

Communication Access

Stories from our community



'I hear by touch and speak by sign'

Heather's story - When staff are willing to learn, we can talk.

For Heather, touch is most important in her life. Touch is her eye and ear to the world and to people. It is through her sense of touch that she finds ways to communicate with people.

Heather is a deafblind person who is a founding member of Deafblind Victorians.

Heather was born deaf and used Auslan signing as her first language. However, she started to lose her sight in her mid twenties.

At first, she remembers she used to write on paper with a thin regular pen, then she had to use a dark black pen to write and read peoples notes. After some time, she was no longer able to read the thick, dark black pen. It impacted on her badly because she had no communication in the hearing world.

She started practising feeling human fingers writing letters and words on her palm. People used a finger tip to write block letters firmly and slowly on Heathers hand.

Heather has a support worker or interpreter when she goes into the community. When she does go to a shop independently, she shows the shop assistants her special communication book to instruct them how to communicate with her and tell them what she wants. She has braille dymo labels on each card to find the page she needs. Sometimes she writes notes about what she wants, and asks people to reply by writing information on her hand. It may be the price or some information she needs.

Heather communicates in these ways everywhere. At the bank, the tellers have written on her hand to tell her the account balance when she withdraws money. Airline staff have communicated with her through writing on her hand. Staff at Flinders Street station have learnt her way of communicating. It is because they are willing to communicate with her in her way, that it is possible for her to continue to use public transport. She uses gesture and mime to explain she wants to know when the train is coming. Staff will then say 5 minutes on her hand or she feels their fingers by counting them.



It is very important to her that people do it right. They must write on her hand slowly, using big letters and use short sentences. This must be done in the same spot, letter by letter.

It makes her life more relaxed when people communicate with her in the right way.

And that is why she says, 'I hear by touch and speak by sign'. It is through touch that she understands you and through sign and gesture that you understand her.

People made places communication accessible by:

- getting to know Heather and how she communicates
- using Heather's communication method
- doing what Heather asks so she can get her message across
- taking time so Heather can get her message across
- treating Heather with dignity and respect
- treating Heather as a valued customer
- understanding there are different ways to communicate.

**To find out more about Communication Access, please contact
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