

In New York City, everyone is loud.

They speak right at you, enunciating their letters. I'd moved from London's *Observer Magazine* for a great job with the famous newspaper editor, Harry Evans, at *Condé Nast Traveller*. Looking back, I didn't meet a single person there who mumbled.

At that time, I was 25 and I didn't know I had a hearing problem. I know now that all my adult life I've been compensating without realising it. When I was a student at what was then called St Martin's Art College, I always sat near the front, not understanding why people spoke so softly. After New York, I came back to the UK and was Art Director at *Elle* and then *Elle Decoration*. People said I was direct, always making eye contact when people spoke to me - but I thought everybody did that.

I didn't know about my hearing loss until 1998, when I had my second baby. My husband and I would argue about whose turn it was to get up at night when the baby cried in the room next door. I would say, "The baby's not

miss the consonants in speech sounds when people talk. There was no reason for this: no car crash; no trauma; nothing like this in my family. It's like a bite has been taken out of my audiogram.

At the time, I was shocked. I didn't know if this was a symptom of another condition. I'd never had a test before and had nothing to compare these test results with, so didn't know if I was losing my hearing completely.

I didn't tell anyone at work. I was now a freelance designer working at *The Guardian* and had just launched a design studio with my husband. I think I was still coming to terms with the news and thought they didn't need to know. Of course, most of my work was about creating visual identities and briefing photographers and designers in one-to-one situations. I suppose this environment was manageable.

Not like contact lenses

The adjustment period with hearing aids was long and difficult. I thought they would work like magic, in the same way

Artfully done

crying." He would say, "The baby *is* crying," and "You need a hearing test." It was confusing for me because I could hear lorries screeching, phones ringing and horns booming. I knew I wasn't deaf.

But I had the test - and it showed I was 40% down on my hearing. I can't hear soft sounds and, like many others, I

that contact lenses correct my sight. I kept having them adjusted in order to get rid of annoying, tinny sounds. It was too tempting to take them out when my husband coughed, or the alarm went off, and sounds became too loud. Then I found a really good audiologist at the Whittington Hospital in north London ▶

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who gave me a good talking to and told me I had to train my brain to process sound in a different way. He said if I worked at it and made the adjustments now, I could prolong my hearing into my old age.

This helped me enormously. Now I can't get through the day without my hearing aids and, if the house was on fire, I'd rush back in to get them - or go to the NHS and get some more.

Then I was invited to join the teaching team at Central Saint Martins. I knew I would still be working visually and that the students would learn by 'doing', so I took up teaching to support my creative practice. I found ways to engage students, despite my hearing loss; rethinking the traditional seminar, mainly using small breakout groups and asking students to assist with Q&A sessions.

Give my brain a rest

The student body here is very diverse. They like to learn in alternative ways and that suits me. I use written peer feedback a lot and there are other useful, visual aids. I teach editorial design for tablets and use my iPad all the time. I make sure I get to work and meetings early to set up the room to enable me to lipread and also to write down the names of the people there which helps, especially when one name sounds like another.

However, my business is talking, teaching and listening to students and, when the college moved to a new site in Kings Cross in 2011, life became more difficult. There were high ceilings and huge, open-plan spaces and I had to 'come out' by registering as a disabled person. My colleagues found it quite hard to believe because I'd coped so well, but I needed to get changes made to the graphics studio for me and also for any students with hearing difficulties. An acoustic survey gave us the evidence



Above: Cath by fashion photographer Gary Wallis; at a work meeting; her design toolkit publication



It was a big step admitting [hearing loss] in front of a new group of students I didn't know but I wanted to encourage them not to feel ashamed. It's all part of their transition to becoming adults

needed to apply for funding to make changes and we had acoustic-absorption ceiling panels fitted. I do still struggle with the sound here, though I'm very grateful to have been given my own tutorial room, away from the open-plan space. This has helped tremendously and I'm far more productive. I can give my brain a rest and don't have to deal with all the reverberating sounds around me.

When put in charge of the first year cohort of 180 students, I came clean to them, saying, "I have a disability and I would appreciate your help along the way. Now if you're dyslexic, dyspraxic or have a 'hidden disability', we can support you, too." It was a big step admitting this in front of a new group I didn't know but I wanted to encourage them not to feel ashamed. It's all part of their transition to becoming adults.

Part of my job is to teach students to talk about their work in public, helping them to speak clearly and with confidence and clarity. I remind them that I'm hearing impaired and this helps them to understand how they'll have to communicate when working with people with diverse needs.

On the other hand, I don't want to make too much of a fuss and draw attention to myself about not being able to hear. It is the great British fear of being embarrassed. People never stop making jokes: "Did you hear that?" "Pardon?" I also find people are

impatient because it may take me a split second to process something I've not heard correctly.

I used to feel optimistic that a cure would be developed for my kind of hearing loss, which is due to wear and tear of the tiny hairs in the inner ear. We're all still waiting. However, my hearing has not got any worse over the years. I have tinnitus (which is connected) and I use meditation and try to sleep well to try to reduce this.

Everyone at home is sympathetic. My kids learned from a very young age to look at me directly when they talk and we only speak one at a time at dinner. They report things to me that I've missed in social situations. We have subtitles on the TV and the radio on quite loud.

Book club mix up

Friends come to me and ask, "What should my husband/cousin/sister do?" I always encourage people to wear hearing aids. A colleague of mine now openly wears hers, too. It affects one in six of us, after all.

And my book club is a great help. They always position me in a good spot and fill me in on the punchline of jokes I've missed. They did think it was funny, though, when I asked how everyone was getting on with *The Taming of the Shrew*. We were meant to be reading *The Turn of the Screw*... I had wondered why we were doing a play...