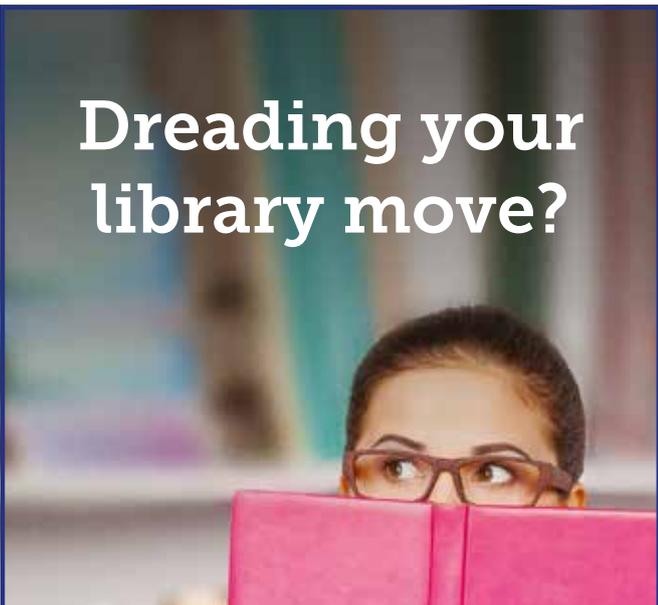




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# REDUCING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN OUR UNDERSTANDINGS

**T**he Pierre Gorman Award was awarded to Yarra Plenty Regional Library (YPRL) in 2012 for the project *Connected Communities – Auslan and Voice Unite* – designed to meet the needs of the local hearing impaired community.

It dawned on me that I was about to embark on a wonderful journey; however, it seemed a daunting project. How was I going to make this work, meet all the obligations, and make a significant impact to the lives of the community who are hearing impaired?

I had been given an opportunity to better understand a community I knew little about and believed that our library service could improve the connections, not only with the library service, but also the wider community.

Prior to the Pierre Gorman Award, the Yarra Plenty Regional Library ran Auslan storytelling sessions for preschool children in the Banyule area for 12 months. While this program was successful, it reached only a small proportion of the target group. The aim of the project was to expand the target group to include hearing children and help to educate and break down the prejudices surrounding deafness.

Research was gathered to understand the demographic of the community we served, covering Banyule City Council, City of Whittlesea and Shire of Nillumbik. Census data for Victoria revealed that sign language users in the area of Melbourne in 2011 totalled 5.35 signers per 10,000 residents. The Shire of Nillumbik and Banyule City Council revealed higher than average populations of Auslan signers. Banyule was identified as having 9.02 signers per 10,000 residents. The Shire of Nillumbik was identified as having 7.95 signers per 10,000 residents. The City of Whittlesea statistics showed there were 3.31 signers per 10,000 residents, but a big increase of 35% in Auslan signers from 2001.

Understanding what life for a deaf or hearing impaired person is like was a big part of the project.

A story told by one of our interpreters spelt out for me how what we see as an everyday life event can provide challenges for a hearing impaired person. Imagine taking a yoga class and being deaf (try being in downward dog pose while the yoga instructor counts the breathing and your Auslan interpreter stands at your rear end, signing the numbers and letting you know what to do next – talk about intimacy). This setup does not make the program feel suitable or accessible for a deaf or hearing impaired member of our community.



I also gained a clearer picture when Jennie, a deaf community member, explained her frustration in using the public transport system. When travelling on the train, everyone relies on loudspeaker announcements for timetable cancellations or platform changes. Jennie says she follows the crowd like a little black sheep, hoping she is following the correct group to catch the right train.

We also had to analyse the needs of the audience. With storytime, *Old Macdonald had a Farm* moves too quickly for signing in Auslan, for example. We discovered the librarians needed to choose large print books with less text and discuss the presentation or storytime with the translator beforehand.

We had to find the right people to partner with (as we are not the experts), whether this was a local school, sporting club, Metro Access, or members of the community who have experienced being deaf or having a deaf member in their family.

We also had to learn how the community we were connecting with communicated. We discovered the use of a black and white hands symbol was recognised as a valuable program by the deaf and hearing impaired community and, by promoting programs, services and training on the Vic Deaf website and Facebook page, we were able to reach out to a greater audience. We also discovered that an Auslan translator needs to be booked three weeks in advance because they are so few and in high demand.

Not only did we aim to increase understanding ourselves, but provided opportunities for other professionals to increase their understanding. Professional development opportunities were provided over three sessions for library professionals and teachers as well as community members.

The challenge, as we reach out to particular groups in our community we may not usually connect with, is that we do not know what they want.

We extended and expanded programs and resources to increase community education and participation at all our branches for children and adults with hearing impairment. YPRL developed a number of new resources including a training DVD. We created and published a children's storybook with the assistance of local children with hearing impairments and, in partnership with a local publisher, produced a youth chapter storytime DVD translated in Auslan.

Some plans needed tweaking as our understanding increased. One element of the project was to purchase more resources and develop a DVD of more titles for children's storytimes. We discovered the local Aurora School had an abundance of resources for children, dictionaries and other sign books, but limited titles on DVD for youth and adults. So we developed a DVD reading and Auslan translation of the young adult book *Remember Me* by George Ivanoff.



Auslan in action.

The newly established Auslan book group relocated to a different library branch and instead of reading and discussing a book, it morphed into a language café where they practice AUSLAN and help each other improve.

We set out with a focus to run a program for hearing impaired and changed course to running our programs with Auslan interpretation. We became more inclusive, and this meant access increased as we ran more sessions and introduced Auslan to the general community.

Attendance and programs have continued to increase, up by 80% at Auslan Adult Conversation group and our Auslan Storytime growing by around 50%.

I believe passion made a real difference. When you believe in your role and see the project is making a difference, it gives people a sense of wanting to be part of the adventure.

#### JANE GRACE

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*The Pierre Gorman Award is administered by the State Library of Victoria and assists Victorian public libraries with service development and delivery to people with a disability. The award honours and recognises the amazing contribution made by the late Dr Pierre Gorman CBE, who was devoted to improving services for people with disabilities, and was himself profoundly deaf.*