

Superhuman Hearing

Interview with Deaf Entrepreneur Tina Lannin: Create Your Own World

Gianluca April 21, 2017

An Interview with Tina Lannin, founder of [121 Captions](#).

I recently interviewed Tina Lannin, founder of 121 Captions, a UK-based agency that brings speech-to-text and remote captions to deaf people across the world. Tina is not only a successful business woman but also a forensic lip reader, an important role played by expert witnesses in the justice system. I was quite intrigued by Tina's expertise in the field of forensics and inspired by her passion for helping other deaf people achieve equal access to work and education through high-quality communication support.

Tina was born profoundly deaf before attaining superhuman hearing powers by way of cochlear implants 5 years ago. I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to chat with her over Skype!

Gianluca: First of all, thank you for taking the time. I was so intrigued by your work as a forensic lip reader. Please tell me more!

Tina: Forensic lip reading is the reading of CCTV or video rather than a real person. It is in 2D, which is much more difficult, than reading in 3D because many clues are missing. The judicial courts want every word possible. They also want us forensic lip readers to produce an expert witness report, which is basically explaining how you processed the job, what equipment you used, transcript, and explanation of how lip reading works. The courts are looking for evidence as to your ability and what you have seen.

Gianluca: Wow that's so cool! I write about hearing loss on my blog and I love to interview people who successfully deal with their hearing loss – like you. So, tell me about your early years. How was it in school?

Tina: School was good up to age 11 as I was in a Partial Hearing Unit with a teacher of the deaf. But at 11, I went to mainstream boarding school – the only deaf child – ouch. That was a shock and I really had to roll up my sleeves and cope. I was bullied at school. Very tough. Then at 16, I left to live in Gibraltar and I did my last 2 years of school there. It was a hearing school and they would teach in English while the students replied in Spanish.

Gianluca: Was there anything or anyone that helped you to cope in those hard years?

Tina: It really helped to have great friends and I am still in touch with them today. Also, I was just bloody determined!

Gianluca: Do you ever attribute your determination to anything in particular?

Tina: I didn't like being seen as "not quite with it" because of my deafness, and I wanted to prove that I wasn't stupid. That was my driving force. I think I was trying to prove I'm just as good as a hearing person.

I actually had my deputy headmistress in Gibraltar pull me aside one day. She said to me, "You'll never make it to university (because of your deafness)," and she insinuated that I should "give up now." That fired me up. I was furious. When you work so hard to overcome your deafness and someone steps on you, it's hard to look the other way or forgive.

Gianluca: For me, it was a similar force. I wanted to be "normal" – whatever that means. Tell me, where did you end up?

Tina: I went on to University to study Business and Japanese. The Education Board said they would purchase a radio aid for me. But when it arrived, I discovered that it didn't work. I had given up my job, house, and car in Gibraltar to start university in Ireland and now with no communications support. So I woke up at 4am every day to study until midnight as I had to read so much to keep up. But I finished with a 2:1 honours and 1st for my dissertation. When I went on to study law in order to become a solicitor, the university refused to give me any communication support so the reading hit the roof! It was just too much.

Finally, when I went back to do a professional careers consultant degree, I had full communication support – captioner, notetaker, lip speaker, all at the same time – it made my life so much easier.

[121 Captions](#) is the first agency to pioneer remote speech-to-text reporting in the UK and the Middle East. 121 Captions provides high quality captioning, lip readers, lipspeakers and consultancy services.

Gianluca: How would you describe 121 Captions?

Tina: We're a small company and bring the personal touch to client relationships. I will advise people when I can, especially when they have questions about Cochlear Implants, etc. We look after the client as I am a client myself — clients come first.

Gianluca: Of course. You obviously have a passion to serve your customers well. What exactly do you do for them?

Tina: We provide real-time captioning services. If you have a tablet, smartphone or laptop, we can stream live captions of whatever the captioner can hear [demo link: <https://www.121captions.com/cart-captioning-demo/>]. We do a few other things such as deaf awareness training, lip reading, etc.

Gianluca: Do you use your own service?

Tina: Oh yes of course! I also road test everyone myself. And I make sure that we have the fastest platform available so captions stream to you in 1 second, not 8 seconds like some of the other captioning companies. Instant captions equal real access.

Gianluca: Would you have ever guessed when you were younger that one day you'd have your own successful business in hearing accessibility?

Tina: If I didn't make the jump to self-employment, I would have spent the rest of my life wondering 'what if' – plus, I didn't like working for hearing people who didn't understand my hearing loss. But it was scary taking that jump! I always felt I wanted to work for myself. I had that burning inside of me. But I couldn't work out what I wanted to do, which is why I did my degree in business. It was there in front of me all the time –lip reading and communication access.

Gianluca: And is your entire team deaf?

Tina: I am the only deaf one! But my team was all trained to be deaf aware and work in a way that works for me.

Gianluca: That is fantastic. How were they trained?

Tina: Simple – deaf awareness and a huge consideration for others. And they listen, they care. We use Skype all the time at work as we all work remotely and chat all day by typing. I had a vision that the whole business would be online and everyone would be able to work from home, and it is just that.

Gianluca: I think that it's amazing how you have completely redesigned the world around you. I think it will be inspiring for others who may think that they can't do the job they love because they don't fit the box that hearing people can fit.

Tina: Exactly. Create your own box. Create your own world.

Gianluca: Is there anything that you would like to say to deaf people who are hesitant to take the first step in creating their own box (or world)?

Tina: Speak to other deaf entrepreneurs, look for a business mentor to help you in your first steps. I have seen some deaf people start a business and they have gone about it in totally the wrong way. Going to networking events is useful up to a point, if only so you can see how others set up and run their own businesses. I would suggest asking around your contacts and maybe look online, e.g. there is a business group on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/deafsmallbusiness/>)

Gianluca: Thank you Tina for taking the time to speak to me! You really are doing amazing work in our field! I hope we have the chance to speak again soon.

Copyright © 2016 - 2017 Superhuman Hearing (Hear.am Ltd).