

Lionel inspired to put deaf folk at forefront

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LIONEL SMITH believes that much more needs to be done if the disabled community is to achieve its rightful place in Barbadian society.

If he had his way, he would expeditiously bring about that change to right the wrongs of “discrimination”.

Lionel, who is president of the Barbados Horizon Deaf Charity, was born deaf, and though he believes this disability should not be a major barrier to one’s progress, he said it is.

“The barriers are very real. Sometimes there are no interpreters on television and we need to understand what is happening,” he told the **DAILY NATION**.

He said that in a world in which things were happening at a rapid pace, there was a crying need for more access in Barbados to make it more disabled-friendly. This, he added, needed to be rectified in conjunction with people changing their attitude towards the disabled.

Growing up

Lionel, 34, who attended the Irving Wilson School, said that despite being born deaf, he grew up “normally” and was taught sign language from early.

“My only problem was not being able to hear. My family signs – my mother, brother and sister.”

Passionate and yearning for change, Lionel said that enough effort was not being put into bringing change at a governmental level. He cited the **American Disabilities Act** as an example of the level of seriousness associated with stamping out discrimination against the disabled in the United States. He said similar action was required in Barbados.

Lamenting that a friend was recently denied a job because he was deaf, Lionel said that this could not have happened in the US since there were laws specifically designed to protect the disabled.

He said he spends his happiest moments with the deaf community, as they had a strong bond and were like one big family.

Against the background of the recently celebrated **International Week Of The Deaf 2020**, which had a specific focus on the human rights

of the deaf, Lionel stressed the need for the understanding and use of sign language in the general society.

“Sign language is the language used by deaf people and is recognised like any other language in the world. In Barbados, the deaf use American sign language with a blend of signs representing Bajan dialect and culture. It fully incorporates the use of our hands, facial expressions, gestures and body language, and some lip-reading; not one without the other,” he added.

The deaf community became organised as a group in Barbados in 1995 and formed the New Life Deaf Club. It renamed itself Barbados Horizon Deaf Charity one year ago and is supported by the Barbados Council For The Disabled and The Deaf Heart Project, conceptualised by reigning **Miss Barbados World**, Ché Amor Greenidge, to assist the disabled with realising their goals.

“We are in contact with over 200 deaf people in Barbados, but there are no official figures for the actual number of deaf individuals living here,” he said.

Lionel said the COVID-19 pandemic had dealt them a big blow. “It presented an additional challenge to all deaf people by impeding communication even further. Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals cannot easily communicate within the scope of the ‘new normal’, which requires the wearing of face masks.”

Despite adhering to and agreeing with all COVID-19 protocols “for the safety of all”, he said this did not change the fact that face masks severely obstructed communication for the deaf.

Inspired to bring about change in the midst of several obstacles, the president added it was therefore his aim to make the public aware of the challenges.

Decrying the lack of sensitivity to their needs in public places, he said he recently had a staycation at a local resort where phone calls were being directed to his room from the front desk. This, he added, was happening though he made them aware that he was deaf.

In responding to the reservation



LIONEL SMITH looking on as interpreter Bonnie Leonce interacts with participants during a sign language workshop in 2017. (FP)

PRESIDENT of the Barbados Horizon Deaf Charity, Lionel Smith, wants equal opportunity for the deaf community. (FP)

manager, he asked: “How can I hear the phone call? It was then that the manager realised that they have a problem with communication and access for deaf persons.”

But that is just one area of serious concern for the community.

Lack of opportunities

Lamenting the lack of educational opportunities, Lionel said there was a huge disparity.

“Deaf people have limited access to the same education levels [afforded] our hearing counterparts. As a result, our job opportunities and options are limited. There are too many deaf people with skills who are not being accepted or employed.”

He asked why there could not be deaf people working in Government as accountants or teachers, but added: “At least now we are allowed a driver’s licence.”

He said the lack of accessibility was forcing many deaf Barbadians to relocate to the US and other developed countries for a chance to live “more independent, successful lives”. His message to the authorities was: “We just want to feel at home in our home – Barbados.”

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