

Ride For Change

By Kaylee Alex Irvin

My name is Kaylee, and I am hard of hearing. Although I was born with a significant hearing loss, my deafness was only discovered when I was in my early teens, and I was then fitted with 2 hearing aids. My parents told me to wear my hearing aids only when I really needed them and to be sure to wear my hair down on the days when I did wear them. Consequently, I rarely wore my hearing aids and have lived as if I were a hearing person - lipreading my way through life. In fact, most people I meet would never know that I'm deaf. Well, that used to be true anyway. When the pandemic hit and everyone started wearing masks, my ability to "hear" was cut off. I find myself staring where the mouth used to be and where masks now sit. I watch the masks move as people speak; I know they're saying something. If I concentrate really hard, I can make out enough words to understand the idea of what they're saying...sometimes.

Early in January 2021, I walked into the SAAQ confident about the test that I was about to write to obtain my motorcycle licence. Although I do not usually wear hearing aids, I did this day as I knew I would need to communicate with strangers. But even with the hearing aids, the lady behind the glass, behind her mask, speaking only French (my second language) was almost impossible to understand. I asked her to speak louder. She did very slightly but was still hard for me to understand. I told her that I do not hear well and asked her if she would lower her mask. She gave me a disgusted look and shook her



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head no. She responded by telling me that deaf people cannot drive motorcycles and that I was not allowed to take the test. I was shocked to hear this. I spent the next 45 mins debating with her, her managers, their bosses, and any employee who would listen. I demanded they keep calling their supervisors to get the correct information - insisting that I had the right to take the test and get my motorcycle license.

Finally, I was told I was wasting their time. The woman said she was sorry but that she could not let me take the test - that I had to leave. I left the SAAQ feeling completely defeated. I sat in my car, called my sister, and cried. A few moments later, the very same lady came running outside; she was waving at me to come back in. She had received a call right after I left informing her that deaf people can in fact ride motorbikes! I could go take the test - which I did and passed. I felt relieved and happy.

About 2 weeks later, I got a notice in the mail saying my licence to drive a car was suspended immediately. The SAAQ was requiring me to obtain medical permission to drive a car. I was shocked as I have held this licence for over 25 years - accident free, I might add. I now needed medical permission?! I called the SAAQ, and after many hours on the phone, I finally got my licence reinstated - but only after I agreed to accept new driving conditions and had a new photo taken.

I then began motorbike school. When the program was half over, the driving school booked the next test for everyone...except me. I tried to book the test for myself, but the system was locked and would not allow me to book anything. I reached out to a motorbike group on social media to ask if anyone who was

hard of hearing and had their motorbike licence could offer me some advice. A member of this group introduced me to Heidi Wager, Executive Director at Hear Québec. After connecting with Heidi and her team, Hear Québec was there to offer me information, support, and encouragement through my journey.

Learning to unlock the system was not easy, but Hear Québec was so resourceful and supportive which helped take some of the pressure out of the process. It turns out that, without sending me a letter, the SAAQ had cancelled my new 6R motorcycle licence only 21 days after I had received it. Figuring out how to fix this was not easy. It took call after call, hours on hold, days waiting for call-backs, and crying in frustration; I felt like giving up and abandoning this goal.

Days passed, and I made yet another call to the SAAQ. A representative I had never dealt with before saw that the locked licence was due to my deafness and that the situation only required a simple fix: a new request for permission. Finally, I was allowed to take the next test. I was so nervous, but I rocked that closed track test and am now happily holding a 6A motorcycle licence!

I now have an 11 month wait until my next and final test before I can hold a full licence. I am hoping the process of booking the next test will be easier. I am disappointed that SAAQ employees are not better informed about the requirements and the processes people with disabilities need to go through and that I had to fight so hard for the basic right to drive.

What comes easy for hearing people does not always come easy for deaf people. There are always extra hurdles in our lives, as my story demonstrates. The wearing of masks has isolated deaf and hard of hearing people as it has taken away our ability to communicate through lipreading. The lack of accessible communication strategies and public understanding certainly played a large part in all of the miscommunications in this process. I feel proud of my accomplishment and am happy to share my story with others. I want to encourage deaf and hard of hearing people to push for and not give up on their goals - even when wrongly told "no" repeatedly.



A mother, a teacher, a learner, an explorer, a business woman, a chef, a sociologist, and now a rider are just a few of the titles that describe me. I am dedicated to learning to live my best life, advocating for a more equal world for all, and teaching my children to unapologetically create their own versions of happiness.