Sandra breaks down the barriers in a silent world

A 62-year-old Adelaide woman will this month become the first profoundly-Deaf person to graduate with First Class Honours in the University’s 138-year history.

Sandra Hoopmann has spent the past 11 years studying part-time at the University of Adelaide with the help of sign-language interpreters, who worked with her during lectures, tutorials and meetings with her supervisors.

In 2011, Sandra completed a Bachelor of Arts (First Class Honours) in the Discipline of Gender, Work and Social Inquiry after earlier obtaining a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Anthropology, and Media and Communications in 2008.

“Because I live in a predominantly hearing world, those extra services provided by the University’s Disability Liaison Office (DLO) have been a real boon and absolutely essential in order to obtain a higher degree without disadvantage,” Sandra said.

The DLO has provided both sign-language interpreters and transcribers for Sandra during her studies. The ability to lip-read has also come in handy, although that has its challenges, too:

“Every person has unique lip shapes and not all lecturers are easy to lip-read. With some people I pick up quickly but, with others, it is a continual ‘Mt Everest’ climb – especially those academics who mumble and have thick beards! There are times I am sorely tempted to get a pair of scissors and snip off an overhanging hair or two.”

Sandra was born congenitally-deaf in Brisbane as a result of a rubella epidemic in the late 1940s.

Although very keen to attend university in her earlier years she was often confronted with barriers because of the lack of services for Deaf people.

“I got married and had children, yet always focused on my dream to study for a higher education because of my love for learning.”

Sandra enrolled at the University of Adelaide in 2000 when the disability services were still in their infancy and the learning curve was steep for both parties.

“To my knowledge, it was the first time the University had provided services for a profoundly-Deaf student like me. I was initially frustrated by the red tape and had to chip away at the layers of bureaucracy, but now I receive all the services I need.

“I feel extremely fortunate to have studied at such a prestigious university as Adelaide. Doing my Honours degree has been both challenging and inspiring, thanks to the support of Gender, Work and Social Inquiry colleagues and my wonderful supervisor Dr Megan Warin, who was a wise mentor for me.”

The latter described Sandra as a “meticulously-organised researcher” with a “razor-sharp reading of body language”.

“Sandi has a wonderful ability to open up the world to more diverse and conceptual ways of thinking and communicating,” Dr Warin said. “She negotiates the hearing world every day with great confidence, creativity and a wonderfully robust sense of humour”. Sandra’s Honours thesis focused on the community of Deaf women in Adelaide, their history, kinship and identity.

“The Second World War created conditions for the Adelaide Deaf community to become visible through their contributions to the War Effort. Through the Deaf Women’s Friendly Society (connected with the Adelaide Deaf community), a sisterhood without blood-ties was forged and still remains today.”

After graduation Sandra hopes to further develop her writing skills and make “valuable contributions to Adelaide’s Deaf community”, through community work, research and teaching.

“At this stage I am not sure what is around the corner but, at the ripe age of 62, the world is my oyster.”

Note: The capital “D” denotes Sandra’s identity as a culturally Deaf person because of her use of signed language and cultural habits that are different from mainstream hearing norms. The capital “D” is used internationally when talking about Deaf communities and their members.

Story by Candy Gibson
Above: Sandra Hoopmann
Photo by Candy Gibson