



UNMASKING – Lara’s Story

A Lumo TV Documentary

Story Transcript with Visual Descriptions

A sunny day by an outdoor swimming pool. The bare feet of a young woman, Lara, walk along a textured concrete poolside. She adjusts her goggles before grabbing the pool ladder handles and stepping into the water. She wears a wetsuit. She holds her breath and drops beneath the water.

Bubbles rise as Lara swims breaststroke. She floats under the cool blue water, allowing herself to sink down to almost sit on the pool floor, before rising back up again. She swims, calm and graceful.

Lara—“When I go into the water, I feel at peace. It's one of the few times I can see clearly. Down here it's my world. But up there, on the surface, things aren't so clear.”

Lara takes a seat opposite a TV camera in a dimly lit interview room. There is a male TV director behind the camera. We do not see his face. Lara wears a light brown jacket. Her hair is loose and dry. Her skin looks natural, with hazel eyes.

She smiles nervously. This is a big moment for her. She is about to tell her story.

Director—“When you say things aren't so clear, what do you mean?”

Lara smiles, a little nervous. She signs in fluent BSL.

Lara to Director—“There are so many times I am with people, then I tell them I'm deafblind, which means I can't see well, they're like, ‘You're deafblind!? Oh...”

In a supermarket aisle, Lara opens a fridge and takes out a punnet of raspberries to buy. She brings them close to her face to see them.

Lara to Director—“Then they say, but you don't look deafblind?! And I feel like, what am I supposed to look like?”

Lara's facial expression shows the frustration she feels at people's reaction to her.

Lara arrives home at her flat. She dumps her keys on the kitchen counter and turns on the bright lights under her kitchen cabinet. The worktop lights up, making it easier for her to see. Lara appears confident and independent.

Lara—“I'm deafblind, but it's fine because I can still see things. I'm still managing.”

Wearing dark glasses, Lara cooks chicken in a frying pan. She picks up the chicken with tongs and holds it near the light to check if it is cooked.

Lara—“I have my own way of doing things. Glasses when I am cooking, and torches to find things.”

Lara holds a small black torch. Kneeling on her grey carpet, the torchlight falls over a paperclip and she picks it up.

Lara—"But for my sight, time is running out. Soon, I will have to make some big changes. I need to stop pretending everything is still the same...and find another way... to be me."

A flashforward of Lara's story unfolds in pictures.

- Lara has her eyes examined by a doctor.
- She stands with a man and woman as they communicate using Protactile sign language.
- She walks in a city and sits with her young friends in a café.
- Lara stands at the edge of a bridge looking into the distance and later finds a table with another woman in a café.
- Lara stands still in a street as people walk past her.
- A hand pats a knee to communicate.
- The title of Lara's story appears...

UNMASKING

At Cambridge Clinical Research Centre, a male doctor is viewing Lara's eyes using specialist equipment. Lara's chin rests on a frame as the doctor holds a lens in front of one of her eyes. Lara appears serious and a little uncomfortable. She opens her eyes widely. An illuminated eye test chart hangs on the wall.

Lara—"I always dread going to my annual eye checkup. My official diagnosis is Wolfram Syndrome. It's a rare condition. It means I will become more and more blind. Life is constantly changing for me. There is no consistency in my vision. I used to be able to see widely. Now it's reduced to about here."

Lara gestures with her arms outstretched either side of her head to show her narrowing field of vision.

Lara—"I can't see to the sides. It means I miss things."

In Lara's flat, she sits on the sofa and draws with a pencil on a paper pad. She signs to the director, who is off camera.

Lara to Director—"Often now I have what I call 'snow vision'."

She signs to indicate fuzzy vision like falling snow.

Lara—“I will show you a drawing.”

A simple line drawing shows two similar images of a head and shoulders of a person. One has lots of dots across the image, like falling snow. The other image has fewer dots and is clearer.

Lara—“When I'm tired, and it's dark, my vision becomes like TV static, and I know my eyes have hit their limit. But during the day, when it's lighter, there's less static, and I know I can get on with things.”

Lara looks at baby pictures in a photo album. She smiles fondly at pictures of herself as a pouting baby, Lara as a toddler playing in a ball pit, and one of Lara's dad, who is white with short dark hair and glasses, watching toddler Lara in red dungarees.

Lara—“Deafblindness runs in my family. My father was the first to be deafblind and passed it down. So, I'm the second generation. My dad's sight is now almost gone. He can't see the food on his plate. He uses a magnifier to look at things. He finds FaceTime difficult. He has his own TV to watch everything up close. I look at him and see my future, guaranteed.”

A home video plays of Lara's dad talking to a baby in a highchair. Lara smiles as she watches the screen. Her dad gives baby Lara a spoon, which she throws onto the plastic yellow tray part of her highchair.

Lara—“Growing up, I knew my father was deafblind because I noticed he was doing things differently to other people. That was interesting to learn from. But he rarely talked about what it's like being deafblind and his journey. From my perspective, he didn't really accept his deafblindness. He didn't accept help.”

Lara appears saddened by her dad's refusal to adapt.

Lara—“He refused to learn hands-on sign language because he did not want to be treated any differently. Using hands-on would be proof that he is deafblind. So he liked to just sit back instead and say, ‘Just treat me like I'm normal’.”

In another location, a 1960s building, Lara is sanding a wall with one hand while wearing an LED light glove on the other to help her see as she works.

Lara—“Sometimes I volunteer at the local deaf club. I love art and decorating.”

Lara paints a wall. She runs a brush loaded with paint over the surface.

Lara—“I’ve been thinking about the reasons my father hid his deafblindness and why I hide mine. With some people, when I tell them I’m deafblind and ask, ‘Do you mind using hands-on?’ They reply with ‘Oh really? OK...’ I can tell from their body language. I’ve now become a burden. I’ve asked Paul, my oldest brother, for his perspective on this.”

A man enters the room as Lara paints a wall. He taps her on the shoulder to get her attention. The man, Paul, is white, has short brown hair and a beard and is wearing glasses.

Lara—“Paul is much older than me. He is also deafblind.”

Lara signs to Paul—“I’ve had some lovely conversations with people during social evenings. Then when we go to a nightclub and I tell them I’m deafblind, and need hands-on, the looks on their faces! I’ll put my drink down and the next thing...”

Lara and Paul— “...they’re gone!!”

Lara—“They’ve done a runner!”

Lara shrugs with a sense of irony and frustration.

Lara to Paul—“We just have to accept this. If you had a chance to learn hands-on, would you?”

Paul—“No.”

Lara—“Why not?”

Paul—“I was in a pub once, and there was a deaf person with Usher Syndrome. He had bad eyesight. A deaf woman was trying to sign to him. He couldn’t understand so he took her hands. She screamed!”

Lara appears shocked.

Lara—“What?!”

Paul—“The bartender saw this and threw him out. The deafblind man was shocked. We tried explaining he was blind. But it didn’t work. That’s why, ever since then, I’ve never used hands-on. I’ve avoided it.”

Lara nods thoughtfully as she watches Paul’s story.

Paul—“I don’t mind holding on to wrists.”

Paul holds onto Lara’s wrists as she signs and tracks her movements through touch.

Paul—“I can see from this distance and control the communication. That’s all I will do. It’s a shame. I do avoid it, if I’m being completely honest with you.”

Lara has a look of concern and understanding for her brother.

Lara to Paul—"I really appreciate your honesty."

Lara folds her arms and nods thoughtfully about what Paul has told her.

Back in her flat, Lara looks in the bathroom mirror and brushes her hair.

Lara—"I'm getting ready for a big conversation. I'm going out to meet some friends. I can't let what Paul and I have encountered hold me back anymore."

Lara puts on a dark grey denim jacket.

Lara—"When things come up and I know I'll need help, or have to ask for something, I don't want to burden my friends. So I just put on a mask instead. But today I want to do something different. I want to be more confident about asking for help and working together. I'm a bit nervous!"

She grabs her keys... then heads out of the flat.

It's an autumn day at an adventure park.

Lara—"I'm meeting with two of my friends and my brother, Oliver. We are going to a fun maze."

Lara embraces a young man, Oliver, who is white with short ginger hair. He wears a black puffer jacket over a white sweatshirt. Oliver then hugs one of Lara's friends, Laura, who's white, with long, wavy brown hair. Another female friend watches. She is white, has long, brown hair and glasses. They are all in their 20s.

They stand on a path with coloured festoon lights and a shuttered doughnut kiosk close by. They all sign to each other as they walk through a wooded area and approach the 'Mayhem Manor Hotel' fun maze.

Lara holds on to her friend Laura's shoulders as they walk through the maze to a dark space illuminated by green laser lights.

Lara—"Inside, it's really dark. And when it's dark, using my sight is really tiring."

Lara and her friends navigate past large plastic cubes inside metal wire crates that are lit from within by green or purple lights. Up ahead, there's a glowing green water feature with water running into it. Lara and her friends are happy, relaxed and enjoying themselves.

Back in the interview room, Lara talks to the director.

Lara—“I'm always that person who is walking behind someone else and whatever they do, I just copy it and follow them. I just go with the flow. But I'm tired of following. I feel like now it's my time. I need to tell people what my needs are and make sure we work together and build bridges.”

In a café back at the maze, Lara and her friends sit around a table. It's dark outside now. The group are signing and discussing deafblindness.

Lara to her friends – “I feel like, when I say that I need help and adjustments, some people have an attitude of like, ‘Urgh, really?’ And I'm like, OK, I have to work with this. Some people don't understand because they lack information on how to help me and they panic. I have to reassure them, try to manage the situation.”

Lara's brother, Oliver, nods in agreement. Lara's friend, Laura, looks a little wary to share her views.

Laura—“Yeah, about hands-on, the problem is I don't like touch. And I know some other people don't like hands-on too. It makes me feel uneasy. But I know in the future, when you become more blind, I'll have to use hands-on. There's no other option. I have to learn, accept and tolerate it.”

Back in the interview room, Lara shares her reflections on what her friends have said.

Lara to Director—“When Laura said she wasn't comfortable with hands-on, I was taken aback.”

Lara looks sad and at a loss.

Back in the café, the friends continue the conversation. Laura appears conflicted as she discusses her feelings openly.

Laura—“With other deafblind people, I still feel a bit wary.”

Lara—“Why?”

Laura—“How close can I get without being patronising or offending them? Or being, like, ‘I'm your saviour.’ I don't want that.”

Back in the interview room, Lara reflects to the director.

Lara to Director—“Lots of deaf people share the same view. Their vision comes first, because they are signing. It's natural to stand back to keep

eye contact. When I get too close, they push me away and say, 'Please, back off a bit', so I'll step back. But then we lose the connection."

Back in the café, Oliver continues to discuss deafblindness. Lara watches him thoughtfully.

Oliver—"Sometimes, I've felt embarrassed about how deaf people interacted with Dad. Because Dad was isolated. We grew up seeing him isolated. Our mum tried to encourage deaf people to talk to Dad, but they'd only talk to him for five minutes and then they were off. It was always five minutes. Never a proper conversation. No one would be there for him. No one."

Lara nods in agreement and then signs passionately.

Lara—"That is exactly why I believe in starting your independence now! Find your way. Because, one day, you will become blind, and you'll have the confidence to know what you need to do. You can prove to people, I don't need to depend on you. I can do it on my own. But I need your help. That's it!"

Oliver nods enthusiastically as Lara shares this new way of seeing the situation.

Oliver—"That's beautiful."

Lara—"Change the word 'dependence'. It's not that, it's helping and working together. We have to change it."

Lara's friends nod thoughtfully. They are taking it all in.

Back in the interview room, Lara conveys a mix of determination, frustration and sadness as she shares her feelings with the director.

Lara to Director—"I understand that people have their own preferences and needs too, and I respect that. But the biggest question always remains unanswered. How do we work together through this? And that makes me sad."

At the swimming pool. It's a bright, sunny day. Lara is sitting at the top of the swimming pool ladder. She wears a black swimming costume. Lara looks thoughtful as she looks across the cool blue water. There isn't anyone else around.

Lara—"Some days all I want to do is cry. I think, why me? My brother is fine. He got our mother's genes, so he's fine. But why me?"

Lara swims front crawl gracefully under the water. She floats on her back. She holds her breath and goes beneath the water again.

Lara—“Whenever I feel stressed or overwhelmed, I like to just go for a swim. Once I submerge in water, I relax. It's probably the only time I don't see my visual static. There are no distractions. There's nothing I HAVE to look at.”

Lara floats on her back in the empty swimming pool. Her limbs are outstretched as her body turns gently in a circle.

Lara—“But sometimes, it feels like I'm going round in circles. I know something needs to change. I just don't know how.”

Outside London Liverpool Street Station, Lara checks her phone for directions. She makes her way down the steps in front of the large glass station building. There is a sign for the underground train.

Wearing her denim jacket, Lara walks through the busy streets of London. A passenger boat passes under a bridge. The dome of St Paul's Cathedral can be seen in the distance. Lara appears excited and optimistic.

Lara— “Today, I'm in London. I've decided I need a fresh approach. I'm going to meet a woman called Jo Atkinson. She's a psychologist who is losing her sight too. I want her perspective on how I can build up my confidence and engage more. I'm going to meet her now and I am really excited.”

Outside a café, Lara meets Jo, a professional-looking middle-aged woman with bobbed grey hair, wearing a bright blue top and black trousers. Jo has glasses and carries a red and white cane. They greet one another warmly and embrace. Jo places one hand over Lara's, as Lara signs. Jo is using her remaining vision as well as feeling the signs using hands-on BSL.

Lara— “Hello! All right?”

Jo— “It's lovely to meet you.”

Lara— “Same! It's lovely to meet you too. Did you get here OK?”

Jo— “Yeah, all good.”

Lara— “Do you want to go inside?”

Jo— “Yes.”

Lara— “It's cold out here. Let's go!”

Jo— “Great!”

The pair enter the modern light café with potted palms. Jo uses her red and white cane and confidently navigates to a table. Lara and Jo sit down and sign to each other across a round, white table.

Lara– “Can you see me all right?”

Jo– “Yes.”

Jo signs with confidence as she tells Lara her communication needs.

Jo– “I prefer to sit back, because my vision is narrow, so I can see your signs.”

Jo demonstrates her tunnel vision.

Lara– “I'd rather be closer.”

Jo moves her chair forward, closer to the table. Lara smiles as the pair work together to accommodate each other.

Jo– “I can move a little bit closer to meet your vision, but you need to match me by bringing your hands up and signing a bit nearer your face.”

Jo demonstrates her visual frame to Lara. Jo is at ease talking about her communication needs, which appears to put Lara at ease.

Lara– “No problem.”

Jo– “Lovely. Thank you. If I was really close, I would use hands-on and feel the signs. I'm flexible.”

Lara is intrigued by Jo. She brings her hands nearer to her face and signs as Jo has requested.

Lara– “Can I ask, when did you start using hands-on?”

Jo– “It was a slow process. It started in situations like when I was in a pub or it was really dark outside and I couldn't see, so I had to use hands-on sign language. That's how it started, about 10 years ago, using it bit by bit. Then I used it more and more over time.”

Lara watches with intrigue as Jo continues.

Jo– “But, at first, I didn't feel comfortable, because I felt like other people didn't want me to touch them. They would be standoffish. It was like, I had to be assertive to become comfortable with myself first. Being comfortable with myself helps everyone else become comfortable too.”

Lara– “I know a lot of deafblind people, they are struggling. I meet them at social events, but they don't use hands-on. They don't use a cane. They don't use resources to help them relax.”

Jo nods in agreement.

Jo– “It’s a mask. We need to come out and say, we ARE deafblind, we NEED these things.”

Lara agrees enthusiastically.

Jo– “When you hide and pretend you understand, it just causes disconnection. Psychologically, if I’m not comfortable in myself, with my identity or my disability and my vision, I become awkward. Other people absorb this and become awkward too. If I accept it myself, then others will accept it more easily. And we can build bridges more easily.”

Lara nods. She appears moved and relieved by what Jo has said.

Back in the interview room, Lara reflects to the director about her conversation with Jo.

Lara to Director– “Up until now, I have always been around my father and half-brother. And now I have learned an outside deafblind perspective. It was a wow moment.”

Back in London, a boat travels down the River Thames. Birds soar and swoop in the sky above. Water laps at the riverbank.

Inside the café, Jo signs to Lara.

Jo– “Imagine you are floating through life on a river. Suddenly you realise there is a huge waterfall ahead. It’s a massive drop. What would you do?”

Lara laughs nervously at the thought.

Lara– “I’d panic and scream!”

Jo nods. Her signing intensifies as she continues.

Jo– “You cling on. You resist. You don’t want to fall. But you’ve got no choice. Do deafblind people have a choice?”

Lara shakes her head.

Lara– “It’s impossible.”

Jo– “You’re caught in the whirlpool. Some people stay there forever, stuck for years and years.”

Lara is thoughtful. Jo’s waterfall analogy is helping her to understand things differently.

Jo– “We need to adapt to pop up again. We need to embrace our sense of touch. Learn new ways of using it. That could be Braille, a cane, or a

guide dog. Then things get better and we can keep floating down the river of life.”

A video reel shows:

- A hand tracing the texture of a stone wall.
- The tip of a white cane moves along the textured ground.
- Inside the café, Lara and Jo run their fingertips across a sheet of Braille on the table.

Jo– “But we have to let go of our attachment to vision. Don't obsess over it. Vision is good, but when it eventually goes, we'll still have the tactile.”

Outside, the sun is setting over the River Thames. The sky is blue and the horizon glows with orange.

Back in the interview room, Lara reflects to the director about her conversation with Jo.

Lara to Director– “When Jo said about letting go...it scared me. But at the same time, she's right. Because if I don't let go of my vision, I won't have the chance to see the world in a different way.”

Back in the café, Jo and Lara continue to discuss deafblind acceptance.

Lara– “So it all starts from within, not from the outside...”

Jo responds enthusiastically.

Jo– “You've got it!”

Jo appears pleased that Lara can see a new perspective.

In a park on a cold winter's day, the tip of a red and white cane swishes along the textured pavement.

Lara– “One of the ways into the tactile world is using a long cane.”

Lara practices walking through the park with a red and white cane. She is followed by a male cane training instructor. Lara is wearing a thick pink coat. The instructor follows close behind as Lara sweeps her cane from side to side.

Lara– “Jo has arranged a cane taster training session for me.”

Jo is standing in the park, wearing a red coat and cream woolly scarf. She holds her own red and white cane and smiles proudly as she watches Lara training.

Lara– “After the lesson, Jo has a challenge for me, to cross the Millennium Bridge together, using our canes.”

At London’s Millennium Bridge, birds swoop in the early evening sky. Lara stands at the end of the bridge – a metal pedestrian walkway crossing the River Thames. Lara holds her cane nervously. She looks down the long bridge to the other side of the river.

Lara– “Even with Jo beside me, I’m still nervous.”

Back in the interview room, Lara reflects to the director about using a cane.

Lara to Director– “By walking with a cane, people looking at me will know I’m deafblind. My vulnerability is there for all to see. But with Jo, there’s no time like the present.”

Back at the Millennium Bridge, Lara and Jo are ready to cross. They both hold red and white canes.

Jo– “Let’s do this!”

Side by side, Jo and Lara walk along the busy footbridge, keeping to the left-hand side. Water gushes beneath the bridge. People in wintry clothes pass by. The bridge has views of other bridges over the wide River Thames and tall office blocks in the distance. The sky is grey with a golden glow to it. A couple step aside and let Lara and Jo pass.

Jo signs to Lara as they walk.

Jo– “People move out of our way and we can power through. It’s our bridge now!”

Lara– “Yay!”

Lara is growing in confidence as she and Jo sweep their canes before them. They look up and admire the view of the London skyline and the river.

Lara– “I can feel the bridge vibrating as we walk. Through our canes, we can feel the bridge’s textures and its contours.”

Jo and Lara run the end of their canes along the textured metal sides of the bridge, feeling the shapes of the wires and steelwork.

They walk down the centre of the bridge. Jo moves in a self-assured and confident way, sweeping her cane from side to side. Lara appears a little more hesitant as she practices her new skill. The pair stop and stand and face each other. The London skyline is behind them. Lara looks relieved and elated.

Jo– “So, how do you feel?”

Lara– “I feel like I can look up and see a new world. Normally, I'm looking down at the ground, never really thinking about anything else. But now I feel like, whoa, I've been missing out on a lot!”

Jo nods and looks proud of Lara.

Lara– “It feels like freedom. It was a really nice experience. Thank you for showing me the bridge, and for everything. I really appreciate it.”

Jo– “A pleasure.”

They hug. It's a tight embrace as they both smile.

Jo– “Goodbye.”

Lara– “Bye-bye.”

Jo– “Take care.”

Jo waves, then heads off in the opposite direction. Gulls fly over the river. The sun sets on the London skyline.

On a new day, back in her hometown, Lara walks across a small bridge crossing a much smaller river. The sky is grey and overcast. Lara leans against the bridge's railings and sweeps her hand across her hair as she looks out at the water with a thoughtful expression. She reflects to the director on her journey so far.

Lara to Director– “Since meeting Jo, I've been doing a lot of thinking. She was such an inspiration. I was wowed by a lot of the things she said, like the waterfall metaphor. Jo said to use tools to adapt and I will rise up to the surface again. But part of me still resists change...and that makes me want to hide behind my mask.”

Lara looks out across the water.

Lara– “People have always asked me, ‘Do you have a cane?’ And I say I don't but the reality is that I do have this...”

Lara holds up a folded red and white symbol cane.

Lara– “I was given it three or four years ago. But I've always felt if I walk around using it, I'd feel stupid. I feel like people would look at me, knowing I'm vulnerable. I'd feel exposed. So I like to hide the cane and pretend everything is normal. But since talking to Jo, I'm thinking about it. Change is always hard. But I think I'm ready to stop hiding.”

Lara appears determined and ready to take on the challenge.

On a new day, Lara is sitting in a café. She appears proactive and focused. She has her laptop open. On the table, there's an A4 pad, tea, coffee and a plate with a croissant on it. Lara looks at the laptop screen closely. She types 'deafblind' into an internet search.

Lara– “It's time to do some research. I want to see what else is going on. Already, I'm finding so many deafblind people who are out there and not hiding.”

A video of a deafblind dancer plays. She is performing in the World Latin Dance Cup. She is holding a white cane. She sweeps across the dance floor.

Lara types 'deafblind communication' into an internet search. She watches videos of a man and woman signing through touch. Then there is a close-up of four lively pairs of hands communicating through touch and tapping.

Lara– “I've found something that intrigues me. It's a language that only needs touch, called Protactile, an emerging language within deafblind communities.”

Lara watches the video with interest.

In another location, Lara walks along a path by an Art Deco style apartment building. She appears purposeful.

Lara– “I want to know more about Protactile so I have arranged to meet Lisa and Romain, teachers from the Netherlands and France. We'll be using international signs to communicate.”

Inside the building, a man and woman, Lisa and Romain, in their 30s or 40s are sitting in a living room beside some patio doors. They are casually dressed and both wearing dark glasses. They sit closely opposite one another, with their knees touching. There is a third empty chair next to them. Lisa and Romain communicate using Protactile. Lisa taps rapidly on Romain's knee with one hand. With the other hand, she signs. Romain has his hand over Lisa's hand, gently feeling the signs. They appear confident and animated as they converse.

Lara joins Lisa and Romain in the living room. She signs with both hands and Romain and Lisa each place a hand over one of Lara's hands to receive her signs through touch.

Lara– “Hello, nice to meet you. I'll sit down here.”

Romain and Lisa greet Lara warmly. They stay in light touch contact with Lara as she sits in the third chair.

Lara– “As I sit down, Romain makes sure our knees are interlocked. Then it's time to put our hands together.”

The three sit in a triangle, all facing one another. Their knees touch one another, so they always remain in contact and present with one another.

The three of them form a circle of tactile contact together. Lara touches her right hand to Romain's left hand. Her left hand connects with Lisa's right hand. Romain and Lisa connect their other hands.

Lisa– “We need to have our hands touching at the same time. This keeps the conversation connected.”

Lisa signs as Lara and Romain each feel her signs with one of their hands over hers. Everyone is part of the conversation and they always maintain tactile contact.

Lisa– “Also, you need to mirror your signs, using both hands at the same time.”

As Lisa signs, she mirrors the signs in her left and right hands. Lara and Romain both feel what Lisa is saying at the same time. Lara appears relaxed, taking in this new way of communicating.

Romain signs and Lisa and Lara receive his signs through touch.

Romain– “Yes, because we can't assume any sight. If only one hand is used, it might not be seen. It's important to use both hands together so everyone gets the same information.”

Lara nods in understanding.

Lara– “Another feature of Protactile is responding by backchanneling.”

Lisa– “You can tap here, on the knees, to indicate ‘yes’.”

Lisa demonstrates by tapping on Lara's knee.

Lisa– “‘No’ is shown by a rubbing motion.”

Lisa brings Romain and Lara's hands up to her chin as she shakes her head to show that the sign means ‘no’, and then demonstrates the knee-rubbing motion.

Lara smiles. She appears relaxed as the conversation flows easily between them using Protactile. She reflects on the experience.

Lara– “Already, I'm feeling a sense of shared connection. But as I learn, I'm thinking of my friend Laura, who is uncomfortable with even normal hands-on.”

Lara signs to Romain and Lisa and tells them her concern.

Lara– “But what if someone didn't want to be touched? How would you use Protactile with them?”

Lisa replies, still mirroring all her signs on both hands, as Lara and Romain receive these by touching one hand each.

Lisa– “Everyone is different. We're not all the same so it's important to *have a dialogue. Check what kind of touch they are comfortable with.*”

Romain– “If they don't want their shoulders touched, you can ask if they *are OK with touching knees or legs. Check what their limits are.*”

Back in the interview room, Lara reflects to the director. She is feeling optimistic.

Lara to Director– “Protactile is a game changer. Whenever I go to deaf events, you can only do hands-on with one person at a time. But if I use Protactile, I could have a conversation in a big group and be included.”

Back in the living room, Romain, Lisa and Lara continue their animated conversation using Protactile.

Romain– “Imagine you have no sight at all. By touching, you are able to ‘see’.”

Lisa taps Romain’s knee rapidly in agreement. Lara nods.

Romain– “But if you take touch away, we would be lost. Alone without connection.”

Romain removes his hands and breaks contact with Lara and Lisa. Their hands hang in the air. Romain takes their hands again and signs.

Romain– “Keeping touch builds co-presence. We stay in touch, no matter what we are doing.”

Lara nods as she learns from Romain.

Lisa– “It's hard to explain. It's better to just do it! Co-presence is an important part of Protactile.”

The group all stand. Lara leads the way to a modern kitchen with white units. As they walk across the room, Lisa is holding onto Lara's shoulder and Romain is holding onto Lisa's hand, so they remain co-present and connected in a chain of touch as they move.

In the kitchen, there is crusty sliced bread, ham, cooked pasta, cheese, croissants and butter laid out on the countertop.

The group arrive at the counter and connect hands again. Lisa signs as both Lara and Romain track her hands with theirs.

Lisa to Lara– “Now, I want you to close your eyes.”

Back in the interview room, Lara shares her feelings with the director.

Lara to Director– “When Lisa said to close my eyes, that felt like a culture shock.”

Back in the kitchen with Romain and Lisa. The group use touch to feel along the worktop. They always remain touching and co-present. They explore items on the worktop using their sense of touch alone.

Lara– “We guided each other around the kitchen, figuring out where we were going, exploring cupboards and drawers.”

The three move together across the kitchen and open a wall unit which contains plastic beakers, mugs and a jug. Lara has her eyes closed.

By the sink, the group wash their hands. At all times, they remain in contact and present with one another through unbroken touch.

Lisa– “Time to eat now. We’ll get some bread out and make a sandwich, OK?”

Lara– “Yes.” Lara rapidly taps Lisa’s arm to show that she agrees.

Romain guides Lara’s hand onto a plate.

Romain – “Feel this?”

Lara rapidly taps Romain’s arm to indicate ‘Yes’.

Romain– “Cheese?”

Lara and Lisa rapidly tap Romain’s arm to indicate ‘Yes’.

The group prepare the sandwich, never breaking their co-presence touch. They spread the butter and Lara adds the ham. Her eyes are still closed.

Lara– “I’m feeling things I hadn’t noticed before. Like how oily and greasy butter is. How cold ham really is.”

Back in the interview room, Lara reflects to the director about the experience of using Protactile. She appears excited, with a new-found confidence.

Lara– “Normally, when I'm talking for hours, my vision goes fuzzy with static. I know I'm tired and I need a break. But with Protactile, I could go on for hours and hours. Lisa and Romain touch the world without fear, and that's what I want too.”

Back in the flat with Romain and Lisa, the group continue to chat freely and easily using Protactile.

On another day, at the outdoor swimming pool. The sky is blue as Lara and her friend Laura walk towards the entrance. A sign above them reads, ‘Beccles Lido’. As they pass the pool, Lara looks at the water and signs to Laura with childish excitement.

Lara to Laura– “I want to jump in right now!”

The friends laugh.

Back in the interview room, Lara shares her thoughts with the director.

Lara to Director– “When I first found out I was going blind, I immediately texted my best friend, Laura. I said, ‘Are you going to leave me? What does this mean for me and my future?’ She told me, ‘Fine. We'll try and find a way.’ But at the back of my mind, I still have that fear.”

Back at the swimming pool, Lara and Laura sit opposite one another across a wooden picnic table. There are wooden changing cubicles behind them. Lara signs to Laura, reflecting on their previous conversation about deafblindness.

Lara– “Remember that conversation we had in the café?”

Laura nods and smiles.

Laura– “Yes.”

Lara– “One moment took me aback. When you were talking about your personal boundaries and not feeling comfortable with hands-on.”

Laura answers with honesty.

Laura– “It's not hands-on itself. It's about touching. Some people aren't comfortable with it. I'm one of them, unfortunately. It feels too personal. But at the same time, I know that at some point, I will have to swallow it and push through.”

Lara watches. There is a flash of sadness in her eyes.

Lara– “You will need hands-on to communicate, because then we won't be able to sign like this anymore. You will be blind. I know that, and it's always in the back of my mind.”

The cool blue water in the empty swimming pool ripples gently in the sunlight.

Lara– “I've decided to ask Laura if she'll learn Protactile with me.”

Lara and Laura approach some seating. Lara guides Laura to sit in the right position. Lara appears happy to share her new-found skills with her friend.

Lara– “Sit here. Get yourself comfortable.”

They sit opposite one another. Laura appears more open to learning, but a little nervous.

Lara– “Move forward a little bit.”

Laura moves forwards so her knees are touching Lara's.

Lara– “Perfect.”

Lara checks her position.

Lara– “I'll teach you little bits now, OK?”

Laura– “OK.”

Back in the interview room, Lara is feeling more self-assured as she signs to the director.

Lara to Director– “I need to be more open about teaching people how to do things and breaking through to them.”

Back at the pool, Lara continues to teach Laura Protactile skills. She taps on Laura's knee.

Lara– “Tapping repeatedly means ‘Yes’.”

The friends share calm smiles as Lara gently shows Laura how to communicate with her through touch. Laura relaxes and nods as she settles into Lara's instructions. Laura taps Lara's knee.

Back in the interview room, Lara reflects to the director about her journey.

Lara to Director– “I can see hope now. I can see a positive future.”

Back at the poolside, Lara and Laura continue communicating with Protactile. Lara moves her fingertips in a circle on Laura's knee using her right hand, then taps it with her index finger. Lara signs with her left hand as Laura gently

places her own hand over it to feel Lara's signs. It's a warm moment of connection between old friends.

Lara is alone in a cool blue swimming pool.

Lara floats under the water, gently turning her body.

Lara– “As my life changes, I am changing as well. I feel like I am creating new worlds.”

Lara runs her fingers slowly through the water as she reflects back on her journey.

A film reel shows:

- Her time with friends at the fun maze.
- Meeting Jo Atkinson in London.
- Using a red and white cane across the Millennium Bridge.
- Meeting Romain and Lisa.
- Exploring the kitchen together.
- Learning Protactile and teaching Laura how to communicate through touch.

Lara– “I AM deafblind. I'm not ashamed or hiding it. I don't want that anymore. I am taking off my mask. I am changing. I hope others will too.”

The sunlight makes the pool water sparkle as Lara swims gracefully through the cool blue water.