

The impact of Deaffest on young people's Deaf identity

Louise Parrott reports on Deaffest and its role in inspiring Deaf young people

In a world where film, art, sign languages, and visual storytelling bridge communication, cultures, and communities, **Deaffest** – the UK's leading Deaf-led Film & Arts Festival – stands as a place of inspiration, expression, and possibility for young D/deaf people.

Running for nearly two decades and based in Wolverhampton, Deaffest has served as a global platform for D/deaf filmmakers, artists, performers, and creatives to share their work, stories, and lived experiences. The festival champions and preserves Deaf culture, heritage, and sign languages – fostering education, empowerment, and a strong sense of identity among younger generations.

Founded in 2006 under **Zebra Access CIO**, Deaffest is proudly Deaf-led. Co-founders and Festival Directors Nikki Stratton and Marilyn Willrich – two pioneering Deaf creatives widely recognised within the international Deaf film and arts communities – have built the festival on a foundation of authenticity, cultural pride, and firsthand understanding. Their work has also gained recognition in mainstream circles, notably being named among The National Lottery's Arts and Film **Game Changers** in 2024.



Marilyn Willrich and Nikki Stratton

Nikki, a native British Sign Language (BSL) user from a multigenerational Deaf family, brings a deep-rooted perspective shaped by her upbringing in both the UK and Irish Deaf communities, and her experiences in both mainstream and Deaf schools. Her work in the media industry, including roles with broadcast channels, has further deepened her understanding of the media landscape. Her lifelong passion for creating barrier-free environments is evident in her work. Marilyn, fluent in BSL and with deep Deaf generational roots, is a fierce advocate for inclusion and access. Together, their shared vision and leadership have shaped the internationally recognised Deaf Film & Arts Festival into an inspiringly transformative platform.

A space for representation and belonging

Deaffest creates a vital space where young D/deaf people can see themselves represented, reflected, and celebrated.

Across the previous 15 **editions**, the festival has brought Deaf creatives to the forefront – showcasing their skills and talents, and raising visibility around Deaf identity and representation.

For many young D/deaf people, especially those in mainstream schools, access to language-rich learning environments that reflect their communication preferences is limited. This lack of access, combined with everyday communication barriers, often leads to missed opportunities – academically, socially, and emotionally. Without visible Deaf role models or inclusive representation, confidence, self-expression, and identity may be affected – leaving young people feeling excluded, frustrated, and confused.

Deaffest tackles this challenge head-on. Through film screenings, interactive workshops, and direct engagement with Deaf professionals, the festival enables young people to access learning through their language and culture – without barriers. It supports meaningful, direct learning, where information is shared in accessible and culturally relevant ways, and where creativity becomes a tool for connection and empowerment.



Chris Fonseca (photo taken by Diana Martin)



Vamos Theatre (photo taken by Diana Martin)

Hands-on experiences with Deaf creatives

Over the years, young participants have had unique opportunities to engage with a diverse range of Deaf creatives. The activities have included:

- Acting workshops with the brilliant Vamos Theatre and the inspiring Deafinitely Theatre
- Comedy sessions with skilled actor and comedian **John Smith** – recipient of Deaffest's 2024 Award for Outstanding Achievement in Comedy and Dramatic Arts
- A content creation masterclass co-led by **Danny Murphy** (comedian, actor, and Young Deaffest Ambassador since 2021, known for BBC's Waterloo)

Deaf identity

Road and The Parts You Lose film) and **Jazzy Whipps** (presenter, content creator, and a passionate advocate for Deaf awareness and sign language)

- Filmmaking sessions with Deaf directors and creatives, including a 'Young Actors and Scriptwriters Day' with Kalen Feeney (USA), technical writer for the *CSI:NY* series TV series
- Visual Vernacular exploration with Italian maestro **Giuseppe Giuranna**
- Mime workshop with the captivating **DeafMimo** and his orangutan character
- Art & Photography **Exhibition** showcasing young talent
- Sign song sessions with performer **Rebecca A. Withey**
- Dance events with the UK's **Chris Fonseca** and Russia's **Andrey Dragunov**.



John Smith and DeafMimo (both photos by Diana Martin)



Danny Murphy and Jazzy Whipps (photo by Diana Martin)

These hands-on experiences help demystify the creative industries and introduce young people to career pathways that might once have felt out of reach.

International guests have also played a key role in showcasing global Deaf culture and inspiring the younger



'Listen With Your Eyes'

generation to explore creative fields. From South Africa's 'Listen with your Eyes' actors performing their UK debut comedy, to workshops with acclaimed creatives such as:

- **Sean Forbes** (American musician and co-founder of D-PAN)
- **Florian Tirnovan** (Swedish comedian)
- **Kalen Feeney** (American writer and actress)
- **Nyle DiMarco** (American model, author, actor, winner of America's Next Top Model in 2015 and Dancing with the Stars in 2016)
- **Alice Hu** (Chinese artist and interpreter)
- **Andrey Dragunov** (Russian hip-hop dancer and finger-dance expert)
- **Sean Berdy** (American actor)



Sean Berdy and Andrey Dragunov (both photos by Mark Mecklenburgh, Willow Photography Ltd)

Young audiences – including school groups – have gained powerful insight into the diversity of Deaf talent and expression worldwide.

Over the festival weekend, young people also enjoyed:

- Accessible film screenings (with sign language)
- A stalls fair
- An Art & Photography Exhibition, including presentations by Deaf creatives
- Opportunities to connect with other D/deaf young people.



Stalls Fair (photo by Mark Mecklenburgh, Willow Photography Ltd)



Donna Mullings and Art & Photography Exhibition Talk (both photos by Diana Martin)

The power of Young Deaffest

At the heart of Deaffest's youth engagement is Young Deaffest – a dedicated platform that celebrates the creativity and stories of young D/deaf people. Since 2007, Young Deaffest has supported professional growth, creative exploration, and visibility for aspiring young creatives.

Highlights have included:

- The **Young Deaf Filmmakers Scheme** – with some participants still active in the creative industries today
- **Ben Steiner Bursary** opportunities, which helped launch the careers of talents like
 - Rose Ayling-Ellis (*BBC's Reunion*, *Doctor Who*, *Eastenders*)
 - Jamal Ajala (*Venom: Let There Be Carnage*, *The Witcher*)
 - One of the winning short films, *Retreat*, which has since been developed into a **feature film**
- The Young Deaffest Film Award, showcasing films created by young D/deaf people

- **National art competitions**, with the top entry displayed at the festival and winners announced during Young Deaffest
- Events hosted by inspiring role models such as: Danny Murphy, Ashley Kendall (*CBeebies' Magic Hands* presenter), and Mia Ward and Rosie Benn (*LumoTV's Up for it?* presenters)
- Performances from Solar Bear Youth Theatre (Glasgow)
- Deaffest's first ever sign song music video, **'Believe'**, featuring young D/deaf performers.



'Believe' Music Video Project

Each experience contributes to building confidence, strengthening identity, and fostering a sense of pride and belonging within the Deaf community.

Beyond the festival: outreach and ongoing opportunities

Though Deaffest takes place biennially, its impact extends year-round. Through initiatives like **Deaffest on Tour**, the festival brings Deaf-led films and creative events to local communities across the UK – ensuring young people and families can engage, wherever they are.

A recent Deaffest on Tour **event** featured the London premiere of Marlee Matlin: Not alone anymore (in collaboration with Dogwoof). The powerful documentary shares Marlee's journey as a Deaf actress, highlighting her historic Academy Award win for *Children of a Lesser God* – which made her the first Deaf performer and the youngest ever to win the Oscar for Best Actress – and the barriers she has faced throughout her career.

Deaffest also collaborates with Deaf festivals abroad – such as **Shanghai International Deaf Film Festival** and Toulouse's **Film'Ô Festival** – creating opportunities for young D/deaf people internationally to access Deaf-led creative work and cultural exchange.

Partnerships with schools and organisations like the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) have led to innovative projects, including the UK's first-of-its-kind sign song **music video**, co-produced with Deaf creatives from both the UK and USA. These initiatives promote cross-cultural understanding and give young people fresh ways

to explore sign language, dance, and performance.

Deaffest has also brought its mission directly into schools, including:

- A **media-focused Careers Convention Day** at Mary Hare School, featuring presentations, screenings, and workshops
- A visit to **Braidwood Trust School for the Deaf** where pupils took part in a film storyboard workshop and learned about creative industry roles from the Deaffest team.

Online platforms like YouTube, Deaffest: Rewind, and the Deaffest Online Cinema (DOC) offer ongoing access to Deaf-led films and festival highlights, ensuring continued engagement beyond the physical events. The DOC currently features films from the Young Deaf Filmmakers Scheme (2007) and the Deaffest Classic Showcase, a special section that honours the groundbreaking contributions of Deaf-led films and independent creatives.

In addition to its online platforms, Deaffest is currently running a fun creative challenge for young D/deaf creatives aged 11–16, as part of the Deaffest 2026 theme spotlighting costume and fashion in film, TV, and the arts, and celebrating the tenth anniversary of its Film & TV Awards. This exciting opportunity invites participants to imagine, be creative, and explore storytelling by designing their own unique film clapperboard.

Through these digital channels and social media, Deaffest continues to highlight and support D/deaf creatives – especially from the UK – such as William Mager,



Rebecca Withey (photo by Grant Peddie)

John Maidens, Raabia Hussain, Rebecca A. Withey, Bim Ajadi, Teresa Garratty, Ted Evans, and many more, showcasing the range of talent and pathways available to aspiring young D/deaf creatives.

Nurturing identity, confidence, and ambition

For young D/deaf people – whether they communicate using BSL, Sign Supported English (SSE), or oral methods – developing a positive and empowered Deaf identity is vital. It enables them to advocate for their rights, navigate a hearing-dominant world with confidence, and take pride in their cultural and linguistic heritage.

Participating in Deaffest and experiencing the intangible aspects of Deaf culture connects young people with visible Deaf role models from all walks of life – people who share their language, experiences, and dreams. It shows what's possible and opens doors to futures in film, media, arts, education, and beyond.



By celebrating Deaf creativity and creating spaces of shared understanding, Deaffest plays a critical role in helping young D/deaf people feel seen, valued, supported, and proud of who they are.

Looking ahead: Deaffest 2026

The **next Deaffest** festival will take place from 8th to 10th May 2026 in Wolverhampton across film and arts related venues, including the University of Wolverhampton. The team is already looking forward to welcoming the next generation of young attendees.

With the continued support of teachers, Qualified Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (QToDs), and families, the festival aims to grow the reach and visibility of Young Deaffest, ensuring even more young people benefit from these rich, identity-affirming experiences.

Together we can support every young D/deaf person to know that they matter, their identity matters, and their stories deserve to be told.

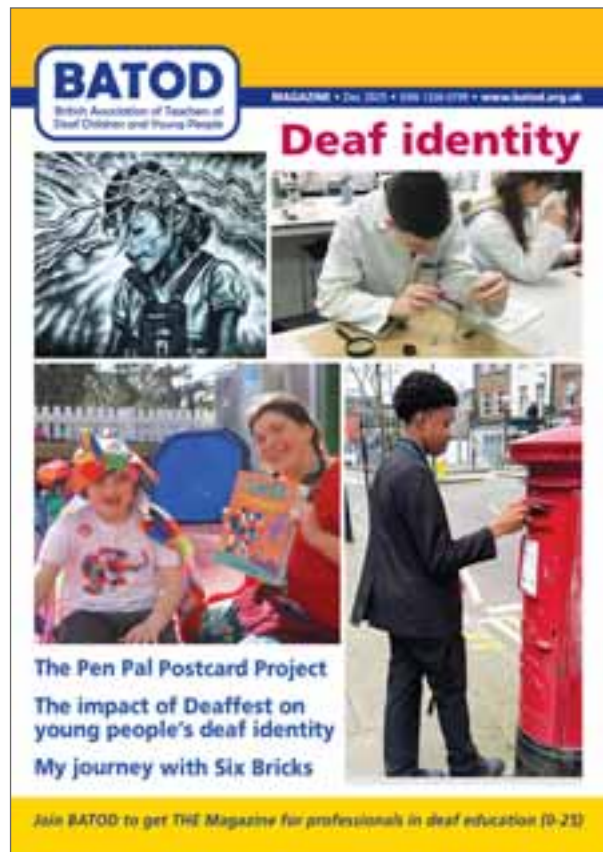


Louise Parrott is the Festival Producer for Deaffest.

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