

# Bears & Health

## Bears, Communication and Challenge



Like most bears who are not deaf, I sometimes discover that the hot bear I'm cruising is. Since I don't know sign language, it can be a challenge to communicate. If he or you are not with someone who knows ASL (American Sign Language), lip reading usually works, with pen and paper as backup.

Although I have never experienced any resentment from a deaf bear or cub in such a situation, I am aware that my relying on lip-reading is presumptive, if not intentionally insensitive; like automatically speaking English in a foreign country.

How do deaf bears and cubs feel about all this? What do they have to tell us about themselves, and ourselves?

For the Q & A that follows, I contacted deaf bears and cubs and those close to them – including Henry Carter, co-founder of DBCO (Deaf Bears and Cubs), Bobby Crocker, DBCO President, John Maxwell, a former International Mr. Deaf Cub (2003), and Carlos Abreu, who teaches ASL and whose partner is deaf.

**LM:** According to the history on its website, DBCO came together in 1999. In what ways does the organizing of deaf bears and cubs serve needs?

**Maxwell:** Our organizing serves our need to grow, especially to reach out to other deaf bears and cubs around the world; to provide a forum where we can meet each other, with hearing bears who can act as ASL interpreters. We are trying to encourage hearing bears to learn basic ASL, for which there are classes, such as that taught by Carlos Abreu. More bears knowing ASL would make the biggest difference in our ability to communicate, respect and support one another.

**LM:** Generally speaking, how would you describe the experience of deaf bears and cubs within the greater bear and gay communities? Beyond the issue of physical challenge, is it comparable to other minority experience – like being

Black or Jewish or a leather person? Are bears any more or less tolerant than other communities?

**Carter:** In the greater gay community, most men weren't interested in hairy men whether they were hearing or deaf. At the other end of the spectrum, some bears and bear chasers find our physical appearance attractive. But when hearing bears try to initiate conversation, they realize there's a barrier. Disappointment is sometimes apparent. When there is a friction in the flow of information, communication is impeded. So we are at least a "double" minority. DBCO was founded so we can be in the world with less barriers.

**Maxwell:** I think bears can be as tolerant or intolerant as anyone else. My advice to bears would be the same as to everyone else: Just be yourself, be friendly and say Hi.

**LM:** In the world of big men, two big categories are commonly accepted: cubs and chasers. Although it obviously would not be the same thing, is there anything comparable in the deaf bear and cub community – of deaf bears and cubs and their admirers? And if so, are there terms for them?

**Maxwell:** There are no terms *per se* for admirers or partners of deaf bears and cubs.

**Carter:** For the contest we have three titles: Deaf Cub, Deaf Bear and Deaf Grizzly. As in the bear world, we didn't set up strict rules/definitions for these categories.

**LM:** What can hearing bears who don't know ASL do to facilitate communication?

**Maxwell:** When I first approach a hearing bear in person, I first let him know that I am deaf. If a hearing bear asks if I can read his lips, I will say yes or no depending on how good I am at it and how easy or not easy it is with this individual. If the hearing bear has a thick beard or goatee or moustache it can make lip-reading more difficult. Good

lighting can also make lip-reading easier.

**Carter:** It's important to add that not all of us are totally deaf. Some of us are harder of hearing than others, and some of us are better at lip-reading than others. Some are just more comfortable communicating with writing.

**LM:** What resources currently exist for deaf bears and cubs, their friends and others interested in learning more about this community?

**Maxwell:** There are many bear events that deaf bears and cubs attend and that offer ASL interpreters – e.g., Bear Invasion, Bear Trek, IBR, Spring Thaw, BOLW (Bears On Liberty Weekend).

**Carter:** We also have a "Deaf Bear" contest at the Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf Conference (RAD), which is held every two years. At present, our main goal is to meet at the RAD conference that occurs every two years in various places around the country. Event information is available at [www.RAD.org](http://www.RAD.org). Also check out the DBCO website at [www.deaf-bearsandcubs.org](http://www.deaf-bearsandcubs.org).

**LM:** What directions/developments would you like to see in the future?

**Carter:** For starters, maybe we could meet every year instead of every two years.

**Maxwell:** I do hope hearing bears will become more involved in supporting deaf bears and cubs and our events. I don't want to see hearing bears afraid to learn how to sign. The more hearing bears know about us, the more respect there will be for deaf cultures and the easier it will be to meet the challenges of communication.

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