

Face masks with windows mean more than smiles to deaf people

June 12 2020, by Julie Watson



In this June 3, 2020, photo, Chris LaZich, of Fleet Science Center, wears a mask with a window as she talks with Delpha Hanson in San Diego. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. That has spurred a slew of startups making masks with plastic windows to show one's mouth. The companies are getting inundated with orders from family and friends of deaf people, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words, and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

Michael Conley felt especially isolated these past few months: A deaf man, he was prevented from reading lips by the masks people wore to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

But then he met Ingrid Helton, a costume designer who sewed him a solution – [masks](#) with plastic windows for [hearing people](#) to wear, allowing lip readers to see mouths move.

She has started a business to provide the windowed masks, and she's not alone. A half-dozen startups are doing the same. They have been inundated with orders—and not only from friends and family of the roughly 48 million Americans who are deaf or hard of hearing.

"You can tell so much by a facial expression, so it's proving that it can be helpful to everybody," Helton said.

Teachers want them for English learners struggling without being able to see native speakers pronounce words. Hospitals and businesses want them to help improve communication, and so everyone can see the smiles of their workers.

"We have retailers who say, 'We want to protect our employees but our customers need to see their smile and put customers at ease,'" said Dr. Anne McIntosh, a hearing-impaired doctor and founder of Safe n' Clear in North Carolina. The company's surgical mask with a fog-resistant window, The Communicator, was the first to be approved by the FDA.



In this June 3, 2020, photo, Michael Conley, left, who is deaf, talks with San Diego Opera costume director Ingrid Helton, right, while wearing a mask with a window in San Diego. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. That has spurred a slew of startups making masks with plastic windows to show one's mouth. The companies are getting inundated with orders from family and friends of deaf people, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words, and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

The Communicator was developed before the pandemic to address a problem that lip readers have long faced in trying to understand masked workers in hospitals. The problem has been worsened by the pandemic; many interpreters for hearing-impaired people have been unable to go

into [medical facilities](#) because of the highly contagious [coronavirus](#).

But as masks have proliferated outside hospitals, so have the miseries of deaf people.

Conley, a San Diego museum worker, suddenly found himself cut off from the world. Unable to see mouths, he could not understand or even know when people were speaking to him. He was anxious to go to the pharmacy for his medication or the [grocery store](#) for food.

He paced outside his favorite neighborhood restaurant for 45 minutes, wondering what he would do if a masked worker asked questions after he gave his takeout order. Luckily once he walked in, the female employee recognized him and immediately pulled down her mask to talk. He was touched.



In this June 3, 2020, image, Ingrid Helton, costume director for the San Diego Opera, talks while wearing one of her mask prototypes with a window in San Diego. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. That has spurred a slew of startups making masks with plastic windows to show one's mouth. The companies are getting inundated with orders from family and friends of deaf people, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words, and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

But not everyone knows him. He carries pieces of paper with him to be able to ask people to write down what they were saying—eliminating the need to remove a mask—but that means touching the same paper, and it can be uncomfortable asking others to do that.

One young man bagging his groceries refused.

"It makes you lose your confidence," said Conley, who has been deaf since birth. "It takes its toll."

After he told co-worker Chris LaZich about the challenges, she sought help from her friend Helton, the San Diego Opera costume shop manager known for making extravagant outfits out of almost anything.

Helton got busy sewing. And soon, she started her company, Happy Laugh Masks.

Conley has been moved that so many people have come together to help him regain his independence.

Several of his colleagues at the Fleet Science Center plan to don Helton's

masks when the museum reopens. He and LaZich recently met to try out a prototype.



In this June 3, 2020, photo, Michael Conley, left, who is deaf, talks with Ingrid Helton, costume director for the San Diego Opera, while wearing a mask with a window in San Diego. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. That has spurred a slew of startups making masks with plastic windows to show one's mouth. The companies are getting inundated with orders from family and friends of deaf people, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words, and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)



In this June 8, 2020, photo, Ingrid Helton, costume director for the San Diego Opera, sews one of her masks with a window in San Diego. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. That has spurred a slew of startups making masks with plastic windows to show one's mouth. The companies are getting inundated with orders from family and friends of deaf people, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words, and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)



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In this June 8, 2020, photo, Delpha Hanson, daughter of San Diego Opera costume shop manager Ingrid Helton, cuts fabric for a mask with a window in San Diego. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. That has spurred a slew of startups making masks with plastic windows to show one's mouth. The companies are getting inundated with orders from family and friends of deaf people, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words, and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)



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In this June 3, 2020, photo, Chris LaZich, of Fleet Science Center, tries on a mask with a window with the help of Delpha Hanson, rear, in San Diego. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. That has spurred a slew of startups making masks with plastic windows to show one's mouth. The companies are getting inundated with orders from family and friends of deaf people, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words, and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)



In this June 3, 2020, image, Ingrid Helton, right, costume director of the San Diego Opera, talks with Michael Conley, who is deaf, while wearing one of her mask prototypes with a window in San Diego. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. That has spurred a slew of startups making masks with plastic windows to show one's mouth. The companies are getting inundated with orders from family and friends of deaf people, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words, and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)



In this June 3, 2020, photo, Michael Conley, who is deaf, smiles as he talks with others wearing a mask with a window in San Diego. Face coverings to curb the spread of the coronavirus are making it hard for people who read lips to communicate. That has spurred a slew of startups making masks with plastic windows to show one's mouth. The companies are getting inundated with orders from family and friends of deaf people, people helping English learners see the pronunciation of words, and even hospitals that want their patients to be able to see smiles. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

"I'm having no trouble reading your lips," Conley told LaZich, who stood 6 feet away in accordance with social distancing rules.

Through her mask's window, she flashed him a smile.

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