

# WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD

**Bethany and Scott are two ordinary teenagers who live  
in the extraordinary world of the deaf.**

**1 hour documentary**



Photograph By: Hana Rose ©2005

*Directed by Helen Gaynor  
Produced by Sally Ingleton*

DEVELOPED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE AUSTRALIAN FILM COMMISSION AND  
FILM VICTORIA.

PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH SBS INDEPENDENT.  
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## WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD

**Bethany** and **Scott** are two ordinary teenagers, who live in the extraordinary world of the deaf. We follow their final few months at school as they prepare for the adult world.

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### SYNOPSIS

**Bethany Rose** and **Scott Masterson** are schoolmates, a couple of energetic and charming teenagers who share 3 things – adolescence, school, and deafness.

We see deafness as a disability to be cured. But to Bethany and Scott, their deaf world is a rich culture of human possibility, with its own language, rules, challenges and inspirations. Above all, it is about seeing, and dancing a language of profound gestural communication. It is a culture that few people know or fully understand.

**WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD** follows Bethany and Scott through the last few months of their schooling at the Victorian College for the Deaf (VCD), Australia's first school for deaf kids, and now the only place that teaches in sign language from Prep to Year 12. With dreams of creative, sporting and academic success, both teenagers are eager to move beyond their sheltered lives and enter the wider world.

Bethany and Scott share a past – once they were girlfriend and boyfriend. Like most teen romances, the relationship was short lived. They also share the experience of being the only deaf child in a hearing home.

Scott's mother is determined that Scott will lead a normal life. This means 'talking' at home, not signing and the idea of a 'disability pension' is off the menu. Instead we see Scott's mother pushing him to finish Year 12 at school and find a real job. Scott struggles to match her ambitions – preferring to play footy, party, chase girls – hearing or deaf - and dream of a new car.

Bethany has left her family in the country to return to Victorian College for the Deaf so she can study in Auslan. She has moved into a friend's bungalow and is now determined to pass Year 12. Bethany has high ambitions – except her interrupted schooling has left her stuck doing subjects that will lead her nowhere. She would love to talk and decides once again to try hearing aids even though she knows they will give her a headache.

This story of two teenagers on the edge of change is really the saga of what it means to be deaf in contemporary Australia. It is an exploration of a culture with its own language and history. Ignored, dismissed, secret – it has persisted and grown through centuries and shows us a different way of communicating, of knowing each other, of being human. Bethany, Scott and the school are its custodians. **WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD** is an insight into their world.

## PRODUCTION STORY

In Conversation with Director Helen Gaynor  
by Kirrilly Brentnall

Before making a film about two deaf teenagers, director Helen Gaynor had never met anyone from the Deaf community. The experienced film director speaks about confronting notions of difference and assumptions about being deaf, in discussing her latest film **Welcome 2 My Deaf World**.

*Through the story of two teenagers the audience witness the life of an average teenager. Exploring their desire to play football, relationships with girls, parental pressures, and facing decisions about life after school. The twist is – Scott and Bethany are deaf and their challenge is not only their transition into adulthood but also their transition from a sheltered deaf environment into the wider hearing world.*

– Helen Gaynor, director of SBSI documentary *Welcome 2 My Deaf World*

On being approached to direct this new documentary screening on SBS Television, Gaynor admits that the very fact that she knew no Auslan (Australian Sign Language) and had no contact with the Deaf community in Melbourne was the very thing that attracted her to the project in the first place. *"I enjoy making documentaries about my own society and exploring lives that I have absolutely no knowledge of. I started out on this project like most audience members knowing nothing about Deaf Culture."*

However, Gaynor did not anticipate how much of a challenge the film would be. It was not the Deafness that was the most difficult aspect but dealing with teenagers. *"By the very nature of being adolescents, teenagers like to keep their personal lives secret - from parents, teachers and adults. The biggest challenge I had as a director was building up an intimacy with the teenagers. At times Scott and Bethany would be incredibly candid and spontaneous and alternatively they would just disappear and not return my text messages. Adolescents are incredibly unpredictable and it is simply a matter of going along with what is affecting them in their lives at the time."*

The determined director persisted with Scott and Bethany to make a film that gets inside the heads of these two youngsters. Dedication to the story resulted in one night, the director and crew sleeping on the fold out bed at Scott's family's home just to get that shot of him being woken up by Mum at 4.30am.

The director's tenacity has paid off with some beautifully constructed and unguarded moments in the film, one stand out scene is when Bethany Rose, sitting in a busy city restaurant, philosophises on how she would behave if she was hearing, *"I'm very friendly, I wish I could just go up to new people and make conversation, like "hi, how are you, where are you from?" and so on. Buy my hearing friends just don't do that. I tell them 'if I was you, I'd be doing that'."*

Building up a relationship with Scott and Bethany was further complicated by the necessity to work through an interpreter. Gaynor effuses gratitude and appreciation for Ntannis Davi, a filmmaker himself who has a long history with the Deaf Community and was on location to interpret and act as an intermediary between the director and her young film subjects. On other film projects Gaynor has had the flexibility to simply pick up the camera and film on her own, but this project required more intense logistical planning.

Shooting in an observational style also presented its own problems for Gaynor who did a lot of the camera work herself. *"Normally a director uses verbal language to know when the best moments are unfolding, when to press the record button. In this case I had to work off my instincts, intuition and follow the emotional context of a scene rather than rely on normal language cues."*

Working in another language was more confronting than originally anticipated. The workload in both the production and editing stage was increased ten-fold by needing every sign transcribed into English. As Gaynor comments, *"When I took on this project, I didn't really know what I was up for. I didn't expect it to be so difficult. I've worked in other languages and with other cultures before but the pressures on this, needing everything translated made for an exhausting and intensive shoot and edit."*



Over the course of filming, Gaynor came to the belief that the issues facing the Deaf community are similar to those facing any minority culture. For Gaynor and her young subjects, it is not about 'disability' as noted at the beginning of the film with Bethany's remarks, *"Deaf people can do anything. Just like hearing people."* The filmmaker's own preconceived notions of deafness were challenged as she came to realise that being deaf was about being 'different' rather than deafness being something that was disadvantageous. *"It is an issue of difference that faces the Deaf Community, it is about their relationship to the world of sound being different to a hearing persons. The hearing world mistakenly view deafness as a disability and I think my film is successful in challenging this misconception."*

Providing a glimpse into how a Deaf teenager experiences the world was one of Gaynor's major ambitions for the film. This is reflected in her decision to use subtitles rather than voice the characters. *"Both Bethany and Scott have their own voices and can speak, it felt incredibly disrespectful to hire an actor to give another voice to them. What's more I wanted an audience to get a sense of what the experience is like and to gain an appreciation of the beauty of sign language."*

Despite the great hurdles this film posed for the seasoned Director, it was a rewarding experience that came down to showing Deaf kids living their lives, perfectly normal kids apart from the fact that their relationship with world of sound is different. *"Bethany and Scott are such wonderful, outgoing, vivacious, funny and communicative kids, that had stories to tell and that comes across in the film."*

*"In essence WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD is a 'Coming of Age Story' with a twist as they are members of a minority culture that is little understood. They are two very normal young teenagers who experience life in different way. The opportunity to work with Bethany and Scott, to explore and explain their world to an audience is fantastic for a filmmaker."*

- Helen Gaynor, director, *Welcome 2 my Deaf World*, June 2005

## THE CHARACTERS

***There are about 3000 profoundly deaf children in Australia. Many of these are teenagers who must one day make their way into the hearing world.***

***Of these about 1300 kids are like Scott and Bethany who have hearing under 90db and another 1500 between 60-90db.***

### SCOTT MASTERSON

*They said Scott would never do VCE and would end up pushing super market trolleys. I said no. I think he'd make a great teacher but he wants money. Scott wants a- \$60,000 job and 49 square house now, so he'll have to do something...-*  
**Judy (Scott's Mother)**

**Scott Masterson** is 19 years old and like most teenage boys loves, cars, girls and football. According to his mother **Judy**, Scott was born hearing, but became deaf following an illness as a baby. *'It was the antibiotics that did it'*, says Judy. She has always wanted 'normality' for Scott, but there's nothing normal about being deaf.

Scott attended primary schools for the deaf, and then went to the same high school as his older hearing siblings where an interpreter was provided four days a week. Scott wore hearing aids, and tried his best to cope in an oral environment, learning to lipread and 'talk'. It was tough and by year 9, he was way behind in his studies and so was shifted to the Victorian College for the Deaf. Scott is much happier and to his mother's horror has tossed away his hearing aids, preferring now to sign. Mum Judy just can't understand her son's reckless behaviour – why not try to be hearing if you can? She has learnt a little finger spelling but with five kids there just wasn't the time. She and the rest of the family have their own way of communicating to Scott and have never learnt Auslan seriously. As far as the family is concerned Scott talks, they can understand him even if no one else can. One of her frustrations with the Victorian College for the Deaf is the sense that Scott has disappeared more and more into a deaf world.



Scott has a driving licence, but without a car must spend nearly 4 hours a day getting from his home in Hastings on the Mornington Peninsula, to VCD in Prahran. He studies VCE English at the private school next door Wesley, and does other subjects at VCD. Judy has high hopes for her son, hoping he will go to university to become a teacher, but Scott has his eyes on money and an apprenticeship. Judy's expectations for her son are not real – maybe she is trying to get him to go beyond being a kitchen hand like herself.

### BETHANY ROSE

*Hearing people don't know how lucky they are to have a full complement of senses. Because I'm very friendly, I wish I could just go up to new people and make conversation, like "hi, how are you, where are you from?" and so on. But my hearing friends just don't do that. I tell them "if I was you, I'd be doing that".*





Bethany is a feisty adventurous 17 year old who is determined to live life to the fullest. Her deafness is no barrier and she insists that hearing people will be her friends. Her recent experience at a hearing school has opened the door to a new and exciting social world beyond the constraints of the tiny deaf community. But her education there was failing her and so she has left her family behind in the country to return to the school of her youth. Bethany has dreams of being a photographer or a fashion designer and loves walking and breathing the city air. The future is rosy and the world is her oyster. If only she didn't miss her mum so much.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### The School

**Almost every deaf adult in Melbourne has a story or connection with the Victorian College for the Deaf. Right down to the school's gardener who was taken to the school one day as a four-year old by his parents. They never returned and he never saw them again. The school raised him – and unlike his parents they were proud of his deafness.**



Photograph by Dana Rose Elliott

Melbourne's historic **Victorian College for the Deaf (VCD)** was established in the 1860's as Australia's first school for deaf kids. In its heyday more than 300 students filled the corridors. Today there are less than 80. Government funding to special schools for the deaf has shrunk to the point where few remain – forcing deaf students to be 'accommodated' within the standard education system. Many hearing parents prefer their child to go to a normal school but sadly many deaf students miss out as interpreters and mainstream culture often leaves them behind in learning. The VCD has defiantly resisted this trend to assimilate and despite ongoing threats of closure has remained as one of the last bastions of deaf culture still catering for profoundly deaf as well as partially deaf kids. It also has a program for deaf students with disabilities and a limited number of hearing students who experience communication problems (eg. autism, stuttering).

VCD functions more or less like any normal school. There is sport, school camps, theatre, driver education programs, parent-teacher nights and discipline issues. Yet everything is remarkably different because the students and teachers communicate through Sign Language. It is the only school in Australia that teaches in Auslan from prep to year 12. The school has flashing lights in all classrooms instead of a school bell and TV monitors broadcast text messages and signed announcements to students. The principal Dr Therese Pierce is deaf.

## The Deaf Community

With the school as a back-drop, the film had the opportunity to provide some insights into the bigger picture of the centuries old struggle of the deaf community for control over their own voice. How does a minority culture, whose expression has been often regarded as freakish and indicative of intellectual deficiency, survive and actually receive respect and understanding? WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD explores the prejudices within all of us against those we don't understand or can't communicate with. By understanding more about deaf culture, WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD is a great vehicle for understanding more about our own backyard.



As a backdrop to this personal story is a portrait of the Victorian College for the Deaf – a school that is defiantly swimming upstream against a tide that is turning against deaf culture. As medical technology strives to eradicate all human 'imperfection' WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD provides a window into this rich subculture and the challenges of learning in and transcending an 'all deaf' environment.

## BACKGROUND NOTES ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN DEAF COMMUNITY

### What is the Australian Deaf Community?

In every country in the world, Deaf people come together to mix and socialise, to play sport and to lobby for better services and conditions. In each country, this is the Deaf community. In Australia it is called the Australian Deaf community and, like other countries is tied together by a mix of sporting, political, religious and social associations. Many Deaf people from all over Australia know each well due to meeting and mixing with other Deaf people through different activities organised by each state's Deaf community.

### Why does the Deaf community exist?

The Deaf community exists as a cultural and linguistic minority within the wider community. It provides each Deaf person with a sense of belonging, a place where identities can be developed, confidence enhanced, skills learnt and friends made.



The Deaf community plays a vital role in the life of each Deaf individual and plays a similar role to other minority groups within the community.

Most Deaf people still spend the majority of their day with hearing people, at work or with their family. They may also belong to hearing groups, sporting clubs and associations. However, the Deaf community is one place where they feel they fully belong and where no communication barriers exist.

### **How do Deaf people in the Deaf community communicate?**

Deaf people communicate with other deaf people through Australian Sign Language, Auslan.

Deaf people are proud of Auslan and promote Auslan as the language of their choice as it meets all visual language requirements of Deaf people.

### **Who belongs to the Deaf community?**

In the Deaf community, a range of degrees of hearing losses will be present, but the criteria essential to being accepted by other Deaf community members is the ability to use Auslan fluently and to accept the Deaf community's values and culture. The degree of hearing loss is not important in the Deaf community but the ability to sign well and to accept the Deaf community values and culture are very important.



Photograph by Sara Rose Jones

Most members of the Deaf community were born with severe and profound hearing losses. Others have lost hearing in early childhood. Some Deaf people who have been raised to speak and lipread may join the Deaf community when they are teenagers or young adults when they are seeking a place of belonging or identity. These people will be accepted into the Deaf community if they learn Auslan and support the values and culture of Deaf people.

Most people who lose hearing later in life usually prefer to continue to use speech and lipreading to communicate. They very rarely become members of the Deaf community because of communication preferences and differences in life histories, culture and values.

### **Does the Deaf community have different values from the hearing community?**

Yes. This is what is known as Deaf culture. Deaf culture may be described as the "deaf way of doing and seeing things"

Some examples of Deaf values which may be different to hearing values are:

Deaf people see themselves as a linguistic minority, not as disabled people.

Deaf people view Auslan as a fully fledged language which meets all their needs and are proud of this language.

Deaf people value their deaf heritage.

Deaf people highly valuing deaf babies.



Deaf people usually do not want their hearing restored; Deaf people value their deafness as part of their identity and have no desire to change their identity of who they are.



### **How is the Deaf community different from other groups of disabled people?**

The Deaf community is different to groups for disabled people because Deaf people share a similar language and culture, different to that of the majority hearing community. Groups for disabled people are often mutual support groups who share the same language and culture as the majority culture.

### **Does the Deaf community have a history?**

Yes. The Deaf community has a rich heritage, achievements, challenges and arguments. It is as rich and as long as any other history of a linguistic minority group.

### **Why do deaf people have their own sporting teams and why don't deaf people participate in the Paralympics for disabled people?**

To feel a sense of belonging to any group, communication is vital. Physically, Deaf people are capable of the same sports as hearing people but they still need to feel they belong and communicate equally. They can do this by playing sports with other Deaf people, often against hearing teams.

That doesn't mean that Deaf people never play in hearing sports teams; many do and some play in both!

Deaf people do not view themselves as disabled so do not participate in the Paralympics. Because of communication differences, Deaf people feel very little connection with disabled people and so rarely mix or socialise with these groups.

Deaf people have their own state, national and international sporting events which are held regularly. The Deaflympics are held every 4 years and were held in Melbourne in January, 2005.

### **How many people with a hearing loss are there in Australia?**

It is difficult to know how exactly many deaf people there are in Australia because of the difficulties in making sure everyone who has a hearing loss is counted.

Better Hearing Victoria estimate that 1 in 5 people over 60 in Australia experience some kind of hearing loss. A study from the Centre for Population

Studies in Epidemiology in South Australia on behalf of Department of Human Services in 1998 estimated that the number of people over 15 years in Australia with a hearing loss greater than 25dB is 3.25 million people. This is 16.6% of the population.

### **How many deaf children are there in Australia?**

Australian Hearing reported that in 2004, there were 11,479 deaf and hearing impaired children in Australia. The number of children for each state and their degree of hearing loss is shown in table two. Australian Hearing, 2004, states that about 72% of children with hearing aids under 17 years have a mild to moderate hearing loss in their better ear.

There are about 3000 profoundly deaf children in Australia. Many of these are teenagers who must one day make their way into the hearing world.

Of these approximately 1300 have hearing under 90db (Like Scott and Bethany) and another 1500 between 60-90db.

### **How many deaf people use Auslan?**

Hyde and Power in a national research study (1991) found that there were 15,400 deaf people in Australia who use Auslan in daily communication.

### **References**

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3. Hyde, M., & Power, D. 1991. *The Use of Australian Sign Language by Deaf People. Research Report No.1.* Nathan: Griffith University.



## BIOGRAPHIES

### **Sally Ingleton** **Producer**

Sally Ingleton and her company **Singing Nomads Productions** have a proven track record in Australia and internationally selling to and winning awards in all major territories. Clients have included ABCTV, SBSTV, BBC, Channel 4, NHK Japan, and Discovery Channel.

Credits include *The Tenth Dancer* 1993 (ABC/BBC) about rebuilding the Cambodian Ballet after Pol Pot (*winner of ATOM award and several international awards including at Chicago FF and Golden Gate Award San Francisco.*)  
*The Isabellas* 1995 (SBS) about a group of Chinese boat people seeking asylum;  
*Mao's New Suit* 1997 (Channel 4/SBS) about two fashion designers in China (*nominated Best Doco Dendy Awards & winner of several international awards*)  
*Pandora's Secrets* 1999 (BBC/Discovery) about an archaeological shipwreck expedition; *Painting Country* 2000 HDTV (NHK/SBS) about a desert journey for senior Aboriginal artists *winner Silver Chris Award at Columbus FF.*

In 2001 she line produced a feature film *The Land has Eyes* on the remote Fijian Island of Rotuma, for US Te Maka Productions, which premiered at Sundance 2004. In 2002 she co produced and directed *Muddy Waters: Life and Death on the Great Barrier Reef* for Film Australia and SBS. It received much international acclaim winning the coveted Jury Prize at Japan's top environment Festival *Earth Vision* as well as the Best Environment and Conservation Award at the *Japanese Wildlife Film festival*. It was nominated for a UN Media Peace Prize, and short-listed for Best Documentary on sustainable development at the British Environment and Media Awards.

Sally has also worked as a lecturer at AFTRS, RMIT and Open Channel and as Documentary Manager at Film Victoria, and has served on the board of the Australian Screen Directors' Association and the Australian International Documentary Conference.

### **Helen Gaynor** **Director**

Helen Gaynor is one of Australia's most experienced drama and documentary directors. After graduating from Swinburne Film and Television school in 1979, she was trained by ABC TV as a producer/director, and worked there for several years, directing and producing everything from "The 7.30 Report" to "Countdown", and various television dramas, "House Rules" and "Inside Running".

Since leaving the ABCTV she has produced, written and directed several documentaries: "Impunidad" (1993-SBS), "The Election of the Century" (1994 - SBS), "For the Defence" (1999 - ABC TV), "A Little Inconvenience" (1999- ABC TV) and "Nurses" (2000 - ABC TV)

Alongside this work, she has directed several play readings and also spent time as a Project Officer and lecturer with the Australian Film, TV and Radio School (AFTRS) Melbourne's office.

She has continued to direct film and television drama. Credits include, "The D-Generation, Series One", "A Country Practice", "Neighbours", "Home and Away", "Big Sky" "High Fliers", "Something in the Air." and most recently "MDA."

## **CREDITS**

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## Media Release

**Bethany and Scott are two ordinary teenagers who live in the extraordinary world of the deaf.**

**Singing Nomads Productions in association  
with SBS Independent presents**

# Welcome 2 my Deaf World

*(Sign Language) is, in the hands of its masters, a most beautiful and expressive language. It is impossible for those who do not understand it to comprehend its possibilities with the deaf, its powerful influence on the moral and social happiness of those deprived of hearing, and its wonderful power of carrying thought to intellects, which would otherwise be in perpetual darkness. Nor can they appreciate the hold it has upon the deaf.*

*So long as there are two deaf people upon the face of the earth and they get together, so long will signs be used.*

- J. Schuyler Long, Head Teacher, Iowa School for the Deaf, The Sign Language (1910)

**WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD** is an hour long documentary that follows two teenagers on the brink of adulthood, facing exams, playing footy, attending parties, and leaving the safety of the Victorian College for the Deaf.

At the start of the project filmmaker Helen Gaynor had never encountered Deaf Culture and knew no Auslan (Australian Sign Language). "Prior to becoming involved in this project, I knew nothing about the deaf world and had never met any of its' members. It unfolded into a landscape of great complexity." After following around two Deaf teenagers, Scott and Bethany over a period of eight months, Gaynor developed a deeper understanding of what the hearing world looks like to an outsider and more over what it means to be a teenager today.

*Hearing people don't know how lucky they are to have a full complement of senses. Because I'm very friendly, I wish I could just go up to new people and make conversation, like "hi, how are you, where are you from?" and so on. But my hearing friends just don't do that. I tell them "if I was you, I'd be doing that".* - Bethany Rose, 17 years old

*I'm happy being deaf - I don't want to hear the hearing shouting. It's peaceful my world because I can't hear all that unpleasant noise" - Scott Masterson, 19 years old*

Few Australian documentaries have explored the culture or the issues facing deaf community. **Welcome 2 my Deaf World** takes the audience into the world of the deaf through, Scott and Bethany, two dynamic and outgoing teenagers with stories to share.

**Media, for further information please call Sally Ingleton  
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(note: this is not a Deaf Society but is placed here for information.)  
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