



# Through Ellen's Ears

Eleven-year-old Ellen doesn't speak with her voice but with her hands. She uses sign language because she is deaf. Ellen has to decide which secondary school to attend. She doesn't want to go to the boarding school for the deaf like other deaf children. She would much rather go to an ordinary school or to the school for the hard of hearing, just like her best friend Myrthe, who is hard of hearing. But will she be admitted there?

**Recommended for ages 8+**

**Themes:** coming of age; deaf culture; friendship; disability; cross cultural understanding

**Director(s):** Saskia Gubbels | **19 min** | **Documentary** | **2013** | **Country:** Netherlands | **Language:** Dutch with English subtitles



## SET THE STAGE | THOUGHT-STARTERS

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the late 1800s, deaf schools promoted "oral" education instead of "manual" education; deaf children were taught how to speak and read lips, not how to sign. At that time, deaf kids were left with very little means to use language at all—they couldn't speak or understand spoken language well and they didn't have their own manual (sign) language. All of this changed in the 1970's and 80's when deaf schools went back to primarily using sign language. Today the deaf community embraces their distinct language and culture.

### WORDS TO KNOW

- **American Sign Language:** Visual gestural language that is expressed through the hands and face and is perceived through the eyes.
- **Deaf Culture:** The set of social beliefs, behaviors, art, literary traditions, history, values, and shared institutions of communities that are influenced by deafness and which use sign languages as the main means of communication.
- **Documentary:** A type of film that attempts to explain reality.
- **Mainstreaming:** Educating students with special needs in regular classes instead of placing students with disabilities in separate classes and schools.

For more film terms, refer to the PCFF Film Glossary ([pcffri.org/FilmHub](http://pcffri.org/FilmHub)).

## TALK ABOUT IT | DISCUSSION

- Our first introduction to Ellen and her best friend Myrthe is when they're brushing their hair. What does that establishing shot of the two girls accomplish? When did you figure out that they were deaf? Were you surprised? What did we learn about Ellen from that opening scene? Can you describe her characteristics?
- Ellen's best friend Myrthe says that sometimes she covers her hearing aid with her hair so other people don't know that she's deaf [1:49]. Why do you think Myrthe is embarrassed about her hearing aids? Are there ways that you cover up or hide how you're different?
- How do the grandparents feel about signing and deaf people in general? Can you tell from their expressions and gestures (not just their words)? Do you agree or disagree with the grandfather when he says, "The society is out there. There you have to speak. No gesturing...that's why [we] don't sign to you much."
- Why do you think Ellen wants to go to a hearing school? Where do her parents and her grandparents want her to go to school? What decision would you make? One of Ellen's classmates says, "In hearing school, I am shy and afraid, but not in deaf school." Thinking about this, does it change your mind about what decision you would make?
- What is Ellen and Myrthe's experience like getting food in a curry shop? What does that teach us about what it's like to be deaf in a hearing world? How would you feel if you were Ellen? The shop owner? How is Ellen's personality different when she's around other deaf people compared to when she's out in the hearing world?
- In the U.S., the hearing school's decision in the film to exclude Ellen would be illegal because of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) believing classrooms are better places when they're diverse in abilities and differences. But some deaf kids and parents believe it's better for deaf kids to be mainstreamed with everybody else including Ellen's dad. He feels deaf kids understand more when they communicate directly instead of through an interpreter. What do you think?
- Although documentaries tell stories about true life, the filmmaker's perspective may be evident in their editing choices. What do you think the filmmaker's opinion is about where Ellen should go to school? Are there clues based on what is included or excluded in the film?



Clues and Cues

### Pay attention while watching

- Notice how the filmmaker uses music. How does the music make you feel?
- Do you notice any differences between how Ellen acts with other deaf people and how she acts when she's among hearing people?

## GET CREATIVE | EXTENSION ACTIVITIES



For Activity Reel details, downloadable storyboard template and more, visit the the Film Hub website: [www.pcffri.org/FilmHub](http://www.pcffri.org/FilmHub)

### • Writing Prompts

**Option 1:** Write a journal entry from Ellen's perspective about her first day at any one of the schools she was considering (deaf boarding school, hard of hearing school, local hearing public school) or write Ellen a letter telling her where you think she should go to school.

**Option 2:** Imagine that you were going to your first day at a deaf school. Write a journal entry about your experiences being a hearing person at a deaf school.

### • Understanding Sign Language!

**Option 1:** Learn American Sign Language (ASL): Visit the [lifeprint.com](http://lifeprint.com) website and learn as many words as you can from the "First 100 Signs" video tutorials. Come together as a group and see how many words you can recognize from each other. Discuss why you think these are the signs for the various words, and if they are understandable to those who might not know ASL. Note: ASL is not the only form of sign language. There are many different sign languages around the world. Select another language and learn how to say simple words like hello, mother, father.

**Option 2:** Create your own sign language to help better understand how expressive and rich gestures can be without using words you can hear. Write a list of complex feelings or phrases like: I'm exhausted, I'm ravenous, I'm furious. How would you express these feelings without words. Play a kind of charades with other groups or individuals to see if other kids can understand what you said or how you are feeling.

## MAKE CONNECTIONS | ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources complement the film and inspire further discussion or programming.

### FILMS

#### • Hear This! (2013)

This short film is told from the perspective of a boy with hearing who has two deaf parents.

#### • Matilde (2012)

This short film is about girls of different ages demonstrating how they overcome obstacles that a hearing person might be unaware of.

#### • Sound and Fury (2000)

This documentary follows two families as they decide whether or not to get cochlear implants for their deaf children.

#### • Deaf Jam (2010)

A PBS film about a deaf New York City teen who is introduced to sign language poetry and boldly enters the spoken word slam scene.

### LOCAL CONNECTIONS:

• Rhode Island School for the Deaf:  
[www.rideaf.net](http://www.rideaf.net)

• Indicates PCFF festival selection

## BEYOND THE FILM | RELATED INTERNET LINKS

### • Deaf culture primer:

[www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/articles/pdfs/deafculture.pdf](http://www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/articles/pdfs/deafculture.pdf)

### • Website of the University of North Carolina School of Education explaining the importance of deaf culture and best practices for teaching deaf children.

[www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/15906](http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/15906)

### • To learn more about deaf education you can look at this timeline:

[www.deafjam.org/timeline.html](http://www.deafjam.org/timeline.html)

### • To learn more about deaf cultural expression watch this video about deaf poetry slams:

[www.pbs.org/independentlens/deaf-jam/](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/deaf-jam/)

