

Malta lagging behind in technology and interpreters that could help

Pair reveal glimpse of life in silent world of the deaf

Kim Dalli

You are in an emergency and frantically dial 112 on your mobile phone but being deaf, you are unable to communicate.

Fortunately, Annabelle Cauchi and Steven Mulvaney have never found themselves in such a situation but dread to think what would happen if there was no hearing person to turn to.

"There should be a text messaging service we can use," Ms Cauchi suggests.

"This would also be of benefit to those who have speech difficulties."

"A video phone service that links to a 24-hour sign language interpreter would be of infinite use," Mr Mulvaney adds.

"The service could also be connected to a GPS [global positioning system] that would automatically register our location. All we would have to do is outline the nature of the emergency.

"Many other countries have this system in place. Deaf people are able to save the lives of hearing people," he says.

On their travels abroad, both Ms Cauchi and Mr Mulvaney were impressed with

the services in place allowing deaf people a fuller degree of integration, experiences which, invariably, only served to throw into relief the extent to which Malta lags behind.

Sitting side by side, Mr Mulvaney and Ms Cauchi share their dream of living in a more deaf-friendly environment. Both 26 years old, they come from widely different backgrounds.

Mr Mulvaney, who has been the president of the Deaf People Association (Malta) for the past year, was born profoundly deaf to two deaf parents. His first language is Maltese sign language. His fiancée is also deaf.

"The bouncer thought I was high on drugs. It took a while to convince him I'm deaf and merely enjoying the bass"

"I feel culturally very deaf. I'm happy in both worlds but I feel more comfortable communicating in Maltese sign language," he signs, as the association's secretary, Alison Vere, takes on the role of interpreter and translates into English.

Ms Cauchi, who is also a member of the association and of the Gozo Association for the Deaf, lost her hearing through a viral infection when she was six.

She grew up in a predominantly hearing environment.

Her family and boyfriend - whom she credits with supporting her and pushing her to make her own way in the world - can all hear.

She comes from Gozo and only started mixing with deaf people fairly recently when she began attending the Malta association's deaf club. In Gozo, there are few deaf teens and

adults and they do not hold regular meetings as the Maltese deaf do.

As a result, she can speak excellent Maltese and English and is an accomplished lip reader, but she has yet to hone her sign language skills.

She highlights the importance of having subtitles in airports, government departments and other public places where names are called out.

"Recently, I was in Edinburgh where buses and museums had little screens with subtitles. It helped me enjoy my holiday much more."

Having subtitles and an interpreter on television would also make a major difference to their lives.

"Think about it: a hearing person can watch TV 24/7 and listen to the radio. We cannot listen to the radio and we only have access to the 7.30pm news bulletin, which has an interpreter. If we miss it, we are unable to tune in again."



Annabelle Cauchi can speak excellent Maltese and English and is an accomplished lip reader but she has yet to hone her sign language skills.

Mr Mulvaney recalled the wonderful moment when he was watching a Maltese programme and, suddenly, subtitles appeared across the screen.

"It was great. However, they abruptly stopped, only to reappear after a while. A friend explained that it was because the man was speaking German.

"The technology is there. Why can't we always have it?"

He stressed the need of having people such as policemen and receptionists with basic knowledge of sign language.

Mr Mulvaney recounted how his love for music and society's lack of knowledge once led him into a sticky situation.

"I once was in a nightclub, standing very close to one of the speakers, enjoying the feel of the vibrations ripple through my body. Suddenly, the club's bouncer grabbed me, took me out and led me into a van.

"I couldn't communicate because it was too dark for me to lip read. Eventually, a friend of mine came out to look for me.

"It transpired that the bouncer thought I was high on drugs and alcohol. It took us a while to convince him that I'm actually deaf and was merely enjoying the bass," he laughs.

When it comes to public places, Ms Cauchi mentioned the

importance of having flashing fire alarm systems.

"If I'm with people, I would notice something's wrong through seeing them panic. However, I could be in the bathroom, an alarm goes off and I'm taking all the time in the world."

"Deaf people are able to save the lives of hearing people"

One of the top priorities on their list is lobbying to have more sign language interpreters. There are about 400 deaf and there are only three interpreters.

"Interpreters are very pushed for time. They are mostly based within the Education Division," Mr Mulvaney explains.

"Every time we book one, we're taking that interpreter away from a child.

"Professional interpreters are vital to us in a number of settings. For many of us they are the links that allow us to connect with the rest of the world."

For more details search for Subtitles Now - Malta on Facebook, run by the association, and Annabelle Cauchi's personal page A Silent World.



Steven Mulvaney was born profoundly deaf to two deaf parents. He feels more comfortable communicating in Maltese sign language. Photos: Chris Sant Fournier