

Business

NJ Women Help Other Deaf Employees Find Equality In The Workplace

For Nichelle Frederic, one of the biggest obstacles on the job has been the ignorance of others.

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Nichelle Frederic of Orange helps to run the Career Pathways Connections program at Easterseals New Jersey, the largest disability services nonprofit in the state. (Photo: Nichelle Frederic)

ESSEX COUNTY, NJ — For Nichelle Frederic, one of the biggest obstacles as a deaf person in the workplace has always been the ignorance of others.

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There was a stretch when Frederic, 26, an Orange resident, used to work retail and office jobs, including a gig at a well-known clothing corporation. But when her supervisors failed to give her the proper tools to do her duties, she was forced to struggle through conversations over walkie-talkies and on the phone – a tough task for someone with hearing loss.

And asking for an interpreter? Good luck with *that*, she says.

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Frederic often took matters into her own hands, creating a label that read "I am deaf" to alert customers. From there, she'd communicate with pen and pencil or they'd show each other what they were trying to say.

It wasn't a task that was ever a cakewalk. But when the coronavirus pandemic hit and people began wearing face masks – making it impossible to read their lips – things got even harder. And she found herself constantly on the lookout for the next gig that could help make ends meet.

Most of the time, it wasn't too difficult to find a new job, only to hold it. But there were exceptions, Frederic adds.

"I interviewed for one company, doing almost the exact same job I currently do, where the interview went amazing and I was so confident that I would have the job," she told Patch. But when she let the company's hiring manager know that she'd be using a closed-captioned phone, Frederic visibly noticed his confidence in her take a nosedive.

"They never answered any of my calls to follow up on the position or communicated that they had chosen another candidate," she remembered. "It was a blow to the gut for sure."

That's only a small sample of the struggles that many people with hearing loss encounter on the job, according to Frederic, who now works at Easterseals New Jersey, the largest disability services nonprofit in the state.

Based in the group's Essex County office, she's part of a team that's trying to improve working conditions and boost opportunities for others in her shoes, who simply want reasonable accommodations on the job.

Learn more about Easterseals' Career Pathways Connections program [here](#).

These days, Frederic has a much easier time when she shows up to work. For example, closed captions or an ASL interpreter are always provided at meetings. Frederic added that her manager, Lauren Weishaar, has also given her tons of encouragement in her journey as a Black and deaf woman, especially with when it comes to self-confidence – something she's struggled with in the past.

"Being raised Oral, meaning I wore hearing aids in order to listen and respond using my voice, I felt on the short end of the stick," Frederic explained. "Many [people] would talk covering their mouths or with their backs turned. I've even had people repeatedly tell me that they forgot I couldn't hear, which felt a lot like my hearing loss was dismissed."

"It's the greatest thing that I don't have to constantly remind someone of my needs," Frederic enthused.

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- See related: [Raised By Deaf Parents, NJ Teen Wins Scholarship](#)

TIPS FOR EMPOWERMENT

Weishaar, a 36-year-old Spotswood resident with hearing loss, told Patch that some companies may not know how to work with employees who are deaf.

But there's no need for employees to depend on their bosses; they can stand up for themselves. Here are some things that people with hearing loss can do to empower themselves in the workplace, according to Weisharr:

- Request accommodations as needed
- Get educated on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Have no shame in sharing and disclosing their disability
- Know their rights and resources that are available to them
- "Prove that just because we cannot hear, doesn't mean we aren't able to do our jobs"

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12

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