



# VoluntEars

Keegan Hall-Browne tells his story about realising the power of sign and the strength of the Deaf community, utilising skills, passion and enthusiasm for educating and working with deaf children in Sri Lanka

## What was the inspiration?

The context of deaf education has always been diverse across the UK but the level of expectation for outcomes has increased extensively. Throughout these changes I have worked, as all ToDs have, to ensure the best possible successes for our children and to continue to develop my practice. If I'm honest this is a vocational career with a personal commitment as well as professional but it is one where the pressures of data tracking and progress of students can sometimes distract us from the principles of why we want to teach deaf children. Within this context I needed to renew my drive to deaf education, to be freed to explore and challenge myself again as a ToD and to see if my skills could be effective beyond the deaf schooling system in which I developed my career.

Many of us are aware that deaf education systems vary across the world and it is right that we look beyond our system to compare with what our colleagues do across the shores. We know that much of what helps us develop professionally comes from experts abroad and we use research and advancements from around the world daily in our work. However, we also know that there are other education systems which, through lack of training opportunities and access to the global deaf community and to deaf education systems and often because of limited funding, have a greater need for exposure to, and support from, colleagues where there is greater opportunity. For most of my career I wanted to experience deaf education in countries which may be less developed and to offer my time, skills and effort to help make a difference to those teachers serving these children who we all know are full of much potential.

So this was the drive and the context but then came the crux; where-when-how became my challenging questions. The inspiration came from a group email advertising a newly formed organisation specialising in volunteer experiences in the deaf community with and for deaf travellers to Sri Lanka. Wow! I was sold! So one might say it pays to network and to check your group emails sometimes!

## What was the project?

VoluntEars (Google will display results about the charitable organisation linked to the mouse with the cute big ears – just move on, this is not what you seek) was the organisation I found through my professional email network and it sounded alarms in all the best places. It is a specialist organisation with a focus on travel to a developing country's deaf education sector in great need of our time and efforts. It's an organisation which will arrange bespoke opportunities for the deaf traveller and deaf professional alike to go and experience deaf education in a vastly contrasting locality, an immensely rich and diverse culture, utterly beautiful surroundings and a fascinating deaf community and hey, the opportunity to learn yet another sign language.

After initial investigations and conversations with Director Richard Clowes I was able to plan what would become my most inspirational and reinvigorating experience to date. Together with Richard's expertise and contacts we planned two distinct projects for me to sink my excited teeth into. I would go to Sri Lanka for a month completing a two-week Group Trip followed by two additional weeks teaching in a deaf school.

My first project saw me flying with four UK deaf





travellers, most of whom were volunteering for the first time in their lives. All had fascinating lives and personalities. Together with the help of Richard and his fully qualified BSL communicator we would spend two amazing weeks, packed solid, renovating parts of a local deprived school for deaf children working with the teachers and students, volunteering on Christmas day at a turtle sanctuary – putting back into the eco-system and seeing 64 hatchlings born, visiting an elephant orphanage, which itself gave us pause for thought amongst other specially arranged religious and cultural visits. Just look at the difference that working together could make. Oh and learning Sri Lankan Sign Language was great fun too!

My second project meant working more independently, although safely tucked up in the bosom of a local Sri Lankan host family, as a teacher again. For the following two weeks VoluntEars arranged the invaluable opportunity and honour of joining the committed teaching staff at another larger residential school for over 200 deaf children and young people aged 3 to 20. During these two weeks I experienced an immensely rewarding sense of fulfilment as a teacher again. From planning my own lessons without a specific curriculum, without the need for progress targets, and very limited resources, but alongside children eager to learn and experience all, to leading whole staff training with the principal as my interpreter to demonstration lessons giving their teachers the chance to observe techniques and methods so common to us all back here, the passion, creativity, enthusiasm and, yes, even energy of my NQT years (both as a mainstream teacher and, for me, again as a ToD) were reawakened and harnessed.

#### How can it be arranged?

VoluntEars' Director Richard Clowes worked with us all meeting our requirements, from communication needs to our desired outcomes. Through conversations it becomes a personalised volunteering experience, shared as part of a group of people



driven to make a difference and be accepted into the wider Sri Lankan community as a friend. One must not forget the inclusion you find into the wider Deaf community. You are very quickly reminded of the true essence of it being a global community.

Funding and time are crucial aspects of this experience. The Sri Lankan schools follow roughly the same holidays as ours; however, their academic year begins in January ending in December. This raises questions as to when you can go if teaching is your aim. I hear sabbatical as a solution, though not in my case, but it might well be an idea and possibility for some of you. Funding came through personal contribution but equally through generous gifts of family and friends. I recommend an online gifting page be created and be creative with fund-raising events too, I didn't quite manage the latter but the former was invaluable.

One reassuring element is that all the arrangements are part of what VoluntEars' projects offer and this definitely lifts the burden when, as I can empathise, we are all extremely busy practitioners.

#### What were the benefits for all?

The benefits of offering yourself in this way to the local community in Sri Lanka are far-reaching and with more volunteers taking up the gauntlet positive changes remain long term too. The local students I met were highly engaged, eager to understand our sign language, our methods for learning and to share their experiences.

They enthusiastically wanted to grasp an understanding of the wider world and get a sense of life in England, but equally were thrilled to learn about the idea of a global deaf community to which they could belong. In the words of the school principal about the benefits to herself, her staff and children: "Thank you very much for inspiring our teachers. I will try my best to inspire our teachers to use the language teaching methodology to uplift the literacy skills of our students. I feel



like a good friend has left us.” A real difference can be made from just sharing our enthusiasm and expertise.

**What does the Volunteer gain?**

For those of you inspired to do similar I am sure you can already imagine the benefits; hopefully I have highlighted some too. For me, before this journey I had been contemplating changing my career, I genuinely thought a move from education was necessary. But, now, having given heart and soul through this experience I am renewed and armoured again to improve the lives of deaf children in my care. This might mean still questioning some systems or working to change some attitudes here too, but I am again inspired to do so.

One exciting benefit beyond the renewed vigour and commitment to teaching deaf children, was seeing the power of sign language and the international strength of

the deaf community. As travellers and “strangers” to the Sri Lankan deaf community we were valued and welcomed as friends because of our commitment, expertise (personal deafness or professional involvement) and ability to communicate with our signing hosts. Through this experience there was a sense of the belonging that language grants you. Not knowing Sinhala (Sri-Lankan spoken and written language) and with only English and British Sign Language I worried that interaction would be impossible. However, I quickly saw how sign language truly crosses communication and understanding barriers. It opened many opportunities to belong and interact. By the end of my experience I was bowled over by the reality that it aided communication with my hearing Sri Lankan colleagues when their students became my translators. We could repair understanding through adapting our signs. It was without doubt a true testament to the power of sign!

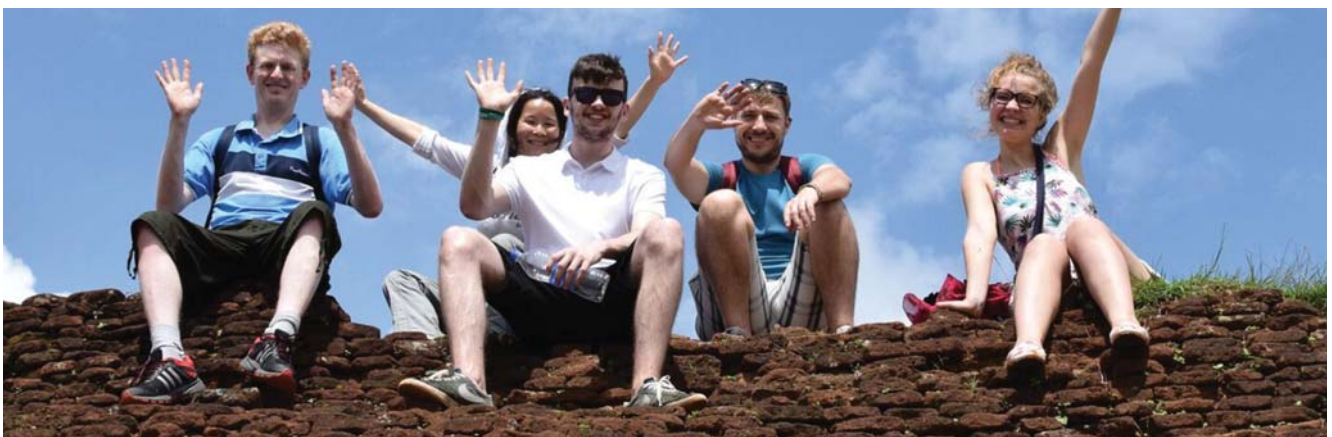
**Why should more of us do this?**

I put this question to you as much as to me for the future. The world of deaf education has much to offer. It is not a singular entity and it is certainly not fixed in time or space, but instead it is fluid and it is organic. The world of sign language and communication is equally evolving and rich too. Looking outside both personally and professionally has always been key to improvement and well-being and I am sure none of us in this amazing field will ever stop doing so. But I say with my hand on heart after this experience: sometimes looking is not enough, it is the “doing”, the “being present” and the giving of oneself beyond our everyday work that helps to change and improve more – both for us as well as those far beyond.

**Two final words from me: Do it!**

*Keegan Hall-Browne was a Lead ToD who recently took time out from his career in the UK to volunteer with deaf schools in Sri Lanka arranged by VoluntEars. Keegan is now a Peripatetic Advisory ToD.*

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