

Getting the Message Across

by Iona McNaughton



Alan Wendt is a sign-language interpreter. He uses New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) to help Deaf and hearing people talk to each other.

There are about 11,000 people in Aotearoa New Zealand who are Deaf. NZSL is the first language they learn. Many of their friends and families learn it, too.

I asked Alan some questions about his job.



Iona *Why did you learn NZSL?*

Alan I love languages. I grew up speaking Samoan and English. Then, at high school, I decided to learn German because our family also has German heritage. I discovered I was good at learning languages. When I went to university, I tried other languages too, including NZSL.



Iona *Why did you become a sign-language interpreter?*

Alan When I was a kid, Mum and I watched Miss Universe on television. Everyone in the contest spoke different languages, and interpreters translated what they said into English. It seemed like magic! I thought that, one day, I would like to be an interpreter, too.

Iona

What skills do you need to be a sign-language interpreter?

Alan

First you need to learn the language. It's very different from other languages because you use your hands and face instead of words. Then you need to have a good general knowledge and a good memory. You also need to like working with lots of different people. Finally, you need to practise and practise.

Iona

What are some of the challenges?

Alan

Sign-language interpreting is hard work. You have to listen carefully to what people say or sign so that you can explain it correctly. You also have to remember what was said, and you have to work very quickly.

Another challenge is that you have to think about how you use your face as well as your hands. Sign-language interpreters use their faces a lot. For example, if I sign "big" and then puff out my cheeks, that means "very big". I also use my face to show emotions, such as happiness, sadness, surprise, or anger.

big



very big



happy



sad



surprise



anger





Iona *Who do you work for?*

Alan I work for whoever needs me – in hospitals, universities, and schools. I even interpret for Deaf people when they are learning to drive. My first job was interpreting for a Deaf basketball team at a meeting with their hearing coach. I've interpreted at birthday parties and for a children's theatre company so that Deaf children could watch the play and know what the actors were saying.

I also interpret for Deaf people who work in parliament. The first time I interpreted in parliament was in 2005. The members of parliament were talking about whether to make Sign Language an official language of New Zealand. I was very nervous because a lot of Deaf people had come to watch, and I wanted to do a good job.

Iona *You often work with the Prime Minister. What's that like?*

Alan The Prime Minister has meetings with the news media every week. The interpreters get her speech notes thirty minutes before the meetings start. That gives us time to read them and make sure we understand everything. After her speech, the journalists ask many questions. There's a lot of pressure!

I usually work with another interpreter so that we can have a break every fifteen minutes. If I interpret for too long, my brain feels like it's turned into cotton wool, and then I'm hard to understand.





Iona *What was it like doing the daily information sessions about COVID-19?*

Alan During the lockdown, a team of six interpreters worked for the Prime Minister. We worked in a “bubble pair”, and we had to keep our distance from other people.

The Deaf community gave good feedback on ways we could improve our work. For example, they asked if we could roll up our sleeves so that they could see our hands more clearly. They also asked for brighter lighting.

One day, the Prime Minister talked about the different ways you can say hello. She did the “East Coast wave”, which is when you just raise your eyebrows. I had to do it too, and it went around the world on social media. People thought it was very funny.

Iona *What do you like about your job?*

Alan I love interpreting because it’s very challenging. I also get to meet a lot of different people. Most of all, I enjoy helping Deaf people to get the same information as hearing people.

Iona *How do you sign your name?*

Alan Most people in the Deaf community have a sign name as well as their given name. When they are using their given name, they sign each individual letter. Their sign name might be something special about them or it might be something about how they look, such as having curly hair or big eyes. My sign name is one hand resting on top of the other because I often sit like that.



Alan says that more and more hearing people are choosing to learn sign language. You could learn it, too. What do you think your sign name would be?

You can find out more about sign language at: nzsl.vuw.ac.nz



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