

Nishma Hindocha, Radio Cumbria – 10th January 2024

Interview with Caroline Howsley regarding the new Marvel star

Nishma Hindocha: For the first time, a deaf and indigenous character is leading a new Marvel series and she's played by an actress who is also deaf and indigenous. Alaqua Cox stars as a title character in the new Marvel series, Echo, streaming on Disney plus this week. Now representation is massively important, it's something that we've spoken quite a lot about actually on this programme.

Let's now speak to Caroline Howsley, the Chief Executive Officer of Cumbria Deaf Association. Caroline, how you doing?

Caroline Howsley: Fabulous yourself?

NH: Yeah, really good, thank you very much. Now this is incredibly important, isn't it? We know the power that TV and film can hold. But what kind of difference does it make for something as big as Marvel to have a character who's deaf?

CH: When it comes to having representation, as you said it's absolutely crucial, but having it in a genre that attracts younger people, and a wider audience, and I will say that Strictly did great with Rose, that was fantastic, you've got the chef, Yvonne, on the morning TV programmes, but having someone in something like Marvel is huge. It really does make such a difference.

NH: What message do you think it sends out?

CH: I think the message to the community is what comes across in the story, is that anything is possible. You know, don't give up on your dreams, no matter what your situation in life, or how other people disable you, if you're talented, you can do it.

NH: You so right when you say that, I was reading an interview that Alaqua Cox did actually, the actress says that, and this is quoted, "I think for myself it was terrifying initially, and then exhilarating to find out how we portray this". She goes on to say how do we go about with a lead character that doesn't speak, and she says "I think the more we got into it, the more excited we got".

Do you think then, more films, series, programmes, TV, need to start doing this a lot more?

CH: I think representation across the board is becoming something that people are more aware of, and more readily accepting of because it used to be that it was easy to go the straight path, you know, no one with disabilities, no one with a different background. But now people are actually going the world is wide. Let's include them. How can we do that? What do we need to do? Do we need to have deaf directors? Do we need to have deaf screenwriters? Do we have deaf consultants? How many sign language interpreters do we need on a production, and people are actually going, you know what, it makes it more valuable what we're putting out there in the world?

NH: Absolutely. We saw, didn't we, you mentioned Strictly there with Rose, that a lot of people started taking up sign language. Have you noticed that as well at the Association?

CH: Well, there was 150% increase in inquiries after Rose started on Strictly so yes, there's been an increase. And to follow that up, last year in September, we launched a brand new training team who will be teaching Deaf Awareness, Introduction to Sign and BSL level one and level two across the county.

NH: Do you think schools should adopt this as well and take on some of the basic signs that most people should know in order to be able to communicate on a base level?

CH: Well, we're fantastically blessed in Cumbria that we have some really good, proactive schools who already do sign language within their classrooms at infant and primary settings, and with the GCSE BSL coming online in 2025, it means that older children are going to be able to learn at GCSE level.

NH: For you then, do you think that's a step in the right direction?

CH: Absolutely. I lost my hearing when I was 10, and to have role models and have my peers learning and understanding about my situation, and how it impacted me and my developmental educational skills and language skills, that would have just made my whole life so much easier.

NH: Support now then, compared to what kind of support you had, do you think we're progressing down that line, or does more need to be done? What would you like to see?

CH: Well, if I had a wish list, it would be huge. But I think the awareness is there, the acceptance and willingness to participate and do more is there. But it's just the resources aren't there at the moment because we've not invested in BSL for so many years. We've not invested in deaf education for so many years to the standard that it could be. I'm saying there is good stuff out there, don't get me wrong, but like anything, there always could be more.

NH: Caroline, it has been lovely talking to you. Thank you so much for your time.

CH: Thank you for the invitation.

NH: Take care. Bye bye.

That was Caroline Howsley there, Chief Executive Officer of Cumbria Deaf Association. Some really good points that she made there, we were talking about how for the first time, a deaf and indigenous character is leading a new Marvel series, and she is played by an actress who is also deaf and indigenous. Her name is Alaqua Cox, and she stars as the title character in the new Marvel series, Echo, it's streaming on Disney, plus starting from this week. Like we said, and like Caroline said, representation is so so incredibly important, and a lot of film makers, a lot of series and broadcasters have got it right, and are stepping in the right direction with this. I know Disney are quite a good one, if you've got children you may watch this - Miss Marvel, it's part of the Marvel series and the main character is called Miss Marvel and she is an Asian girl, and my children really relate to that because Miss Marvel has brown

skin and my children have brown skin. It's all about representation, if you see someone like yourself on screen, it's a step forward.