12 pass. Despite his being computer literate

and having a likeable personality he has never obtained a permanent job, being employed by Darwin Airport for the past seven years in a part-time capacity. He has learnt in his job applications not to mention that he was educated at Deafness Units, but the fact that he wears two obvious hearing aids (this because of his severe hearing loss, although the aids enable him to hear quite well) he is turned down at every interview. He has even been told the reason for this is because his aids are a give-away to his hearing loss. He has been entered by Quota International for "The Young Achiever of the Year Award" and is certainly a great success among his pupils at our Sign Language classes, most of whom are young teachers. He desperately needs a permanent job because he has just married and his wife is expecting their child, but cannot get a permanent job even loading shelves at the local Supermarket because of the prejudice that exists in the public about hearing loss.

It should surely be a recommendation, as it is in the US, that employers with 15 employees or more be required to provide reasonable accommodation for people with a disability to do their job. Their law prohibits discrimination in employment for people who are qualified to carry out the essential functions for a specific job.

#### ASSISTIVE LISTENING DEVICES AT PUBLIC VENUES

I am at present joined with six other deaf people to take action under the DDA against various hotels which do not provide the basic needs of travellers or those who attend public meetings. These are: TV sets with captioning facilities, telephones which have volume controls, telephone typewriters (TTYs), emergency systems which cater for hearing loss (eg provision of flashing lights), hearing loops for Conventions or Meeting Rooms. I do however think the best way to cope with this lack of provision is through public awareness, and we are at present carrying out a campaign to raise these points among local hotels and Convention rooms. The Member of Parliament for Araluen campaigned successfully recently to have hearing loops installed at the recent Sitting of Parliament in Alice Springs and is checking on the loop for our Legislative Assembly here. We have campaigned to have assistive listening devices installed in the newly-built Casuarina and Palmerston complexes, using the DDA.

By and large we have found that the Act gives good protection and our own NT Anti-Discrimination Commission has done good work on behalf of deaf people, particularly in that it enabled the Darwin High School Deafness Unit to be established. It looks as though we shall once again have to to the omission to reinstate the Stuart Park Primary Deafness Unit as the only way we can get this essential facility up and running.

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HOPE THIS IS OK.    MARY SALTER

