

FOULKES, ISABELLE JANE ('Issi') (1970 - 2001), deaf artist, designer and campaigner

Name: Isabelle Jane ('Issi') Foulkes
Date of birth: 1970
Date of death: 2001
Gender: Female
Occupation: deaf artist, designer and campaigner
Area of activity: Art and Architecture; Activism
Author: Siân Hutchinson

Isabelle ('Issi') Foulkes was born on 12 July 1970 at Ronkswood Hospital, Worcester, the younger daughter of Richard Anthony Craven (1939 - 2019), a schoolteacher, and his wife Barbara Kathryn Craven, later Sorrell (née Tully, 1941 - 2017), a physiotherapist. Issi's father was originally from Splott, Cardiff, and her mother was from Mumbles, Swansea. Her sister Katheryn later also studied physiotherapy. Whilst the girls grew up the family retained their links with Wales through regular visits to see family members in Cardiff and holidays spent on the Gower Peninsula and around Llyn Tegid, Bala.

Issi was born with cystic fibrosis, a terminal genetic condition which affects the lungs and other organs. She became profoundly deaf as a result of medication administered to combat a chest infection when she was three years old. The severity of her deafness meant that her ability to make use of hearing aid equipment was extremely limited and as a child she relied almost exclusively on lipreading and other communication strategies. As an older child she started making friends at Worcester Deaf Club and learnt British Sign Language (BSL).

Issi was educated in mainstream Worcester schools: firstly at St. George's RC Primary School and then at the selective Worcester Girls Grammar School which became Worcester 6th Form College. She achieved very high academic standards at 'O' and 'A' level, including 'O' level French. Her peripatetic Teacher of the Deaf, Roma Broadbent described her at that time as being 'determined, single-minded and having a quiet voice that was understandable to most people.'

Issi completed her full-time education at Bretton Hall Art College, an art college affiliated to Leeds University, and Manchester Metropolitan University, gaining a BA (Hons) degree in Art and Design and a Masters (MA) in Textiles respectively. It was whilst living in Manchester and attending the local Deaf Club that she met her future husband Gareth Foulkes who was also deaf and a student teacher at the time.

After completing her MA in 1992, Issi started her own business as a freelance surface pattern designer with start up support from the Prince's Youth Business Trust. Initially she specialised in designing printed textiles for children's co-ordinated collections for the bedroom or nursery. Her designs stemmed from her love of the naïve decorative qualities found in fair-ground art, ancient and modern toys, folk art and embroidery from different countries.

After leaving Manchester she moved to a cottage in Acton Bridge, Cheshire for a short time, renting the property from her aunt and uncle. After they married in 1996 her husband Gareth took a position with the North Wales Deaf Association and they moved together to Rowen, Conwy before finally settling in Colwyn Bay, Conwy.

From her studio at 'Hafan' in Colwyn Bay, Issi increasingly started to explore and experiment with deaf themed art and created vibrant designs for the British Deaf Association (BDA), Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, companies selling hearing aids and other deaf organisations. Issi designed greeting cards, posters, illustrations for publications, logos, ceramics, and clothing that helped raise awareness of deaf culture and heritage. She exhibited her work at exhibitions of deaf art in Cardiff, Liverpool, Manchester, and London.

One of her paintings, 'Multi-coloured hearing aids' is, according to deaf artist John Wilson, in a 1997 magazine article: 'a clever pastiche that makes use of the bold styles of the 1960's Pop Art movement to transform the humble and unfashionable hearing aid into a glamorous fashion object. The painting cheerfully mocks the misguided and out-dated prejudice that deafness is a cause for shame that should be hidden away.'

Issi attended evening classes in Llandudno Junction to learn basic conversational Welsh with support from a Welsh speaking communication support professional. Around this time, she helped devise a fingerspelling form of the Welsh alphabet and designed a colourful poster that was eventually published and distributed to all schools across the six counties of north Wales.

Issi was a valued member of the local deaf community and volunteered for the Conwy Deaf Society where she was Secretary to the committee. Using her artistic ability and knowledge of textiles Issi created an embroidered banner for the Society and took it to protest marches in London as part of a campaign led by the Federation of Deaf People (FDP) which

was aimed at UK Government to gain official recognition of BSL as a language. On these marches she would be accompanied by her hearing dog for deaf people called 'Hiro' and attracted publicity for the campaign in the local and UK national media.

In August 1999 Issi underwent a double lung transplant at Wythenshawe Hospital near Manchester. When she had recovered from this major operation, she took up part-time employment with the charity Hearing Dogs for Deaf People in their fundraising team. Issi maintained her interest in the arts and in September 2000 appeared on the stage at Cardiff Chapter Arts in a deaf community arts performance of Roald Dahl's play 'The Witches', where her paintings and illustrations were also exhibited.

The following year Issi's health began to deteriorate, and she died on 31 October 2001 at Hafan, Colwyn Bay. Her body was cremated at Bangor Crematorium after a short humanist ceremony attended by hundreds of deaf and hearing people. Her ashes were scattered on Llandudno's Great Orme and a few years later her ashes were joined by those of her hearing dog, that provided her with so much artistic inspiration in her lifetime.

Issi's artwork is her important legacy to Welsh deaf people and the wider deaf community. Her Welsh fingerspelling alphabet is used by deaf children from Welsh-speaking homes, in education within Wales to bridge the BSL and Welsh languages, and contributes to their visual identity and pride.

Author

Siân Hutchinson

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