

"Because ... I was bringing her into my world for once!"

Tara Ulrich's visit to Max's Island Podcast

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**Tony (AKA Max)**

Today with me on Max's Island I've got Tara Ulrich.

Tara, welcome to the island.

**Tara**

Thank you I'm so excited to be here.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

Tara all the guests on Max's Island get an opportunity to tell a story about that time in their life where perhaps their life changed on a decision they made.

Maybe they had planned something and then decided that actually they'd go in a totally different direction or maybe just life through them a curveball and they ended up in a place where they never imagined.

Do you have a time in your life where that may have happened to you?

**Tara**

I do.

So, for me the pivotal point was essentially around my career.

I had just returned from traveling abroad for almost a year and soaking in the world, you know, all the cultures, all the foods, all other people really immersing myself in it.

But I had returned back to Perth and was a bit lost on what to do.

And was that after high school?

Yes, it was just after high school.

So, this is coming up to almost a decade ago, not revealing my age there.

But yeah, so I had returned from travelling, feeling very lost from what to do because usually people have their kind of northern star in terms of leaving high school and going to study or going straight into an apprenticeship.

And I didn't take either of those options and I just left to travel the world.

I came back feeling a bit confused, a bit lost and assumed my career path would be something that I had probably pre-empted in my teens and my whole childhood, I guess, essentially.

And I came back and found out that that was not the career that I was going to choose.

And I, in fact, did something completely different, which I'm still doing now and absolutely loving.

And how did you fall into that career?

So, I'm currently in the corporate world.

I work for a big four.

And I came back from the traveling, and I put out some feelers to some friends and I said look I have this potential career opportunity that has sort of been laid out for me as a child, but I don't really want to do it.

I wanted to try something different, but I don't know what I can do.

Help please ... somebody help ... and I was very fortunate that a friend of mine reached out and said that her firm was hiring, and experience was minimal and what I did have would have been enough and I went for the interview, and I just remember coming into Perth and feeling so scared because this was not what I had anticipated.

I had barely been to the city, you know, as it was and all of a sudden, I'm dressed in corporate gear with, you know, makeup on, high heels on and walking into a big building with a reception and staff managers and all of these, you know, at the time what felt intimidating people.

But it was, you know, I was very lucky I got the job and that was kind of where I started my corporate career.

And I've just had quite a few different job roles within that and found my strength was in the corporate world, which completely blew me.

It was not what I thought I'd be.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

So, you obviously came back from a year of traveling where there wouldn't have been makeup, there wouldn't have been high heels, there wouldn't have been corporate clothes, everything would have been stripped back.

You ran your own race in terms of time.

**Tara**

I slept whenever I wanted to sleep.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

Yeah, that would have been a significant change.

So, it's really interesting that you fell into that, but at the same time embraced it immediately.

**Tara**

Exactly.

And I think for me, it wasn't a world that I thought was possible for myself.

You know, as I mentioned, I never went to uni.

I didn't...at the time I hadn't studied.

And so, working in the city or in corporate just seemed very far-fetched for somebody like myself.

My upbringing was a bit different than most.

And so therefore I felt that my potential career path was already laid out for me and it was definitely not one in the corporate world.

So, to fall into this world and to find that I suited it and it fit and it worked and I was thriving was a very happy surprise for me and I was really glad that I could be in there.

### ***Tony (AKA Max)***

The other part of the story that needs to be told is what was that expectation of another career And I'm really surprised that you could say that you were influenced from a very early age to go down a particular path because that's not normally what happens.

So perhaps you can share with the listeners on Max's Island what that was.

### ***Tara***

Yes, well, I mean, I know this is a podcast so you can't see me and I'm definitely not seven foot tall.

I wasn't told I was going to be a basketballer and I wish I was an Einstein, but I wasn't told I was going to be a scientist or an engineer.

... but I am a child of two deaf adults.

And growing up, I used Auslan, which is Australian Sign Language, frequently in the home.

That was the way that I communicated with not only my parents, but our immediate family.

Grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins, parents, best friends, our whole community was full of deaf people.

And as you can imagine, growing up in a community full of deaf people and being a hearing person, I was very often required to interpret for them.

And this started at a very young age.

And when I say interpret, I don't mean, you know, standing in front of a podium of people and interpreting what the speaker is saying.

It could be something as minimal as going to the shops and the cash register lady is asking a question to my mother or we're at the restaurant and the waitress comes out and asks the whole table what they'd like to order.

And these little things in life that I think a lot of people just underestimate is a barrier for some and they were a barrier for my family and my family's close friends.

And growing up, I sort of played the role of family interpreter, which therefore led to a lot of comments saying Tara is going to be an interpreter when she goes up.

"Tara has to be an interpreter when she grows up."

There is no other possible career option for you, Tara.

You are an interpreter.

Of course you are.

You're a child of two deaf adults with a very strong deaf family.

I might just chime in and say that my mum's got eight brothers and sisters, all of them are deaf.

So, it was a very big surprise that I wasn't.

And yeah, growing up it was constantly Tara's going to interpret this, Tara's going to interpret that, that you sort of, you know, as a child, ideally you're brought up in an environment that can embrace you choosing and you exploring different opportunities and different life choices.

And I felt that at no fault of anybody's, it was taken away from me because of just the expectation that was, I guess maybe unexpectedly or unintentionally laid out on me that I sort of grew up, I went into high school, I guess essentially not knowing the direction I was gonna go in because I just assumed I'd fall back on interpreting.

I would go to TAFE, get my interpreters qualifications and then boom, there's my career.

### **Tony (AKA Max)**

I can understand why that expectation would have been there. You were growing up in an ecosystem that is very tight, very full of people who are deaf, hard of hearing, and it's easy to be drawn into that and feel like you're cocooned by that environment.

And it makes sense that there's an expectation that you would maintain your part in that environment and continue to play a role that may have been a little different to everybody else in that environment, but you had a special role to play.

### **Tara**

Definitely.

And I think that's a really good way of putting it, is that it was an ecosystem.

And everyone did have their part to play.

And back then, especially, access for deaf and hard of hearing people was very limited.

So right now, we're still working on it, it's still a work in progress, but there is a lot more accessibility in terms of interpreters, in terms of funding, in terms of subtitles or transcripts and all of these fantastic things that weren't unfortunately around 20, 25 years ago.

And as you're kind of growing up, I felt quite stuck in between these two worlds.

There was the deaf world that I felt so at home with, I felt natural there.

I had friends and family that sat in that world, but then I also had the hearing world, which I had friends and some family there too.

But for me, and I think this is a huge part of why I went travelling, was I needed to rediscover what I wanted to do and what made me happy.

And you know, as much as I would always be the first person to help a deaf person, whether it be family, friend or even just a complete stranger, if they are experiencing any communication barriers, I definitely will make sure I'm there and available to help.

I just realised it wasn't what I wanted to do.

### **Tony (AKA Max)**

My experience with people with disability and listeners on Max's Island will know, I've said it many times, my experience is with people who have blind or vision impaired.

And the deaf community sits alongside that community quite tightly in a lot of cases.

And it's very obvious that they are a very connected, very proud and really have a strong sense of self-sufficiency as well.

And perhaps that's a reflection on the disability and the potential to be perhaps isolated, as you've just said in some cases.

But I think it's also just a cultural thing that the deaf community is a very, very tight community.

So, I can imagine how, like we said before, that you were drawn into it to play role and to be part of it and you know in some cases that may have taken away some of your independence.

### **Tara**

Definitely, and you hit the nail on the head in terms of culture because that's what it is.

It is a beautiful language that also has a culture backing it and it is quite common for children of deaf adults to take that career path as interpreters.

You know essentially working within a community that they feel so safe and at home with which is I think why I had that struggle internally was I do feel safe and home in this community and I do want to help this community and I want to see them thrive and I want to see them get you know break down those accessibility barriers but at the same time it's not what I want and what I really want to do because I don't know what I really want to do and so taking that year to travel and give

myself essentially permission to try different things which then led me down the path of being in the corporate world which I found just suited me and my being and I just, I loved it.

I thrived on everything.

The ability to make a bit of a difference in a different sort of way.

It was more challenging my thought and challenging the way that I essentially the things that I believed and I kind of always thought that these big corporate but things were super scary old men in suits that would freak me out.

But it was actually this beautiful world of people constantly encouraging, learning, growing and being curious.

And after a few years in the current company that I'm with, I was given this amazing opportunity which sort of brought everything back holistically for me.

It was I had those few years of discovering the corporate world and loving the job that I'm in, But there still was that pull back into the deaf community and helping people with disability.

And I remember sitting there going, I don't know how to merge the two because I love what I do.

And I don't wanna give that up full time, but then I don't wanna be an interpreter full time either.

So where is this balance?

What can I do?

How can I raise more awareness?

And it was by a chance encounter that my mum, she came in and visited me at work for a coffee.

She came in and I was being quite cheeky, which you know, you're not meant to do, but I thought, No, come in through the office and I'll introduce you to everyone.

And she's like, "Oh, okay, like I've never been in a big office building like this before."

I'd love to see it.

And I thought, Great.

I proudly showed her off and I said, "Hey guys, this is my mom."

And I'm proudly signing, introducing my mom to everyone.

Everyone's waving and saying hi.

And we left.

And the next day, a colleague of mine, Megan, she pulled me aside and she goes, I actually felt really frustrated after meeting your mum.

And I thought, that's unusual.

Most people think that she's delightful, but okay.

Why would she frustrating you?

And she goes, no, no, no, she wasn't frustrating me.

She was like, I was frustrated that I couldn't communicate with her.

She goes, I saw this woman come in with this huge smile and she's waving at people and she's, you know, essentially talking to people, but I couldn't understand her.

And she goes, and I want to change that.

I want to learn sign language.

Where do I go?

What do I do?

And this idea popped in my head, and I thought the company that I work for is a massive advocate for inclusivity and raising awareness on not only disability but equality in the workplace.

And I thought I wonder if they would give me not even funding but give me the opportunity to promote a sign language class at work and we could get a couple of people on board.

Mum said she'd happily teach it and I didn't think it would take off the way it did, but that was five years ago and we had launched since then almost a dozen different Auslan classes across Australia and New Zealand teaching over five, six hundred of our staff sign language.

And in that time, I've become this advocate within my company for raising awareness on disability in the workplace and equality in the workplace and making sure that what we do we're embedding that equality for everybody.

For a couple of years there I sort of rode this wave of being in my role which at the time was learning and development which sort of fitted in quite well with this because we're educating, we're growing, we're learning, we're developing our people with this self-designed course of Auslan or New Zealand Sign depending on the country.

So, I found this amazing opportunity where I was juggling the both and really thriving because I'm thinking I'm finally getting to merge the two.

But then during that time, the company that I work for decided to start up a diversity, equity and inclusion team.

And in doing so, they asked me to be one of the managers on the team.

And I thought, brilliant, this is ticking all the boxes.

I'm still in the corporate world.

I'm still doing what I love doing.

I'm interacting with the people people that I love interacting, I'm, you know, I'm, I'm, it sounds really silly, but I love wearing the heels to work.

And I love being able to write my emails, jump on team calls and make those connections with all these people across Australia and New Zealand, you know, globally at one point.

But then at the same time, I'm raising awareness about something that is so close to home and I'm so passionate about, and I'm still able to do it.

And so I thought, you know, it took me eight years, but whilst I'm not an interpreter, I'm still giving back to a community and a culture and a bunch of people that I absolutely love and adore while being able to do what I wanna do career-wise.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

Can I just go back to the 500 people or so you put through the courses in across Australia and New Zealand in your organization?

Of the people that did the course, how many of them do you think genuinely felt that it was important for them to be aware of this alternate language.

And even if they weren't using it on a regular basis that they felt again empowered, if they ever got in that situation, they had a skill that they could use.

Or how many actually were in an environment where they connected with people who are deaf and therefore it actually was an immediate skill that they could use.

**Tara**

Yeah, so the launch of this training at work, open the floodgates of the stories that I could tell you is just phenomenal.

I still get chills thinking of the people that we've impacted not only by teaching them this valuable skill, but raising awareness about a community that a lot of people are quite curious about.

It is not uncommon for anybody in their day to day to interact with a deaf person, whether it's on the street, whether it's at school, or whether it's in the workplace, there are deaf people everywhere.



And many people have found that this is finally an opportunity that they can learn a language to break down that communication barrier.

And one of the, I've got two stories I'll actually share.

One of the stories was a woman that I worked with her child, in fact, was born deaf.

And, but she had no idea what to do.

And she went by her doctor's advice, which was to just speak as normal to the child.

And when the child is of age, we will provide it with devices that can help it here.

And she went, okay, no problem.

And then Amir six, seven months later, we've launched this course and she went, "Oh, I can actually, wait a minute, "there's an alternative here.

I don't, yes, you know, we're still gonna use "verbal English with our child "and get the devices that the child needs.

Yes, but there's also an alternative "which can teach our child the language "that is their language, which is the language of the deaf.

And she jumped on and did the first 10 week course, absolutely loved it, reached out to me and said, "Where can I learn more?"

How can I get in touch with someone that can help my family learn it?

Because I want the grandparents, the aunties, the uncles, the cousins.

I want everybody to learn it ... so we can all communicate with my daughter.

And I went, "Oh my goodness, yes."

This is the one person I needed to impact and my job here is done.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

Amazing story and I just thought of the word to say, the amplification, which is a hearing related word.

But the irony.

**Tara**

The irony.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

And that's probably the bit that you didn't anticipate, the ripple effect that was able to occur.

And it's a little sad that the medical fraternity steered and influenced that lady down a particular path with their child and pretty much said, well, that's the only path and a traditional path relating to hearing as opposed to communicating.

**Tara**

Correct.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

And the introduction of sign, I can really imagine how the child themselves but also the extended family all of a sudden had much more enriched communication as opposed to just hearing and talking.

**Tara**

Exactly.

And it's more about giving them options.

And it's not saying that one is better than the other or one is more necessary than the other.

It's about providing them with options.

And you know, as you said, unfortunately, and I'm no professional, but unfortunately in the medical industry, they do steer you towards one path and one path only.

And at no fault of the parents, if a medical professional is telling you their professional opinion, you tend to hear it.

And it's not until you either seek upon research yourself or you interact with somebody that is from that community or you happen to see an email at work that says, "Hey, we're doing sign language classes with a deaf teacher.

You go, "Oh my goodness, I could do that."

And I think that I'm very lucky that at work, they are all about breaking down those barriers of communication and providing everyone with that opportunity to learn this language and see where it leads them.

And we've had, you know, well over a couple of dozen people come back and say, hey, I've gone on to level two at a private organization, or I'm actually studying to become an interpreter and I'm gonna one day leave the corporate world.

Don't think I should be saying that on a podcast so I won't mention names.

But, you know, it's really sparked an interest in a lot of people, which therefore has sparked an interest back in the community.

And for me, it's all about raising that awareness and advocating for the deaf community, making sure that they're getting their equal rights.

And in a sense, their voice heard and seen.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

Your mum.

**Tara**

Yes.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

Had she taught sign prior to this.

**Tara**

Yes.

- But she'd never taught it in the corporate world.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

No...And as you said, she'd never been into it, or very rarely been into a high rise office.

So I'm really interested to know, how did she take to it?

What do you think her reflections of the last five years have been?

And you as her daughter, and knowing her all your life, have you seen a change in her because of that?

**Tara**

Definitely.

So yeah, like you said, Mum had never been into a corporate building, let alone taught people in a corporate setting.

She had been an Auslan teacher for at that point in time, possibly, about 30 years.

So, the teaching the class wasn't a problem.

It was the audience that she had.

And even just funny little things, mum would come in and our team would offer her a coffee and she'd go, "Oh my God, I'm getting a free coffee.

I'm thinking, "Yeah mum, this is what happens at work.

We've got a coffee machine on every floor.

She got so excited.

And I'm thinking, "Wow, like even for her, "something as simple as a barista made coffee "made all the difference because that wasn't, wasn't anything she was exposed to.

And the views that my work had, she thought, oh my goodness, this is where you work.

And for her, she absolutely loved it.

She loved coming in every week for 10 weeks and teaching people, but also it sort of strengthened our bond because I was bringing her into my world for once.

All my life, I had always been part of her world, which was the deaf world.

And very so often she'd pop into the hearing world through my friends or essentially through maybe school, but it was never anything cement.

And for the first time I was going, "No mum, this is my world, this is what I do for a living.

These are the people that I'm with every day.

This is my work.

And I was so proud to be able to bring her and have that equal playing field because she was also coming to work essentially 'cause we, you know, she was our teacher.

And she's loved it.

She, so we've seen it launch, like I said, to over a dozen classes.

She's not taught all of them because we've done them in physical settings in Melbourne, in Sydney, in Canberra, but then we've also done them over Zoom...she's done a couple of those.

And then obviously in New Zealand, while they speak very similar to Auslan, which is Australian sign language, they do have New Zealand sign language.

And we wanted to be really respectful that we were getting the right deaf teachers in place.

So, we recruited deaf teachers over in New Zealand.

But this has led us to, we were on Channel Seven a couple of years ago, promoting the program and the fact that the company that I worked for was doing this disability-led course, which was at the time the first of its kind.

So, mom's been on TV since, she's been on LinkedIn, which is something she's never been before, she's written articles.

Essentially, I guess her career path changed a little bit because all of her life, she'd been a teacher of sign language and a teacher of deaf children.

And then all of a sudden I brought her into my world and she was a teacher of the corporate and she was on TV and she's writing articles and all of these fantastic things.

I think, yeah, in a weird, strange world of events is that we've both incorporated our worlds and we met in the middle.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

We talked earlier about the deaf ecosystem and the network that you were in growing up to have your mum be exposed to a whole new world.

I can just imagine how inspiring it would have been for her where she could be herself.

Her uniqueness, the skills that she had and the world that she lives in, she could bring that and share it with others in a world that she'd never been in before.

And it's great that she didn't feel intimidated by that.

She might have been in awe of some of the things, you know, the coffee and all that, but it sounds like she wasn't intimidated because she was able to be herself and bring that uniqueness that she has with being deaf but also being such a communicator with the language.

**Tara**

Definitely.

It was, especially upon reflection, it was such a beautiful experience to have with her, especially because I think it sort of demonstrated to her that whilst I'm on my own journey and I'm discovering my own career paths, which has been ever evolving, the root of it, I am still very, very proud to be her and my father's daughter and a representation of a child of two deaf adults.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

In winding up your visit to Max's Island Tara, just like to ask you, you mentioned that you're part of a broader diversity group now within the organisation you work for.

Has the deaf disability been able to establish an equal footing against all the other, I guess, more or contemporary diversity issues around gay and queer people, women, the equality, and other things like that, the disability part, does that get an equal weighting and an equal air time?

**Tara**

Definitely.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

I think it's important because disability sometimes and across all disabilities is perceived a little differently from an equity point of view and a diversity point of view.

And the fact that you're bringing that strong disability theme into a broader diversity and equity space. I'm interested to know the balance.

**Tara**

Yeah, definitely.

I'm quite fortunate that the organization I work for is quite a large organization in terms of size.

And we have amazing networks set up for, like you said, not only the LGBTIQ+ community, our gender community, our indigenous community, or our disability community, which at the organization I work for, we have labelled it the ability network.

And within all of those networks is champions of change.

There are people advocating for though, to be seen, to be heard, to have those equal rights within the corporation, as well as the wider society.

Because we can only do so much as an organization, but it's also reinventing and resetting the mindset of the wider society that at the end of the day, we are all human.

And so for me in particular, My role is to look over all of them and make sure all of them are getting, as you say, air time.

But I do obviously have that passion towards our ability networks, but I'm one of the long-term members to that network.

I do a lot of advocating for it.

And not just deaf and hard of hearing.

It's whether it's neurodiversity, whether it's a physical disability or an invisible disability, whatever it may be.

We're ensuring that if you come and work for our organization or you're a client of our organization, you will be treated fairly and you will be given equal opportunity to anybody else, which makes me really, really proud to work there 'cause I've seen it firsthand.

I brought them this idea five years ago, which has completely blown up and I just feel so proud to be supported by the organization and been recognized as an individual with a story, not just a number.

**Tony (AKA Max)**

You just mentioned Champions of Change.

**Tara**

Yes.

***Tony (AKA Max)***

You are a great champion of change.

Thanks for being on Max's Island.

***Tara***

Thank you for having me.

I really appreciate it.