

Simoné Welgemoed: The Ballerina Who Happens to Be Deaf



We spoke with seven individuals as part of our *Power of Representation series* about what it means to see deaf and hard of hearing experiences in popular culture. In addition to reading the series in Clarke Speaks, join the conversation on social media with #LSLRepresentationMatters.



"I also want children to remember that your deafness is not who you are... Yes, you are deaf, but that doesn't define you." -Simoné Welgemoed, professional ballerina, model and advocate. Source: Ruth Smit Photography.

South African professional dancer and model Simoné Welgemoed was born deaf to hearing parents due to a genetic mutation called the Connexin 26 mutation. Of four siblings born to parents with typical hearing, she and her older sister Elnette were both born deaf.

While pregnant with Simoné, her mother, Ines, knew baby Simoné would be deaf. Her doctors brushed it off. "My mom said looking back now... it's amazing how you know that babies react to outside environmental sounds and even music, when they are in the womb. And my sister and I, Elnette, we didn't react to any environmental sounds. And so, she had this gut feeling that I was going to be born deaf as well, and then that was the case."

With a family very prepared for a diagnosis of deafness, Simoné underwent testing right away, tried hearing aids with little success, and then at 22 months, she became the youngest person in Africa to receive cochlear implants. Ines, a psychologist, then made the difficult decision to pause her career to support Simoné and Elnette on their listening and spoken language journey.

Simoné Connects with Clarke Students

In 2021, Simoné generously agreed to meet Clarke students via Zoom for private interviews from her home in Dubai. Watch her answer questions from four-year-old Clarke preschooler, Rowan, who wears a hearing aid, loves to dance and was thrilled to connect with a real ballerina.





Simoné, left with her older sister Elnette. Of four siblings born to parents with typical hearing, she and Elnette were both born deaf.

The sisters attended the [Carel Du Toit Centre](#) in Cape Town, South Africa. In addition to the support they received from professionals there, Ines was eager to find ways to help two-year-old Simoné and four-year-old Elnette integrate into their community and learn English, in addition to their native Afrikaans.

“Ballet was one of those things she thought of,” says Simoné. “So, I’ve done ballet all my life. And I am now known as the world’s first and only profoundly deaf ballerina with a cochlear implant!”

Simoné also met with 17-year-old Krystina, who uses bilateral cochlear implants and is a senior in high school where she receives Clarke’s Mainstream Services. Already a fan of Simoné’s, Krystina wrote a report about her in 2017 when she was assigned a project on a famous person who is deaf and chose the South African ballerina. Like Simoné, Krystina also started dance at the age of two.



“Deaf Children Don’t Dance”



Source: [Vikram Bawa Photography](#).

Ines quickly encountered hurdles and opposition as she sought to enroll Elnette, and later Simoné, in dance.

[Watch](#) them discuss Simoné’s most memorable performances, the challenges they face as dancers with hearing loss, career advice and even share tips for holding their cochlear implants in place.

“When my mom was looking for a ballet class for my sister, she was told, ‘No, sorry. I cannot take her in. Deaf children don’t dance. It’s going to be too difficult, and I don’t have time for this.’ But I’m so glad she didn’t give up! She kept trying and she found [ballet instructor] Natalie Swanepoel, who was very welcoming... [she] became a very big part of my life, when it came to creating a foundation to become confident in who I am and how to advocate for myself.”

Simoné recalls that early support when reflecting on how she’s advocated for herself throughout her career in the performing arts.

“It’s been a long journey of flying under the radar when it came to trying to get a spot in this industry,” she says. “It’s a hard industry to survive in, in the first place, because talent alone doesn’t mean that you’re going to get a spot in a company or get roles and be in beautiful, different productions all the time. It takes a lot more than that. You have to want it badly enough to get to where you are, and that often meant that I had to blend in.”

Early on, Simoné never shared information about her deafness when auditioning for ballet companies and roles, as she worried that choreographers would assume she’d be difficult to work and communicate with. She wanted her ability, dedication and hard work to speak for themselves.

“It’s only after I got into a company or I got a specific role, that I would go up to the choreographer or the director and say, ‘Just before we start this rehearsal, by the way, I just want to tell you that I am deaf and I have a cochlear implant,’ and then just give them a little bit of a summary of what I might need from them, and that it’s not going to change the way that they work... That’s the way I got every role and every job going ahead.”

Turning to Advocacy

With an established career, Simoné now approaches her professional persona differently. She strives to raise awareness of the vast possibilities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, and she no longer chooses to downplay her hearing loss.

“I’ve made it,” she says. “That’s why last year I decided to change my Instagram handle to The Deaf Ballerina ([@thedeafballerina](https://www.instagram.com/thedeafballerina))... It’s time to say, this is who I am. Yes, I’m a ballet dancer. Yes, I am deaf. And this is who I am.”

After changing her social media handle, Simoné was surprised when many followers and fans reached out asking about the “new role” she’d landed—as a deaf ballerina. “It just shows you how much more work we still have to do in raising the awareness about hearing disability,” she says. “And

that's why I'm so excited that people asked me this question... [I] realize what I can still work on and how can I still advocate and inspire and just teach other people about hearing disabilities.”

Simoné is eager to connect with and support young people who are deaf or hard of hearing, particularly those interested in the performing arts.

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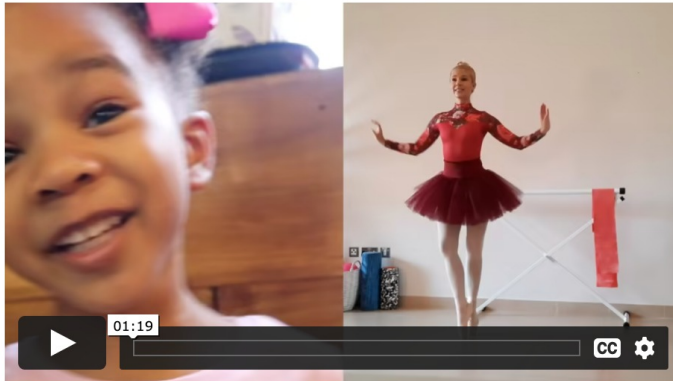
— Simoné Welgemoed, professional ballet dancer and model

“Because [my sister and I] were the only two deaf children in our entire family, in our entire community, and also in our school and all the cultural, extramural activities that we did, we didn't know any other deaf children.” Finding a professional dancer or ballerina to look up to was even more difficult. “Okay, in ballet, who can I look up to?” Simoné remembers thinking. “Who can I follow? Who can I ask questions?”

“For me it's wonderful to now be able to be that representative for other upcoming artists... Because your hearing disability... is not who you are. There's so much more that makes you up as a person so I want people to see that, and I want children to see that it is possible and that they can have the career and the passion that they want to strive for.”

Simoné Reaches Out to Clarke Students from Across the World

Simoné's advocacy work has benefited Clarke students as well. In 2021, Simoné generously agreed to meet Clarke students via Zoom for private interviews from her home in Dubai. Watch her answer a question about how she spins from four-year-old Clarke preschooler Rowan, who wears a hearing aid, loves to dance and was thrilled to connect with a real ballerina. (And see the whole exchange [here](#).)



Simoné also met with seventeen-year-old Clarke alum (and recipient of Clarke's Mainstream Services) Krystina, who is a senior in high school and uses bilateral cochlear implants. Already a fan of Simoné's, Krystina wrote a report about her in 2017 when she was assigned a project on a famous person who is deaf and chose the South African ballerina. Like Simoné, Krystina also started dance at the age of two. [Watch](#) them discuss the challenges they face as dancers with hearing loss and the importance of their support systems. (And see the full interview [here](#).)



In addition to offering her time directly to these young dancers from Clarke, Simoné has a few messages for all children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families—regardless of their interests.

“If you are interested in something, go for it,” she says. “Find out. It's so good for your child's development. It's so good for confidence. It's so good for making friends... I think it's important to find what it is that sets your soul on fire and... to hold on to that. If you can find that one thing, then it makes it worthwhile. Because life is not easy in any case.”

“And just be yourself. Children experience so much peer pressure in school —You want to be cool, you want to blend in, you want to be just like your friends. You want to have the same hairdo and the same outfits... But being different is actually so beautiful. And it's actually really boring to fit in. That's what I want children to realize.”

“I also want children to remember that your deafness is not who you are,” she adds. “Yes, you are deaf, but that doesn't define you. I am a ballerina, who happens to be deaf.”



Clarke classrooms incorporate song, instruments and movement to stimulate listening, language and self-confidence. Aisha Doggette, MEd, a Clarke teacher of the deaf and ballet instructor, talks about how she incorporates dance, music and movement in the classroom.