



# Otago Daily Times

## Reality TV contestant taking deaf awareness to the world

By CHRIS MORRIS

WHEN Christy Smith went up against 15 others in the popular reality television show *Survivor*, she had more than just the suspicions and plots of her rivals to overcome.

Miss Smith (29) is almost completely deaf in both ears and uses a combination of sign language, lip-reading and speech to communicate.

Despite her condition, the plucky American — the first deaf person to compete in a reality television series — survived 33 days in the steaming Amazon jungle with 15 all-hearing rivals, before becoming the 11th person voted out of the competition.

During the show, her every move was scrutinised by a television audience of 20 million



Getting the message across . . . David Justice (left) and deaf former *Survivor* contestant Christy Smith, of the United States, are travelling around New Zealand to promote deaf awareness. PHOTO: CHRIS MORRIS

people across the United States — many of whom, she believes, were also encountering a deaf

person and their unique challenges for the first time. That, she said, was her victory.

"The experience led me to what I am doing today. It changed my life," she told the *Otago Daily Times* while visiting Queenstown on Saturday.

Miss Smith, from Aspen, Colorado, and travelling companion David Justice (29), from New York, are part-way through an international tour aimed at promoting deaf awareness around the globe.

They flew to Christchurch on October 25 and spent time meeting members of the city's deaf community before travelling down the West Coast, with more stops in Wanaka, Invercargill and Dunedin. The pair arrived in Queenstown on Friday for a two-night sightseeing visit, before heading to Christchurch and on to the North Island on Sunday for more appointments.

Miss Smith said it was the experience of throwing herself into an all-hearing community on *Survivor* in 2003, and surviving, that gave her the confidence to take on the world.

"It gave me that boost of confidence . . . I proved myself, I guess," she said.

She travelled around the United States in the years after the show's runaway success, working as a motivational speaker and spreading a message of greater understanding between the deaf and hearing communities.

Two years ago, she and Mr Justice decided to team up and take the same message to the world, with stops in New Zealand, Australia, Japan, China, Thailand, India, Nepal and Kenya over the next 12 months.

Mr Justice, who is not deaf, helped provide a bridge between the deaf and hearing communities.

They planned to meet deaf communities around the country and film their stories, with the aim of producing a documentary that shed more light on what it meant to be deaf.

The deaf communities of New Zealand had also welcomed the pair with open arms, she said. Their travels, promoted online through their website, blogs and email newsletters, had led to invitations and advanced bookings.

One deaf couple even offered to meet the pair upon arrival at Christchurch International Airport, and another person offered them beds for their planned stay in Nelson.