

## THE TWO NORRIES PODCAST

29/11/22

**Dr. John Bosco Conama, James Leonard, Timmy Long.**

**James** Hello everybody and welcome back to the The Two Norries podcast. I'm your host James Leonard and I'll be joined as always by my good friend Timmy Long.

**Timmy** Hi everyone

**James** Sean, as always, is on the light and sound. How are you Sean?

**Sean** Not too bad, how are you getting on?

**James** We have a few guests in the audience and today is a special podcast and thanks to the Cork Deaf Association for organizing this. We've got Dr John Bosco Conama in the studio from Trinity College Dublin, we have two interpreters and we have Gerrie from the Cork Deaf Association. So, this is a special podcast for the National Sign Language Day.

Dr John, how are you keeping and thanks for coming down to meet us today.

**JBC** It's my pleasure to be here and you're welcome.

**James** No, no it's great to have you here. I suppose the reason how this came about was because there's a couple of people access this podcast who would be in recovery from addiction but they are deaf and they mentioned to us that they were accessing it through lip reading which wasn't ideal and so then me and Timmy were thinking about how can we make it more accessible and we got in contact with Gerrie from the Cork Deaf Association and in the conversation then, it came up about how about we do like a podcast on the topic of deafness and she suggested you to come down so that's how it came about and we're delighted to have you here. So, I suppose the first question I want to ask is, were you born deaf or did it happen through an accident and what kind of hearing ability have you at all. Is it a completely complete deafness...?

**JBC** Right, okay. First off I was born deaf. It has been recorded about how I became deaf. It says 'unknown'. I have never had any type of hearing at all and I will often say to people that I am 'deaf as a post' because people often ask do you even have some hearing? It's like - nothing at all. That is the life that I have but I do have a name Sign and as you can see it's the finger going around the ear and that's the equivalent to a hearing aid Sign because when we were growing up we would have a body worn hearing aid which was rather awkward because when you're out playing sports it would fly around with you but then we came to a 'behind the ear hearing aid'. And I was supposed to be the first boy at the deaf school to be fitted with a hearing aid. So, I ended up with the hearing aid Sign. So just like, you're James, you're Tim, but within the Deaf Community in Sign Language, it's dependent on your body, it's your habits and there's different ways of giving you your own name Sign so I ended up with the hearing aid Sign to represent my name.

**James** Okay, okay and how was school for you? Did you go, like, to a regular school, or like, was it difficult in school for you?

**JBC** Oh now, that's going to be a long story. I'm going to try and abbreviate that.

When I was three and a half years old, my parents were recommended that I go to a deaf School in Dublin and in South Dublin there's a school called Beach Park and then after that then I went to Saint Joseph's School for the Deaf in Cabra, which is North Dublin. So, I've been educated in both schools. But the philosophy back then is what was called 'oralism' and this was a worldwide phenomenon. And they had to believe that you teach children to learn through speech and listening not allowed to use Sign Language. And if you ended up Signing you will look down upon and you were, you know, it was not the thing to do. And a lot of people to this day believe that Sign Language is inferior to the spoken language and then you also have to look at the quality of the education. It was not so great. You literally were learning your steps. So it was a self-learning approach. The teachers were not qualified Signers. The teachers were not encouraged to teach Sign....Can you imagine going to a French-speaking school and you didn't know French and you would have to learn your lipreading that way? So that's what we had to do for many years. Now there are differences today, though I have to say.

**James** And you know, the English language is very complex in that it evolves all the time. There's new words added to the dictionary all the time. Can Sign Language evolve the same way? Is it difficult to keep up with new words and complex terms?

**JBC** Oh that's an easy answer. The languages for both spoken and Sign does evolve through time. And like you say, spoken languages in Sign Language now....The best example - look at the word 'telephone'. We're now texting, so can you imagine what the old Sign for telephone would have been? Can you see that?

**James/Timmy** Yeah, yeah.

**JBC** So then it evolved over time and then you press the buttons and you pick up the phone and then you had the very, very iconic visual Signs. So... but it would evolve through time. And not just for things that change but there's also the international influences. Think about... you can fly anywhere that you like... social media... So there's a lot of people that are picking up Signs from America, UK and integrating it into the local Sign Language. So yes, the answer to that is yes. It does evolve over time.

**James** You know growing up, did you have any younger brothers and sisters and were they able to hear perfectly and would that have been an issue in the home? Were they able to help you out and understand what was going on for you?

**JBC** I am the 11th child in the family and the youngest.

**James/Timmy** [laughter] the baby

**JBC** I come from the west of Ireland, Roscommon, and it was common back then to have a big family. So I'm the only one who is deaf in the family. There is no history in the family of deafness and even with the future generations, there is no deafness in the family. Now, of course, my parents were advised by the professionals, quote unquote 'professionals' – 'do not learn Sign Language'. So they took that advice to heart. And that was a struggle for many years because within the family what we created what were called home Signs. But home Signs, that I would use there, I would not use elsewhere in the Community. So, my parents had to come up with Signs of 'are you hungry?', 'do you want to drink?', you know, they would form their own Signs to communicate with me. I do have older siblings, of course and

to this day we still use those Home Signs. So, if the interpreters came to my house they would not understand what we are Signing. But that's a habit that we've got in our own home. And we still use it to this day. All of my siblings are hearing, like I said there is absolutely no deafness in the family at all.

**James** So do you know the way, like Sign Language was actively discouraged like, was it because it was seen as like enabling like deafness to prolong or why was it discouraged? Why were parents taught not to Sign with their children, like.

**JBC** There are many reasons that could be cited. First of all, I think that there's a genuine fear that if you learn Sign Language that it would affect your ability to be able to speak and that that still remains to this day so they're saying, 'do not encourage Sign Language' but research says the opposite.

Now in the old days, Sign Language was seen to be unsightly. Not human. And we were mocked as though we were monkeys. We were gesturing and if you look at the Victorian times, you know there's a certain way of speaking there's a certain way of positioning yourself. So to Sign would not be sightly looking. And there are some people that do not like Sign Language at all. So that was, I think it's the fear that it would affect other abilities.

And that's more about in the noble times but it is misguided information because if children do not speak or write they say that they can't integrate in society but historically deaf people do integrate into society and there's plenty of evidence to back it up. And the best example that I... I can give you one. Here in Cork, 300 years ago a well-known woman by the name of Lady Mary O'Brien, she was able to Sign. She had her own land and there's that evidence there. That is one example. Obviously from the higher class but the thing is that it did exist amongst all the classes.

**Timmy** Did.. what he spoke about there in regards to Sign Language being something out of the ordinary within the communities? Did they feel like that they were their own community and not connected to everybody else?

**JBC** Okay. If we're looking at the Deaf Community the answer would be yes. Especially from the outside looking in. It's seen as a ghetto, it's seen as a closed community. In fact, it is not. It's actually a haven because we work every day in the hearing worlds. Most of us will have hearing children, most of us will have hearing parents, you cannot isolate yourself from that. Communication wise, it can be a struggle but we as deaf people automatically adapt into the hearing world. For example, I work in a hearing University. Obviously, everybody's hearing. I'm teaching a hearing audience. My family are hearing. Do I see myself as isolated? No. Do I see myself as different? Yes. But, slowly but surely there is the recognition of difference and that it's okay to be involved. But the society at large is not ready to adapt to our needs so therefore they're unaware of our presence.

**James** Okay that's good point. Yeah John, if I can ask you about maybe your childhood and in particular your teenage years... where you... generally children ...or young people would start dating and stuff or maybe like a lot of times children that are different are victims of bullying. Like, was childhood a tough time for you personally?

**JBC** I would not describe my own childhood as difficult. It was a struggle though. But I do feel fortunate that I had the love of my family. I wish and I still to this day wish they were

able to Sign. But that aside, they did accommodate by providing food, clothing, information and they encouraged my education. They did all of that for me. Now I accepted the fact that I was deaf and that was because of being educated in the deaf school. But it was a fact that I had to accept that you were just born deaf and but to be told that you have to pass as a hearing person, that was a struggle.

But as you can see, I have met my wife. She's deaf, which many other deaf people do as well and I've often looked at - did I pick her out of love or because she's deaf? Because that is the discussion that is had every day. And I think it's good to have that conversation. There are just people that marry hearing at the moment but there's a question that is often asked and it's always at the back of one's mind, if I had married a hearing person what would it be like? Would we have ended up splitting?

There's a whole load of issues around it now and I'm actually interested in that area myself anyway and I'm hoping to do some academic research about that kind of complexity of humanity. But at the moment I am interested because there are deaf children that are now being educated in mainstream schools all over in Ireland and they're all isolated so what are their chances of having a relationship? How will they be able to build a relationship because my time was very different.

I went to a deaf school where there's 300 deaf boys there and the other school that was nearby was the girls school. Another 300 girls. We had a chance. But what about our children of today and also that relates to mental health issues as well. And from research that's been done in the UK and the States, there are now mental health assessments being required and there's more work that needs to be done on this. More research needs to be undertaken regarding that scenario.

**Timmy** So we've basically gone backwards so in terms of educating kids who are deaf. Instead of kind of helping them out. Is it a good thing to be keeping kids that are deaf in schools where it's all hearing? How..... like that's ...like for me, the understanding of that is like having a child who's dyslexic inside in a class and they can't relate to what the teacher is saying or saying are writing on the board and they feel completely alienated. It feels like the same thing. Because I would have been that child. Because I was dyslexic in school. So, I could.. I can completely understand what it's like to be different to everybody else in the class. How do we change? How do....how do we as a society change that and make it more accessible and easier for the children of today who are deaf?

**JBC** So you have the.... you're talking about the experience. You know what it's like to be on your own having that type of experience. Now to think about the deaf child that can't hear anything at all. So they end up sitting at the front trying to lip read. Okay now, in my ideal world, if I had all the power, I would recommend that all children go and learn Sign Language together but in reality that will never be possible because most parents will like their child to be educated at their local school. But how to resolve that issue is a struggle and it's a challenge. Now I would recommend that local clusters be developed where you can come together and allow deaf children to have access to their own peers. Like for like. Deaf Deaf. Sign Sign. It's not about the same age group but it's more about bringing them together. But I do know that in Cork there are two deaf schools of where there is a good number. One in Bishopstown and the other one is in Douglas and I think they have about 20 30 children together. That's okay. But if you look at the current resources, parents wishes

you know, those are the other considerations. But for me I think if there was regional clusters, easy access to home. But most parents will not want their children to go to a boarding school and be left there.

**James** And you know them boarding schools or them schools specifically for Deaf children, are they public funded or private or is there a mix of both?

**JBC** Publicly funded, just as far as I'm aware. Now you talk about special schools. You mentioned the word 'special' schools. For me, there is absolutely nothing special about those schools. I would prefer it to be said 'schools for the deaf'. But within the Department of Education 'special' has an inferior.... and there's they're like they're like the special schools as the poor relations. Do you know what I mean?

**James** Yeah, yeah I understand that

**JBC** But as far as I'm aware are publicly funded... publicly funded.... but fundraising for school trips, lighting, those kind of extras would be fundraised for. Both publicly funded and a small amount of fundraising, but I stand to be corrected on that.

**James** Yeah, I think it might have been lost in translation here because I said specific schools for Deaf, not 'special'. And another thing you know like .... when you were in deaf school as a child and then you went into University and we know under different Universities there's access teams and disability services and stuff like that, was that the case when you went into University? And was that a difficult transition for you?

**JBC** Today is better resourced but in my time it was completely different. I left school without completing my Leaving Cert. And looking back, I think it's because I was bored. And I wanted to go and see what the outside world had to offer. Of course my parents wanted me to complete my Leaving Cert. I did go back and complete my Leaving Cert in a hearing school through evening classes. And from there I was fortunate that I ended up working for the Civil Service. And within the Civil Service they had funding for staff who wanted to go to university. You pay yourself first and if you passed it and they were satisfied, you got your money back. So that was a very good incentive for me. So, then I went from BA, MA, PhD. I love learning.

Now, the first two years of my education, I did not have an interpreter. I would have to rely on my student colleagues to write for me. I would call it a buddy system but not reliable because of their handwriting or they had fallen asleep in class or they couldn't be bothered writing! Or they couldn't understand what was being said. Unreliable! So I would have to guesswork... but I ended up being a better thinker because I had to guess what they were saying. There's loads of other stories that I can tell you about that alone but I won't. But after two years, interpreters were provided and on it went.

**James** Do you know if somebody is watching this on YouTube now and they're deaf and they feel that they can't go to University, what kind of supports are available for people that are deaf in University to help them in their education journey.

**JBC** All universities in Ireland have an obligation to ensure access under the University Act of 1997. I need to remember my years right. So there is a clause in that. All Universities provide access. Disability service ensure whatever it is that the student requires. They provide interpreters or what's called the loop system if you're using a hearing aid, a note-taker, exam

accommodations. What's called reasonable accommodations such as extra time. So, there is a list of resources available. And at the moment most deaf people go to university actually are not Signing, so they can't rely on an interpreter they can only rely on a loop system. So they're actually struggling. But for me, if I go to University I will have an interpreter but having an interpreter is not enough because it's actually really difficult to get an interpreter because there's not enough of them.

**James** is it expensive to get an interpreter and like do you know if me and Timmy wanted to make this podcast accessible for deaf people, what would you suggest would be the best method we can use? Either closed captions or a Sign Language interpreter on the screen or what would you suggest for us and what is the cost of something like that? Is it expensive to make stuff accessible?

**JBC** Okay, there's a lot of ..... you've asked a lot of questions so a lot of answers! The provision of a Sign Language interpreter can be perceived as expensive but within the University they've got a European fund called the ESF, the European Social Fund, that covers that. But if you've got small businesses like yourself, a small private business... Now, I remember when I was involved in the ISL campaign, we wanted small businesses to provide funding.

We have what's called the voucher system within the ISL Act but before it became an Act, the idea of the voucher scheme came from Finland; that every deaf person who uses Sign Language, I can't remember how many hours, let's say 100 hours, free voucher funded by the State. So a deaf person can go anywhere they want. They can go to a flower show, anywhere that they themselves want to go and do. They would pay for the interpreter. So if the two of you invited me to come here, I could use my own voucher to cover that.

But if you want to provide an interpreter on the regular basis, that becomes difficult. Like, how do you manage to do that? You do require a grant to support you in that initiative. In terms of accessibility, I did say that there's the voice recognition subtitling that you can use but you would have to edit that yourself because it's dependent on accent, tone, spelling, so there's a little bit more work required. And then also to add an audio descriptor for those who are blind that want that want to listen in. But they are easy. They are quick solutions.

**Timmy** Going forward, for people that are deaf you know with technology really, really, really getting advanced at the moment and we're moving into areas that we never thought we would around technology, is there something down the line that John believes may help people to hear or understand what's .... what people are saying? Down the line, are we moving in that direction?

**JBC** Interesting question. And it's a question that is asked every day and it's talked about every day. Absolutely no doubt about it. Technology. Because if you look at subtitles on the movies, there was no access to TV in the past so .... But you do now with captioning.

There's also research that's been done on Avatar type Sign Language. A lot of funding is being used for that Avatar. And also the... we've got an app called Otter, o-t-t-e-r, that will do a recording as well. It's not the most reliable because it will pick up noises, background noises, but there are different pieces of equipment. But - if you're talking about Sign Language - Sign Language to English is the most challenging. But most people are saying that because how quickly technology is progressing, it can happen.

And there's also the research being done on stem cell and they said there is a long-term development whereby you become hearing. I'm not a scientist so I'm not completely au fait with that but technology is making progress. But there's two very different perspectives on it.

One perspective is that there's a great white hope that it will solve everything. The other side of it is saying there are limitations. More work to be done.

**James** Is the increase in use in technology, like social media... does that benefit the Deaf Community where people can communicate more now through text, emojis and pictures? Is that welcome from the Deaf Community? Is it useful?

**JBC** You can Sign – you can Sign with one hand. Just watch what I'm doing here. You hold the phone and you can Sign into it so yes you can make Live phone calls via video yes you can do Signing video messages, cheap quick efficient. We've also got Zoom video calls. Yes, there's a whole range of... there's a whole range out there.

Now in Ireland, we've got a service that's called the IRIS - the Irish Remote Interpreting Service. It's a national service based in Dublin. It is great for people that want to make a video call. So, let's take for example, I'm making a phone call because I want to order pizza. I want to call the doctor. I can go through this Remote Interpreting Service. But the big drawback is that you have to make an appointment first.

**Timmy** You have to make an appointment?

**JBC** And it's ... it's a bit of a pain because I want to be able to make a phone call on demand. In America there's, an on-demand service. And I remember, in America, renting a car. The car was not delivered. So, I used this on-demand interpreting service and I said 'where's the car'? And lo and behold the car arrives! So, I want that type of service here in Ireland but I think Ireland is not ready for it.

Now recently there was a pilot done recently on on-demand and it became very popular. It was a trial for six months and then it was put on hold because they're saying it needs to be evaluated. But that type of service would need to be funded by the State. So if the State wants us to integrate into society they, have to support that.

Now in America, if I remember rightly, 0.01 percent of all telephone companies profits goes into the on-demand service, so that's how it became successful in America and I would like that kind of model to be introduced here in Ireland.

**Timmy** Is there.. is there.. like from listening there I was thinking to myself how difficult it must be for somebody who's deaf. Do you know, sometimes in life we have something that happens so quickly that we need to be able to make a phone call immediately to solve it; to tell somebody that we're going to be late for a lecture or whatever. Like, that sounds to me like it's so difficult. Because I remember last Christmas, we were late for a flight and we had made... I'd make about 15 different phone calls to travel agents and everything else to get it sorted. And I was saying how difficult that must be for somebody that's deaf. It must be...And, and... I get very anxious as well when I have to deal with something like that.

A software or something that would help people that are deaf with something like that would make their lives so much easier and .... and I know we spoke about Zoom and things like that but we need something in the here and now, right now, to be able to help us instead of

something that we have to book an interpreter, maybe a day in advance. Maybe and I was thinking....

**JBC** It's not a day in advance. You're talking at least.. least two weeks.

**Timmy** At least two weeks? What if ....you want to make it...you have to book a take away two weeks in advance? Or like, do you know, is it, is it that - that sounds to me like it's absolutely ridiculous, you know? But if we.. if there was a software, if these telephone companies in the US are putting this amount of money inside, surely be to God that they come up with somewhere that people who are deaf are able to communicate on the spot where people .... and just to meet that ....that will meet their needs at that moment. So, they'll get really stressed out of it you know that must be very, very difficult for deaf people. Is it John?

**JBC** You're right but there's two.... I think that needs to be separated out just a little bit. We have an emergency service - 112 - and you can text the hospital, the garage the fire brigade. So 112 takes.... but you have to register first for that service and that's a little bit of 'why'? Because as 999 users you don't have to register but for us, we have to register - 112 - and I actually used the 112 service recently because I was driving on the motorway in Dublin and I had seen a van with the carpet fall off the van into the middle of the road. And now for safety's sake I pulled over. I text 112 to the guards and saying just to let you know that the carpet is on the road they responded quickly. And you know it's the fact that they responded.

But it turns out that there's other people that have made the phonecalls anyway but it was a quick and easy service and all done in less than a minute. And then I moved on. So that's one side of it.

The other part is if you're talking about like things like flight cancellations and so on if there was somebody that was tech savvy they would know where to find the flights, hotels and so on but there are apps out there that I actually use. Of course there is cost to it and if you talk about you feeling somewhat anxious or if you're not tech savvy you can imagine how difficult it is.

**Timmy** So talking about apps what are some of those apps just in case some of the deaf people are ... are watching this at the moment and they're not familiar with.. with some of the apps. We ..do you have any off ...off hand that you could tell us about?

**JBC** I'm gonna end promoting their businesses so I might just ...I might ask for a commission then.

**Laughter from both. James** We might get sponsorship!

**JBC** Right, okay. When it comes to my international traveling it's booking.com. Okay, now in the old days I would have to ask my family and friends 'would you mind booking a room for me?' Can you imagine all of that conversation to be had? Now I can do it myself; log into booking.com, choose what I want and pay for it.

There's also the taxi app which is great. You know, you pay for that in advance. The list goes on.

**Timmy** Yeah, fair play.



**JBC** And for those that are tech savvy that they are the ones that are okay but if you're looking at those who are elderly that would not be au fait with technology, it would continue to be a struggle.

Now, I mentioned the Irish service – IRIS. A lot of people are dependent on that particular service. Other people are not bothered. They don't want that type of service. So it's recognizing that there are different groupings within the Community anyway. Everyone's going to be different.

**James** Yeah, so John is the director of the Centre for Deaf studies in Trinity College Dublin. Did you set up that? Is that a degree course or a postgraduate course? Is it only for deaf people or do non-deaf people attend the course as well and is there a deaf Society in Trinity College Dublin and do other universities have similar supports and services?

**JBC** Okay now, before... before the TCD I was in the Irish Deaf Society and we had set up a working group to campaign for a Centre for Deaf studies to be set up in Trinity College Dublin but we had a relationship with them anyway because we ... for 20 years prior we were doing Sign Language courses and we were doing Deaf Awareness training. But we asked for a permanent Centre for Sign Language studies research and Sign Language interpreting. That was back in 1999. We received funding and then was formally established in 2001 but the idea of a Centre came from England - University of Bristol Centre for Deaf studies - that has since closed down for different reasons, but we have still survived.

And what we do is we provide an undergraduate degree in deaf studies that is open to all, be you hearing or deaf, so if you want to become an interpreter, teach Sign Language or just general deaf studies that is available to all. But we are restricted to 20 places a year, so it's a small number. 15 come through the CAO system and five come through as mature adults, disabilities.. so there's five allocated. And we only have six staff; two part-time, four full-time. We would like to be able to expand. There is pressure on us to increase the number of students but we can't because there's only six staff because most of the applicants that come under courses do not have Sign Language so we have to train them into an introduction of Sign Language and then go on to Interpreter training. That is a lot of work for them it's a lot of work for us. But in an ideal world, they would have a higher standards leaving certificate just like which have Irish English H4 H3 we want to have that. But unfortunately, Irish Sign Language is not a Leaving Cert subject. We have it in the Leaving Cert Applied but the University does not recognize the LCA, but we are working on it. We're still hoping ...we're still campaigning.

But we also offer postgraduate for MA, Phil and PhD and I'm a supervisor of two PhD students that are hearing. One is soon to finish, the other has got some time to go. The first one is looking at deaf people in prisons during the 19th century, really fascinating research and his name is Cormac Leonard. He is soon to complete his PhD and he was interested in this because we know a lot about deaf people in prison in the 19th century and prisons kept records of deaf people, of their special needs or whatever; what did they eat today? what was their behaviour like? what was the colour hair? their health? All of that is documented in the prison system, so we know more about deaf people in the 19th century in comparison to today, which is rather a strange world, isn't it? Makes for very interesting reading that you could read about the attitude towards deaf people at that time.

The other one is due to start and that is in relation to deaf education ...no it's not, deaf employment - the employment of deaf people.

**Timmy** Do you know... do you know.. for people that are deaf you know, say for someone who's dyslexic and their comprehension is not great so they'd be much more visual so for deaf people, where do their strengths lay outside of their hearing? Where do they work harder with .... if, if their hearing isn't like, if they can't hear basically?

**JBC** I don't know much about dyslexia myself but I have met people who have dyslexia of course, you know yourself included, but there are always valid reasons for visual pedagogy, you know.

You look at the cameras, drawings, making things visual, you can teach visual without the written words, without the written text. Now, you know the University system is very heavily text and it's a struggle but if you have the visual way of learning deaf people would prefer a visual way of learning.

Now we've started introducing filming as our teaching but you know that they're within the university there are academic journals. It is hard work to read them. 15, 20 pages and heavy dense texts, it can be a struggle to read. But if you put it on a film, then it can be an academic resource. The Universities are slow to change but it's ... there's that beginning of a realization of recognizing that there is a visual pedagogy, not just suiting deaf people but to suit other populations that would benefit from learning visually.

And that actually is a strength. That becomes your strength. There are a lot of cultures, not just here, but there's a lot of cultures out there that use space, direction but the English language doesn't. It's actually very poor and space. Take for example, the Aboriginal community in Australia. They use direction in space, from morning in the East tonight at West - so they use that as a way of describing what is going on and then there would be other cultures and they use colour in detail.

But the word - English, it...you know we're very plain. It's very sound based and that can be a struggle for some

**James** John mentioned just a lack of this around prisoners who may be deaf. Is there any data around people in homeless services, addiction services and other services like that that are deaf and our deaf people are represented in those services or do they fare well or is there just a lack of data?

**JBC** I am going to assume that there are deaf people out there using their Addiction Services but we don't know how many. At the moment there's Research into the centre for Deaf studies and it's called JustiSigns 2 project - it's an EU funded project with several Universities around Europe but this time around they're focusing on domestic violence. So there's a lot of data there about poor access to services and so on. Now, I'm sure that there is but there's no research that's been done. They're bound to be there. There is information out there but it's only those social workers, interpreters themselves that would know but for the outside world we wouldn't know. But I would imagine their frustration, their anger, their annoyance - I can imagine all of that.

**James** yeah when I was working in my previous job in Addiction Services and we'd have an initial assessment where you go through in detail a lot of data about that person but the

question .... that question is never asked. Maybe like inputting that question would probably be helpful for research purposes down the line and then once you have data you can get funding. So maybe that's something to consider. Also, we have the director general of the Irish prison service in the studio later today so maybe we can propose to her well maybe like as part of the intake of a prisoner that you would record this data again making it easier for funding down the line to provide services within the prison system. But I suppose another thing I wanted to ask as well is around if people are deaf is there enough like psychotherapy like is there a deaf specific psychotherapist is it ...is there enough services for people that are struggling?

**JBC** Going back and talking about prisons, I do know of deaf people that have gone to prison because the Irish Deaf Society has provided literacy support and the National Chaplaincy for deaf people have provided pastoral care. I know of those two elements. Now, how effective they are, I don't know. I don't know if it actually resolved the issue of frustration, so that's the limit of my knowledge.

But looking at the mental health services here in Ireland. The HSE have set up a new unit based in Dublin focusing on those who are deaf and hard of hearing that require mental health treatment, however, culturally, do they have that awareness? That competency? The Sign Language capacity?

I don't think so. The services I have to say are quote unquote 'crap'. Because when I compare services here to the UK and others, I think they're three/four specialist services in the UK whereby they have a deaf psychologist, competent Sign Language users that they can communicate directly with. They have Deaf nurses. They can be found in other parts of the UK but not in Ireland.

I think we are so many years behind the UK and the UK are not satisfied with their existing level of service so you can imagine how bad the services are here. We already know how bad it is for the general public but can you imagine what it's like for a group like ours? Our Community? Can you imagine what that's like? Now we need staff that are competent Sign Language users so that they can do communicate directly rather than through an interpreter and you know yourself, it's a lot easier when you've got direct communication - you're looking at the person in the eye. You can get what needs to be done.

**James** There's a somebody accesses this podcast and he sent us an email recently and he goes to an addiction treatment day service but he can't attend the groups which are integral really to General ... General addiction treatment. So,, he accesses our podcast and it like ...self-help means, like, Alcoholics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous. The usual supports that... He can't attend them. He doesn't get you know..... because he can't he can't hear what's being said so he accesses our podcast in lieu of those traditional supports. But he's lip reading and it's not ideal and sometimes stuff mightn't be in the context or maybe the camera switches maybe a couple of seconds late and he doesn't get the full sentence or like.... It got me thinking then, like how many other people who are deaf are out there and they are blocked from accessing services and they might be struggling in silence you know? So like, I don't know, is there anything we can do. Maybe we can apply for a grant funding?

Like, what and in terms of, like, the services being far superior in the UK - is there a minister in the UK that drives it? Have we anybody in Ireland in public office? Have we ever had a

deaf person in public office? Would you ever consider running for public office? Or would it be..would it be... we know it would be difficult for somebody who was deaf. But would it be too difficult? Would it be, like, inaccessible?

**JBC** Oh, there you go again loads of questions! Okay, hang on

I cannot imagine how someone can go into a self-help group because if I were to go there, I can imagine myself struggling. I do know of some that have actually flown to the UK for that type of service at their own cost or at the HSE cost, I do not know that kind of detail, but you're right, there does need to be more public awareness out there.

You know, I myself have stood up for the Seanad. I did that two years ago. It wasn't a bad experience. I got.... and I was going as an independent but there were struggles in place. I'm not a member of any political party. That's extremely difficult because you know that the voting is already decided beforehand. So, I was going to the smaller groups, who are Independents but not enough for... to go into the Seanad. Now in Cork, you've got a deaf man by the name of Graham O'Shea, he went for the local County Council, again as an Independent. He did face barriers and the political parties, so if you want to go into a political party, you know, that there's a hierarchy there, don't you? If you're going to progress through the party. Now, you can... but you can have political successes without being in a political party. You can lobby. Like, take for example we set up the Centre for Deaf studies. We set up the Irish Sign Language Bill, but we did that with Senator Mark Daly, with him leading it.

So, you know you can achieve you can achieve, outside of the political system and those are some of the examples that I refer to. But if you were to get a deaf person into the political system, then they would have to represent people of differing needs, not just deafness alone.

**Timmy** Yeah, I think that's... that's.... that's actually a great point. Like, there's so many different areas. You have people who are deaf, blind.... You have people who have, who have different .... other learning differences as well.... so, traveller communities...you have people living in areas of poverty and criminality, you know. I think there's always room for somebody to stand up and back up for all these different people within our societies, because there's probably not enough, you know. I think there's not enough. And I think all of these different groups of people have something in common, you know. They're.. they're outside of the norm within our society today and I think it'd be a great idea down the line to have somebody in government who is deaf.

You know, they stand up for everybody else. And it's not just about standing up for deaf people. It's about standing up for people who are blind ....you know, people who have different disabilities, you know, physical disabilities people.... who have intellectual disabilities, you know. So, I think it's a great .... it'd be a great idea. And I'm just planting the seed now for you actually John.

**James** I think the difficulty then is, like, when ...because politics is local and in your Constituency you may have money, a tiny few of people who are deaf. So, like the Seanad is probably the way to go, where it's not like specific to a Constituency, you know. And maybe if you run again, we might help you with the promotion and the the... the profile of it.... so we'd love to see you succeed in that.

But we're coming up to Sign Language Day, which is on the 14th of December. Have you any message for people who are deaf that are watching this podcast and that may be struggling with their mental health or might be struggling with confidence around employment, education? And have you any kind of words of wisdom or encouragement for them going into the holiday season?

**JBC** Ok, I'm going to go back to your earlier points, three things come to mind. The first thing is that Ireland has ratified the UNCRPD, Article 4. It's the best hope for people with disabilities. Article 4 states that any policy, any new ideas that affect people with disabilities - the State must have meaningful conversations with disability-led organizations, not professional groups, not parents. It's themselves. Of course, they would be included in the system but the priority is that it goes to people with disabilities first. So, Article 4, it's there. It's not really .... the government are still struggling with that kind of idea but that is our best hope for any type of change to policies. And hopefully it will be fully implemented. But, I'm somewhat cynical that - would the government be willing to do that in spirit? That's my first hope.

The second is, in the UK they have a grant by the State that any person with a disability, including Deaf, they can stand to politics by bringing in an interpreter ...go door-to-door. Do you know, the canvassing? But in the Seanad, I was actually reliant on goodwill. One or two interpreters willing to do it voluntary. That's not the way to do it. But in the UK, they've got that grand scheme available, so that was the second thing.

I think I've covered.. I think I've covered the answers to the questions that you asked.

I think now .... going back to the other ones.

The 14<sup>th</sup>. We are marking the 14th of December to remember it as our National Irish Sign Language Day because this is going to be our fifth anniversary of the Irish Sign Language Act. Compared to 10 years ago, I think more people are interested in learning Sign Language. They're more confident in Signing out in public, so there are positives coming out of it. But there are many areas of neglect; addiction services, mental health services - they're screaming for help. And it's easier to forget about them because they're vulnerable. There needs to be future consideration to focus on them.

Now, I as a deaf person, I think, you need to have your own basic identity as early as you can. Tell the child 'you are deaf', 'you're fine' 'you can learn Sign Language', because when I was growing up, I was never told that there was nothing wrong with being deaf. All I got was 'oh poor you!' 'Aw, what a pity?' Can you imagine what it's like to grow up with that?

And then my parents were worried about my future. What am I going to be able to do? So, you can imagine how that affects people's confidence and their mental health. We need to have it said positively - you're Deaf and you can do!

So the 14th of December message it's that - it is fine to be deaf. It is fine to use Sign Language. You can progress. You can.

So can I tell you a little bit of a personal story about my two auntsies?

**James** Yeah, we'd love to hear it.

**JBC** It's one of my favourite stories. When my parents passed away, I felt obligated to visit the aunties and the uncles and the whole lot of them. But there's two aunties that I went to visit on the same day. They come from my mother's side of the family. Both of them are elderly. They've now since passed as well. But this was in the late 80s. Now, the both of them have the same cultural background. Same small town... had a business, you know. They were very similar from what I could see. And I was saying to my wife, Audrey, I feel obligated. I need to go and visit them.

So, I went to visit the first one and she was somewhat surprised to see me. So, you know there's the usual tea and asking how I was getting and I was telling her what I was doing. And she goes 'oh wow, you are successful, aren't you? Now if you had been born hearing, you would have been more successful!' I was like - well what can I be more successful than what I am now? Yeah, so I let her at it. You're not going to argue with an old auntie.

On the same day, I went to see the second auntie. Same question asked - how you getting on? Aunt said 'if you were born hearing you would not have been successful'. And that created a memory of me and that sums up society at large. Just by the two of them. The first auntie representing the majority, the second auntie representing the smaller population.

When I had said to the second... like how could you decide such a thing? She goes, 'oh I'm just looking at your own peer groups within my home. They all emigrated, became tradespeople. None of them went to University. And I went, okay I can go with that one.

**Timmy** But, just bringing it back to something he said there a while ago around his parents. I thought it was very important, you know. Growing up, his parents were a little bit worried about him. As time went on, and then his parents started to see how ...how well he was doing academically and going on, I don't know did they see him accomplishing his PhD. But how do they feel in the end, when just before they died? Of all John's work and what he's actually doing in Trinity at the moment? Were they very proud of him?

**JBC** My parents saw me achieve as far as the BA because they passed away. But they had known that I was starting my MA. So I can imagine they would have said 'oh wow, he could do it.' My mother was happy that I got my Leaving Cert and that I had a safe job in the Civil Service. She was actually very content with that but not realizing that I could actually progress further than that. But yeah, I know that she was happy and I know that if she were alive she would be proud, yeah.

**James** And when did you yourself, when did you yourself know that you could actually go on and finish your Masters and go on and do a PhD? When did that confidence start to start to rise within you that you had the ability to go on and succeed in these areas?

**JBC** The Leaving Cert. It actually started with the evening class in the Leaving Cert. Because I remember going to the first class, it was in English class. Can you imagine? I've only done my Inter Cert, you know, the old system. So I did that and I'm now going into school and I'm writing down. So they asked me to do an essay. I handed it in and the woman gave it back to me and she had this look on her face and she was 'I can't teach you, like you will have to go back to the Inter Cert'. And I said, 'no, I've done my Inter Cert' and she said 'that's not possible based on what you've written. Your standard is appalling.' And then the second question that was asked 'are you a foreigner? And I said 'No, I'm not' and I said 'I want to do my Leaving Cert'. So they had to go... I assumed that they had a conversation

with the Principal and they said what I needed to do was have a lot of grinds and I was like 'okay'. My parents offered to pay, so I did have my grinds. I can't remember the woman's name but she was the one that ... she was hard on me. But the changes were made.

Now, prior to that, I was actually given a false sense of that my English was good. In fact, it was really, really bad. I could not write English at all, but after all of those grinds, I then started passing my exams. And then I went on and then I joined...you know what, yerrah I'll try the BA. Then after that, yerrah I'll try the MA. But I loved learning. I loved learning but at the same time I've got no patience because I just want to keep going so I did my BA, went to the MA, then obviously the PHD. I have absolutely no regrets. Hard work but I enjoyed it, especially getting to a PhD. I got my PhD in equality studies through the DCU, Dublin City University. **[Correction University College Dublin, UCD]**. And they would have a round table conversation every week, different students different backgrounds – education, law, health - everybody contributing in that round table and that was where I learned so much from other people... how they spoke, research but also a very politically aware group as well.

But it was...slowly, I slowly evolved over time. And I'm the first.. my first.. out of the 11 of us I was the first one to go into University.

**Timmy** That is that's so inspirational John. You know and I think that in itself what you just said about your education journey is so inspirational. Not just for deaf people but for everybody that that went through the education system early on and it didn't sit with them. It didn't fit, you know. It shows that, if it doesn't work for you at this time of your of your life, this period of your life you can go on and do something else and go back to it. And then do it when you're ready and it sits with you a little bit better.

Because my own education journey is very similar to yours where it was 32 when I started my own education journey in the Junior Cert, and stuff like that, and went on to do the Leaving Cert then, and then onto do an Honours Degree in Construction Management and now a Masters. You know, what we're doing here is, we're showing people who say 'I can't do that', 'education is not for me', you know, we're showing them that, yes you can do that and you know what? Education is for you if you can get the education that meets your ability and your need, you know, your needs. And I think that's inspirational in itself and education is a key ... a key benefactor key factor in everybody's growth, not just academically but also, spiritually, so I think it's absolutely amazing what you're doing and fair play to you, I think it's inspirational.

**James** Yeah and we've had the many inspirational people on the podcast and you're definitely up there and this, as Timmy said it's the education piece as well. Because myself and Timmy come from... a checkered past and difficult backgrounds but education was transformative in our lives, you know. It helped redefine who we were and now it gives us..it gives us ..the... the English... it gives us the language to, do you know, articulate our experiences and advocate for others who are less fortunate, similar to what you're doing today.

So, it was a pleasure of talking to you. It was an honour really. And thanks to the Cork Deaf Association for organizing it and for the lovely interpreters and for your wife for giving us the time as well. So thank you John and it was great to meet you.

**Timmy** And if there's anything else, while we have you here now or if there's anything else you want to plug, talk about just before we do finish up, now is a great time to jump in and let us know.

**JBC** I'm going to quickly go back to your point Tim. I commend you on your education because you - the both of you - are inspiring others, coming from your backgrounds and I think the human quality that is overlooked is resilience. You are resilient. Where does it come from? It comes from your own drive? Is it your identity? Is it your belief in yourself? I think that is key. The education system failed me but I did not fail them. Can you see the difference? And I think resilience is such a powerful human quality that should always be encouraged.

**Timmy** 100 per cent. 100 million percent.

**James** Yeah, great message to finish on.

**Timmy** And we only get resilience through the tough times in life and .... and that's where resilience comes from. It comes from going through hardship, going through difficulties, being told you can't do it and you... you driving forward and... and getting it done and proving people wrong and that's where resilience comes... it comes from all those different areas. Thanks John.

**James** Sin é [*Irish – 'that's it'*]

**JBC** And thank you. It's been a pleasure to be in here and I wish you both the best with your future podcast. I look forward to more meaningful access as well. Good on you both, thank you.

**Timmy and James** Thank you

**Timmy** Thank you Catherine. Thanks to everybody here..... I forget that lady's name. Suzanne! Thanks Suzanne. And Gerrie. Sorry, you might choke me now after this.

**JBC** Have you .... Now there's one Sign that you can learn after today. Watch me! And it says 'thank you'. How easy is that?

**James** We were saying there.... If an interpreter was trying to interpret myself and Timmy's Northside accent, maybe the gesture he would use would be [*shrugs and laughs*]. If that's universal, I don't know.

**Timmy** It's a tough one.

**James** Thanks everyone. Thanks for your time. We'll see you next time.

**Timmy** Thanks, bye.