

## **BBC Radio Gloucestershire's Jon Smith interview with Reg Cobb – Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> December 2018.**

Jon Smith (JS) – My 8pm guest this evening is Reg Cobb. Reg is deaf and a British Sign Language (BSL) user. Reg also works for the Gloucestershire Deaf Association and you might remember they hosted a quiz and we spoke to them to find out what it's like to put on a quiz for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. So tonight, we're going to hear a very personal account of what it's like to be deaf and living in Gloucestershire. Reg came along earlier to speak with me, along with his interpreter James Banks, who you'll hear in this interview.

Reg Cobb (RC) – I've been in Gloucestershire for 11 years now and I moved with my family to the region. My wife is deaf, I have three children who are hearing but everyone signs, so the children are bi-lingual. It's a lovely county and we enjoy living here. I joined GDA six years ago to support deaf people in the county.

JS – What was it that brought you here?

RC – It was for a better lifestyle really. It wasn't a deaf-related decision, we just wanted our kids to have a good future. And the opportunity came up to join GDA – it looked like a brilliant charity, really supporting deaf people, and I've been enjoying it ever since.

JS – Great. We'll talk more about the charity a little later on, but I'd like to know more about you and your family. How did you and your wife meet?

RC – I wasn't expecting that question, but that's fine! My parents are deaf and only about 5% of deaf people have deaf parents. I was very lucky growing up, communicating with my parents very easy. I met my wife at a party in Brighton. The deaf community is a very small world – everyone knows everyone. People from all over the country are going to these parties; London, Brighton, Liverpool. It was a friend of mine's engagement party, and we got chatting. We had similar interests and were both motivated to get on with our lives. Both of her parents were deaf as well. I think because of that it gave us good social skills, which means we got on really well. I think it was 1996 when we met.

JS – You talk about the close relationship and the ease of communication because both of your parents were deaf, so if you hadn't had that how different would your life be now?

RC – I know many parents, all love their children, but many are confused on how to communicate with their children. The first few years there is often a struggle deciding how to communicate – society puts pressure on children to speak but the future impact of that can be very difficult. If there is no communication support that child will struggle in later life. When I was a toddler I learned sign language and from that I learned to speak. For me that was a very natural upbringing. I think it helps you understand the wider world and for me and my wife, that's what put us on the same wave length and we've passed that on to our children as well.

JS – What was education like for you Reg?

RC – I went to a deaf school from the age of 5 to 16yrs and I really enjoyed it. I was just one of the kids. I wasn't on my own; I wasn't the minority, I was just the same as everyone else. It wasn't a case that I was the only deaf person in among hearing children so I never felt left out. But the expectation on deaf children to succeed in school

is very poor, and so we were educated to a low standard. I left school with just one GCSE, which was what was expected as a deaf child. But I'm a high achieving sort of person. I think even now, it is still expected that deaf people will be poorly educated. I went to college then I went to university and got a degree in the end, but I had to go the long way round to get that degree. If the expectation for deaf children hadn't been as it was, I would have gone in a more direct route to get the degree. But sadly expectations are low and my education suffered as a result of that.

JS – Do you wish you had been pushed at school?

RC – Definitely, yes. I'm lucky, I had my parents and my dad would also explain things to me. I remember sitting with him and he encouraged me and gave me that extra information I needed. But it came from him, not the school. A funny story – I was in a history class, although it was a deaf school they had an oral approach to learning, so you had to lip-read. Some teachers were easier to lip-read than others. In the history class, they were talking about the Wall Street Crash and they were discussing shares and losing shares, and as a result people were committing suicide because of it. I sat through a 45 minute class and I couldn't understand what they were talking about. At the end of the class I put my hand up and asked why are people killing themselves over chairs, because I thought they were talking about chairs. It's the same lip shape! It was my mistake but everyone else in the class had thought the same, so no one had got it!

\*\* breaks for music \*\*

JS – My guest this evening is Reg Cobb. Reg is deaf and his wife is also deaf. We've been speaking about some of the barriers they have to overcome.

RC – My wife is called Yvonne. She is my better half – I'm the rubbish half. I'm really proud of her, she's very successful. She is a presenter on BBC See Hear, a programme for deaf people. She also cooks for the programme and runs her own business, Yumma Food. They encourage deaf people to work with them to learn how to have a career in catering and cooking. We have three kids, an 18yr old and twin 15yr olds, and they're lovely children but I am biased! They're studying for A-levels and GCSE's. The three kids are hearing. We have one rule at the dinner table where everyone has to sign and speak at the same time so it is a totally inclusive session which helps family bonding. I had that with my parents and I wanted the same for my children too.

JS – So many children learn their first language from their parents. Was that sign language for your children?

RC – It was. Their first language was BSL. I remember my daughter was six months old and she could sign mummy and daddy. We'd sit the twins in their highchairs and once they finished, my daughter who was about nine months old, looked at me and she signed the word 'pear', so I got her some and she was happy. I thought WOW, at nine months old she was able to tell me what she wanted. I don't think a lot of hearing children could do that at that age. It does puzzle me why society wants to keep a lid on sign language. It's such a wonderful thing. It's an extra tool. It's not something that replaces speech, you can do both.

JS – In that case, do you wish sign language was more widely taught in schools?

RC – Absolutely. I think in Britain, we're a little 'stiff upper lip' about having proper speech, but I wish society would see BSL as a wonderful thing. There has been research in to how we communicate and 55% is through body language anyway, so the use of sign language could be included in that and we could understand each other a bit more.

JS – Let's talk about your involvement in GDA.

RC – My role is Project Development Manager. I implement projects that match the needs of deaf and hard of hearing people in Gloucestershire. We've recently expanded in to South Gloucestershire and Swindon and Wiltshire because there are currently no services available there. The people there voted for us to go in to help them which was really nice to be invited in to an area, rather than going in on our own accord.

JS – What kind of things are you involved in at the moment?

RC – The main thing I'm involved in is an employment project called 'Going the Extra Mile', or the GEM Project, we work with Gloucestershire Gateway Trust and that's connected to Gloucestershire County Council funding. We support people on their employment journey, we help them understand relationships at work and how to relate with employers. It's a great project because we can guide the deaf people through the process to getting a job. I have a wonderful story about a lady who got a job in a café in Cheltenham. The employer was willing to take on a deaf person which is really rare. The deaf lady had been trying to get a job in a café for a while and had had barista training but no-one would take her on because she is deaf. She struggled in the first week, trying to communicate with the employer but they were really flexible and we worked together. I taught the deaf person how to behave in the proper way in that environment and so far so good. I hoping that with our support the deaf person will continue working there for as long as she wants.

JS – I was at the Navigator meeting the other week and I have to say some of the work being shown there was really amazing.

RC – I'm really proud of this project and I think all the employment agencies should look at working with deaf people. The trick with the GEM Project is it's a team approach and that works really well. It's a good model that could roll out to the rest of the UK.

\*\* breaks for music \*\*

JS – My guest this evening has been Reg and his BSL interpreter James. Reg, it's been great getting to know you. I think it would be great to also have your wife in the studio to talk to her, do you think she'd be up for that?

RC – Oh definitely, she'd be delighted to do that.

JS – One thing we haven't spoken about is the quiz from a little while back. Tell me, what was that all about?

RC – It was one of GDA's fundraising event. It isn't just a fundraiser, it's an opportunity for deaf people to come also. If you think about how many places that are available for deaf people to go to, it isn't many. So we work hard to set up events for our deaf people to come to. It's a really inclusive environment, we had deaf people, hearing people and hard of hearing people there, and there were no barriers. It's nice for everyone to learn to work together in a mixed environment. It was a great opportunity, well organised and some really great and interesting questions – over to you Gem!

JS – Of course! Gemma was our guest announcer on the show back then and we found out what was going to happen. Reg I am intrigued, when you talk about having an inclusive environment for everyone, are there things you want to say to people, to say "please don't say this", or "please don't ask this"?

**RC – That's a difficult question. I think when people think of inclusivity, the first thing they think of is wheelchairs or guide dogs because they are obvious. But there are a lot of hidden disabilities like autism, dyslexia, deafness or even cancer sufferers, all of them are included in that hidden disability. What we're trying to do is open up minds to think about who you want to include? And don't be afraid to ask how, if you're not sure ask us. At GDA we work with so many people that have a wealth of knowledge to offer the right advise – we have the whole breadth of experience.**

**JS – It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for joining us.**