

MERGE NZ, NORMALISING NEW ZEALAND SIGN LANGUAGE

BY CHRISSY LLOYD-JONES

In New Zealand we have three official languages; English, Te Reo and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), a vital link for our Deaf community. My eight-year-old granddaughter told me they learn NZSL at school. Ashley then confidently showed me the alphabet, ending up with the whole sign for "I Love You" which is wonderfully easy to execute. We practised it a few times that day.

Sign languages have developed as useful means of communication and form the core of local Deaf cultures. Although signing is

used primarily by the Deaf and hard of hearing, it is also used by hearing individuals, such as those unable to physically speak, those who have trouble with oral language due to a disability or condition (augmentative and alternative communication), and those with Deaf family members, including children of Deaf adults. Sign languages are used to convey meaning, instead of spoken words and are expressed through manual articulation in combination with non-manual markers. They are full-



One-on-one instruction is fascinating and enjoyable.



Learning sign language can be fun.

fledged natural languages with their own grammar and vocabulary and are usually not mutually intelligible, although there are similarities among different sign languages.

In early February 2017, two mothers of young children discussed the importance of NZSL in education and the benefits that would come from NZSL being exposed early in schools, organisations, businesses and media. As a result of this conversation, the

name and concept of Merge NZ social enterprise was born. It was the first step in a journey that will see NZSL use a normality in New Zealand, taught and respected as much as our two other official languages. Merge NZ champions the promotion of NZSL to ensure its preservation and growth. It offers a range of services for communities, schools, businesses and entertainment and provides workshops and training programmes (both



face-to-face and online via MySign) for people learning and using NZSL. You can also book specialised NZSL course to suit your needs.

I was able to communicate with Victoria Lessing (not by signing unfortunately but by old fashioned texting) who is a Specialist/Director at NZSL. She told me many areas throughout New Zealand have enjoyed crash courses, increasing the knowledge and enjoyment using the language can bring and now Merge NZ are working on the first-time delivery of a crash course for people who want to have a taster of learning NZSL in Waipu. The course will be run with six-hour training during the weekend. Dates and times are yet to be confirmed but are likely

to be on a Saturday afternoon. Once full details are available, they will be advertised. Jennifer Lum is NZSL Onsite Courses Co-ordinator and once the NZSL crash course in Waipu is confirmed she will ensure details are available locally and on social media. There is likely to be great interest for sure.

An example of New Zealand Sign Language becoming increasingly normalised is seen on our television screens, with competent exponents of the language translating behind newsreaders and spokespersons. Merge NZ also aims to promote and develop services for the Deaf, informed by a philosophy that ensures any projects will be led, created and developed by Deaf professionals to strengthen leadership and independence.

On the Merge NZ website praise is given to Auckland Transport for taking the initiative to include NZSL videos with captions on their vehicles, describing this as "fantastic news to have NZSL accessible for the Deaf community in Auckland". It's a great step towards inclusivity and hopefully other

cities and towns will follow suit and have NZSL videos featured on their platforms too. The aim is to continue to make information and communication accessible to everyone.

Merge NZ have several core values. They are passionate about the growth and preservation of sign language; they are creative, energetic, proactive and their journeys are navigated by Deaf culture. Their philosophy ensures any projects are led, created and developed by their Deaf professionals to strengthen leadership and independence with the company marketing and promoting NZSL and Deaf culture in most parts of New Zealand, thus ensuring the promotion and preservation of their unique language. Merge NZ's responsibilities to the Deaf community and to NZSL as a language are driven by the passion that determines all they do. ■



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