

Homemade masks by California teen make life easier for hard-of-hearing

Leif Coorlim. CNN



California teen comes up with unique way to help deaf people during the pandemic 01:49

(CNN) — When Karma Quick-Panwala was pregnant with her second child, she didn't anticipate relying on the help of a 17-year-old stranger, living almost 400 miles away, during her delivery.

Quick-Panwala, who describes herself as severely hard of hearing, relies on lip reading to communicate. She says midway through her pregnancy, as the Covid-19 crisis began, she was concerned she wouldn't be able to communicate with doctors and nurses when they were wearing protective masks.

[Read more: These moms wore masks while giving birth. You can wear one to the grocery store, they say](#)

"I like to say lip reading is my superpower and masks are my kryptonite," said Quick-Panwala. "I'm completely cut off from communication unless I have someone come speak to me personally so that I can lip read to understand what's being said. I knew right away I was going to need some form of communication access."

Her doctors at Sutter Health's California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco helped to ease her concerns, offering transcription services for her prenatal appointments. But as her due date grew near, she knew she'd need something more in order to follow the doctor's real-time instructions in the delivery room.

Isabella Appell, 17, started Talking Masks from her California bedroom shortly after the pandemic began in March.

That's where Isabella Appell, 17, comes in. The high school junior from Thousand Oaks, California, has been making face masks since the coronavirus pandemic began.

Alarmed by [reports](#) of a lack of available face masks in the early days of the pandemic, Appell sprang into action.

Appell is not hard of hearing, but said she has always been interested in learning sign language and is part of several Facebook groups for deaf people.

"I noticed that there were a lot of comments about how scary it was for them right now and how hard it was for them to communicate," said Appell. "I started researching on how I could accommodate these masks for everybody."

Appell created [Talking Masks](#), a small venture that makes masks featuring a clear plastic window. She cuts the fabric from a template she created, then sews the masks and inserts a piece of clear plastic vinyl over the mouth. She applies a de-fogging spray to the final product, so it doesn't steam up when in use.

Since March, when the pandemic closed her high school, Appell has been emailing with and taking orders from customers -- then diligently sewing the masks, day and night, from her upstairs bedroom.

Related Article: Masks are effective only if you wear them properly. Here's the right (and wrong) way

Isabella's mother, Renee Appell, is awed by her daughter's dedication to supporting the deaf community during the pandemic, while at the same time still keeping up with her demanding schoolwork.

"She would do homework or study until 10 or 11 at night, and then would cut and sew until two or three in the morning and start the whole process over again early the next morning," said Renee Appell. "When she finds something she believes in, she gives it everything she has, and she is dedicated to this cause like nothing we've seen before."

So far, Isabella Appell said she has made more than 300 masks. Anyone can order a mask from the website. All she asks is that those who want or need a mask make a small donation and pay the shipping fee. The money from the donations all goes to the [Hearing Aid Project](#), a nonprofit group that supplies hearing aids to those who can't afford them.

Appell has sewn more than 300 masks for people across the United States.

Once the masks are ready, Renee takes them to the post office while Isabella does her homework. Her mom says the masks have brought the family closer together. "We've all helped in little ways," Renee Appell said. "It's become a family project: setting up the website, photography, responding to emails, preparing the masks for shipping, delivery to the post office and other things."

Isabella Appell said she would like to continue Talking Masks through the summer and beyond, at least until the pandemic is over. But as Covid-19 cases continue to [rise around the US](#), and with an estimated [11.5 million people](#) across the country having some form of hearing loss, Appell knows the demand for these masks will be much greater than can be solved by a single pair of hands.

[Read more: This new high-tech glove translates sign language into speech in real time](#)

"I think the biggest challenge is just getting the materials," Isabella Appell said. "I personally love making these masks. I would do it in my free time. I would do it all the time. But I am short on materials, so I would really appreciate any type of fabric donation or help sewing."

Appell isn't alone in working to [address the need](#). Even before Covid-19, back in July 2016, a San Francisco nurse received a [\\$95,000 grant](#) from the [National Institutes of Health](#) to develop and test transparent masks; in the medical community, where protective masks are prevalent, this is not a new issue for those who are hard of hearing -- but it has been exacerbated by the current pandemic.

Karma Quick-Panwala, seen here wearing the Talking Masks from Appell, gave birth to a healthy baby boy in June.

As for Quick-Panwala, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy named Axel on June 6. It was a smooth delivery, for which she credits attentive doctors and their willingness to wear the Talking Masks that Isabella Appell sewed and sent to her.

Get CNN Health's weekly newsletter

Sign up here to get **The Results Are In with Dr. Sanjay Gupta** every Tuesday from the CNN Health team.



Keep students engaged this summer.
Sign up for parenting tips and ideas each week.

Sign Me Up

No Thanks

By subscribing you agree to our [privacy policy](#).

"Having the masks available ... really made a huge difference in my being able to communicate in the delivery room. There would have been so much that I missed out on," Quick-Panwala said.

"That, as a teenager, this is what [Isabella] chose to focus on -- to facilitate our need for access and help the deaf community be able to communicate in this time -- I'm so grateful that her interest in this area led her to do this," she said, "and to help me and the many other people who have been stuck between having to communicate and having to wear these masks."

- US
- World
- Politics
- Business
- Opinion
- Health
- Entertainment
- Tech
- Style

[Travel](#)

[Sports](#)

[Videos](#)

[Coupons](#)

[More](#)

[Weather](#)



FOLLOW CNN



[Terms of Use](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#) [AdChoices](#) [About Us](#) [CNN Studio Tours](#)

[CNN Store](#) [Newsletters](#) [Transcripts](#) [License Footage](#) [CNN Newsource](#) [Sitemap](#)

© 2020 Cable News Network. Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

CNN Sans™ & © 2016 Cable News Network.