

# Be who you needed when you were younger

**BY ZARA MUSKER**

Trainee audiologist, deaf England futsal player and deaf advocate Zara Musker discusses finding her own deaf identity: "It's part of me but not all of me".

**A**m I an audiologist? A deaf England futsal player? An advocate for deaf individuals? A deaf trainee audiologist? Or just a deaf woman trying to navigate life?

Deaf identity: part of me, not all of me. The part of me that tries to advocate for those with a hearing loss. The part of me that always has accessibility at the forefront of my mind in every environment I find myself in. The part of me that strives to leave my deaf awareness, communication and accessibility mark on anyone I cross paths with. The part of me that longs for a more aware and accessible world, so others can go on after me and outshine the path I am trying my hardest to pave. The part of me that is being created and nurtured every day, in my work life and personal life.

By 2035, it is estimated that 15.6 million people in the UK will have a hearing loss yet, for me growing up, I always felt like I was an anomaly. Now, a 26-year-old woman training to be an audiologist in the NHS whilst training for major competitions internationally for my country, I often ask myself 'how can I make a difference in this world?', 'how can I embrace my own deaf identity to empower myself and others trying to navigate this challenging society?'.

Before 2020, I honestly didn't have a deaf identity. I didn't know how much hearing I had. I didn't know anything about the hearing aids I wore. I didn't know many others who were deaf. I could count how many deaf friends I had on one hand. In terms of my own deafness, it was never spoken about, and I navigated through my life in the same way in which my hearing peers did. Interactions with audiology were brief, and I only attended when a letter was posted through my door. Usually I would be in and out within 45 minutes. I had no clue about the aetiology or the significance of my hearing loss and, certainly, I did not know that my hearing loss was progressive (it could only get worse!). How I would have prepared myself for the time if, and when, my hearing deteriorated.

As the first and only member of my family to have a hearing loss, at 18 months old I



*Zara aged 11 playing for Blackburn Rovers.*

received my diagnosis of severe hearing loss in my left ear and moderate-severe in my right. Growing up, I utilised hearing aids, and oral communication was my main method of communication, allowing me to attend mainstream education and participate in high-standard football teams. My life growing up was in the 'hearing world'. However, at the age of 14, for the first time, I received an invite to train with England deaf female futsal team and things internally began to change. Despite most of my life being around hearing peers who used oral methods to communicate, I had found myself representing my country and playing on a team whereby, to practise teamwork, many would use British Sign Language. I felt not deaf enough for the deaf world but not hearing enough for the hearing world.

When I received the news that mentally, emotionally and physically changed my life during COVID-19 – "you've lost all your hearing, I'm going to urgently refer you for a cochlear implant" - everything changed. I had personal experiences which highlighted



*Playing football out in America (Tennessee) on a Football Scholarship.*

the lack of deaf awareness within the NHS and society. I realised life is too short to waste and now, writing this article, I recognise that my hearing loss journey may not be the same as anyone else's, but I have the ability to inspire and advocate for others who may not have the confidence to embrace their deaf identity, just like me growing up.

I've always wanted to make a difference in anything I put myself into, whether that's making an environment a better place or using my experiences and knowledge to make changes that will better someone else who comes after me. After my experiences within audiology, I knew I had to strive to make changes because of the psychological impact it had on myself. From a social media post back in 2020, to networking with some real 'game changers' who wanted a better experience for patients, was the beginning of the 'Deaf Awareness: Communication, Accessibility and Awareness within the NHS' project, a project that we needed to dig into and which will make a huge difference within NHS services

## AUDIOLOGY FEATURE



In action playing in the Deaf European Futsal finals, beating Spain 3-0.

for years to come. I knew in order to fight for change within services, we needed to know exactly what patients with a hearing loss were facing on a daily basis. The project was born from the passion and willingness of so many influential people (ENT doctors, audiologists, deaf advocates, charities) with the aim of reaching out to deaf people to gain a real understanding of the current service provision. Despite the paper not being published yet, from the current data and responses, I am blown away about the minimalistic changes we can individually make within NHS services, to significantly improve patient experiences.

Whenever I was asked the question growing up, 'who is your role model?', I can remember never having an answer. I would think in the back of my head, 'why are there no deaf role models for me to look up to and aspire to be?'. However, thinking about it, it was never a deaf role model I was looking for. I was looking for someone who wants everyone in society to be treated as equal no matter what the disability. Someone who goes above and beyond to ensure that everyone feels included. Someone who has the ability to acknowledge others' challenges, but also tries to ensure challenges don't become their obstacles. Someone that you could be.

“ Never underestimate the valuable and important difference you make in every life you touch, for the impact you make today has a powerful rippling effect on every tomorrow ”

- Leon Brown

### References

1. NICE. Guideline Scope: Hearing loss (adult presentation): assessment and management. 2018. [online]. [www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng98/documents/final-scope](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng98/documents/final-scope) Last accessed July 2023.

### AUTHOR



#### Zara Musker,

Trainee Clinical Scientist in Audiology & Deaf Advocate, Withington Community Hospital, UK.

<https://mylifeinahearingworld.wordpress.com/blog/>