



British Deaf News

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**How they wrote
themselves
into Deaf
history**

INTERNATIONAL: PROFILE

a SIGN of her times

One of the most high profile interpreters in the US, **Lydia Callis** is a regular contributor to the Huffington Post, having covered everything from harnessing Deaf talent, bridging gaps in deaf and hearing families; and Deaf rights, access to the criminal justice system. She also gained national attention for her interpreting work alongside then Mayor Bloomberg during Hurricane Sandy. Here she talks to **BDN**

WHAT DOES DEAF CULTURE MEAN TO YOU?

I am a proud CODA (Child Of A Deaf Adult) who comes from three generations of deaf family. Since my mother and siblings are all deaf, American Sign Language is my first language; it is the language we used in our home.

I have been professionally interpreting for 10 years. I completed the Interpreter Training Program at the prestigious Rochester Institute of Technology / National Technical Institute of the Deaf.

I moved to New York City in 2012, and I began working for an interpreting agency that is contracted by the city government.

When Hurricane Sandy hit NYC that year, I was asked to interpret the emergency press conferences.

It was a true privilege to serve the deaf citizens of New York by working alongside Mayor Michael Bloomberg and other city officials. To my surprise, videos of my interpretations began going viral! – [see bit.ly/lydiacallis](http://bit.ly/lydiacallis)

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO EMBARK ON AN INTERPRETING CAREER?

Throughout my life, I saw the daily struggles my family members endured. Now that my deaf nieces are growing up, it is my duty to make sure this world is a better place with plenty of opportunities for them. I began interpreting to help serve the deaf community, and to ensure I stayed fluent in the language of my roots.





THE BEST REVIEW YOU'VE RECEIVED?

One of the most influential moments for me was knowing that the press conferences were being broadcast and that the videos were seen globally. The mainstream fascination with my signing style made me realise that general audiences have little knowledge about sign language or what it means to be deaf. So I decided to use the media exposure to help educate and raise awareness about Deaf Culture – a topic near and dear to my heart.



HOW DID YOU GET THE HUFFINGTON POST JOB?

Someone there recognised that I have a lot to say and they put their faith in me, believing that I would use the platform to serve the deaf community.

MOST CHALLENGING STORY YOU'VE WRITTEN?

It is most difficult to discuss my personal experiences as a CODA and to confront the distance between deaf and hearing that exists in my own family, as I did in "Bridging the Communication Gap in Your Own Family."

WHAT WAS THE RESPONSE TO YOUR STORY ON "SIA'S SNL MIME AND SIGN LANGUAGE IN POP MUSIC"?

If musicians want to truly connect with the Deaf community, there are plenty of ways to incorporate Deaf voices into their work. Instead of hiring actors who are not fluent in the language to do ASL interpretation, creative directors could find some of the many talented deaf performers who are working hard to make a name for themselves.

I feel like sometimes people miss the main message when I write a piece like this. I was not criticizing the sign language performer or even Sia as an artist. Sia said she loves sign

language, but without a thought to what that means to deaf culture. One of the most important roles of an ally is to support and promote deaf culture by incorporating deaf individuals.

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT DEAF CULTURE?

The hearing community tends to look at deafness as a disability, which puts deaf people in this category where they cannot function. If they were provided with simple communication access, deaf individuals could equally participate in society.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE LEVEL OF DEAF AWARENESS IN THE U.S?

Well, we have a lot of work to do but we are definitely ahead of other countries. The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, yet people are still not providing qualified medical, legal, and educational interpreting services. This law was passed 25 years ago, but I believe the more that these activist groups come together, we can fight for what is right and provide deaf people the opportunities and quality of life they deserve.

HOW DID IT FEEL TO WRITE THE STORY: "HOW THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM FAILS THE DEAF COMMUNITY"?

Justice and legal professionals often lack deaf cultural competency, which plays a major role in deaf discrimination and oppression – See bit.ly/lydiacallisjustice

That story hit home for a lot of people because the abuse of deaf rights has become so widespread. From start to finish, the criminal justice system lets deaf people down. The first step to changing that is making everyone aware that a problem exists.

HOW DO WE BETTER UNITE THE DEAF AND HEARING WORLDS?

Education. We need hearing and deaf people to drop their preconceived notions and help educate one other. If we want real change, it is going to take deaf individuals doing the research, standing up, and advocating for themselves.

Deaf people cannot expect all hearing people to be expert sign language users, but we can expect them to be open to learning. Hearing people might not understand the relevant legislation or how to hire a qualified interpreter, but it is fair to expect that they will work closely with the deaf person to find a communication solution.

To mitigate the risk of having their rights abused, deaf individuals should have the knowledge to advocate for themselves.

WHAT'S YOUR CONNECTION WITH THE UK DEAF COMMUNITY?

I have never been to the UK, although I know a few BSL signs. I would love to connect more with the UK deaf community, as I believe we are all fighting the same battle for justice.

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