

# Communication in Nicaragua

**Kathy Owston** continues to report on her support to deaf children in Nicaragua – in particular her time working in the special school in Estelí

I have been in Nicaragua now for over a year, enjoying the wonderful scenery, friendly people, and the heat, dust and mud. However, things have not all been plain sailing. We've struggled with insecurity in the job market, but have continued to make a go of it here. Now fortunately things have turned a corner, and my husband Steve has a new job with an NGO, with lots of scope for useful community development work. So we are back settled in (very hot) Leon, and I am able to continue my voluntary work, supporting projects with deaf children and students.

When I worked at St Thomas' Hearing Implant Centre in London, one of our standard interview procedures was to ask candidates to prepare a presentation about "Communication and Cochlear Implants". It was fascinating to see how this was interpreted: was the focus on communication mode and methods? Or the child's communication journey? Or were we asking about the importance of good communication between professionals, or communications between the child and family? Here in Nicaragua, the main focus of my work to support deaf children and students has been to try to gather as much information as I can about what is happening here. My aim is to encourage communication between the different groups who are working in the field of deafness, in the places where I have been, so that people work together more cohesively.

Sign Language is the mode of communication for deaf people here. Nicaragua cannot afford to provide hearing aids for children or adults. Since this is a very poor country the quality of education, even for hearing children, is sadly poor. In the UK all deaf children can be provided with hearing aids or cochlear implants on the NHS. In Nicaragua, the basic health care system is free, but it is



Deaf children helping to prepare materials in the special school



Kathy giving her lecture at the University in Estelí "How do we learn language?"

exactly that, basic provision, and does not include audiological assessment, or hearing aids. I have been working in the special school in Estelí with a class of students who are deaf. None of them knew the level of their deafness, having never had their hearing tested - no audiograms. The diagnosis of deafness had been made because they had failed to learn to talk by the age of six. I suggested to the head teacher that it would be a good idea to try to get an audiological assessment for each student. She agreed – but we had very different reasons! She said it would be useful, to prove the students were deaf, because then they could enter the deaf "Olympics"! No thought that it might also be of help to plan their educational intervention, or to look for possible amplification.

After some diligent research on the internet, I linked up with a US-funded NGO called Mayflower Medical Outreach which runs an excellent hostel for deaf students in Jinotega. This small highland town is a three-hour bumpy bus-ride from where I was living, in Estelí. They have places for up to thirty deaf students from rural areas to live in their hostel during term-time. They support the students in full-time education, and have also set up and trained the staff, and provide technical support to audiology clinics in the main hospitals in Jinotega. And by good fortune they also support audiology in my town, Estelí! What luck! I spent two weeks in Jinotega, learning about their impressive work. This was the breakthrough I had been looking for. Now I have an organisation and a structure to support my efforts.

The clinic in Estelí was able to provide a basic audiological assessment for the class of deaf kids. The audiograms were sent to Mayflower in the USA, where the staff identified those who could benefit from amplification.



*Shoskey enjoying communicating with Kathy and one of the Oregon delegation in pre-school*

Without having had hearing aids, the children with only a moderate hearing loss have not been able to access the sounds of speech to learn an oral language. Next month I am going to work with a brigade of US audiologists, who are coming to Jinotega with Mayflower for a week. They are bringing with them a supply of analogue hearing aids from the USA. I am really excited. We are arranging for a minibus to take all the kids who will benefit from hearing aid fitting from Estelí to Jinotega. I have promised to provide follow-up services for them, with listening programmes for their teachers to try to follow in the coming months. It might well be too late, for most of them, to be of help in learning an auditory language for communication. However, at the least, they should be able to gain some benefit from becoming aware of environmental sounds.

I have also been working with a small NGO called Manos Unidas. They fund small projects with deaf people and recently brought down a brigade of interpreters from Oregon University. I arranged their schedule for the week. The brigade worked in the special school in Estelí, painting murals and making educational materials. They were shocked by the lack of resources in the classrooms here. The teachers in Nicaragua try to do so much with so little. There are few educational toys in the school. In the special school, if Alma, the teacher of the deaf children, needs something, she has to buy it out of her own salary. Teachers can't even afford to photocopy worksheets. Thanks to BATOD I have purchased some toys which encourage symbolic play, bought inset puzzles and provided colourful board books for the pre-school class.

I have spent many hours with Alma, trying to facilitate the smooth entry of Shoskey into her class. Shoskey is the deaf four-year old I have been home visiting. All was going well

until his single parent mother had to take a full-time job to survive. Now Shoskey has stopped attending school, and he is looked after in another part of town by his grandmother. I know that often the adults don't even put his hearing aids on now. It is such a shame to see him lose access to the communication through Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL) he was acquiring in school. None of his family can sign. This is another example of communications – I tried my best to emphasise with the mother that the combination of hearing aids and school is an essential long-term approach for Shoskey. But she was expecting a quick fix with the new technology, and I could see her belief in the hearing aids diminish after just four or five months with little obvious visible result.

Hopefully Shoskey will continue to be on the radar of the adult deaf community and school staff. He was lucky to have been identified early. That is unusual here in Nicaragua. There is a crying need for an early identification programme for deaf children. Hearing babies are learning language from the day they are

born, and recognise their mothers' voices from hearing in the womb. As Teachers of the Deaf we know that the first four years of life are the most crucial for learning a language. But in Nicaragua, most children don't start school until the age of five or six. Depending where you live, there is either no system for identifying deaf children,



*Oliver gets his first hearing aids. Choosing earmoulds which are "best fit" in the clinic in Jinotega*

or the system is extremely weak and haphazard. Yet if you can identify a child with hearing loss when they are young, it is possible to provide language, either through signing or with hearing aids, or both.

Early intervention is the bread and butter of deaf education, to develop communication ... the early years are much more important than age five to 18. But sadly, it barely exists here. Nicaragua urgently needs support to establish and strengthen its Early Identification Programme, to take advantage of those magical early years when children can learn so quickly. If deaf children can be identified young, then they can be helped. Even if the identified children have little chance of getting a hearing aid, they and their parents could then be taught to sign. I am working on ideas for how an Early Identification Programme could be supported, working alongside Mayflower. If any reader can offer help or suggestions please get in touch.

The brigade from Oregon also identified that there could be much better training of teachers here. It would be great to be able to design a programme for teachers who have deaf children in their classrooms. That is another project I have on my radar. I was flattered, but also intimidated, to be invited to give a morning's training at the university of Estelí. Over a hundred mainstream teachers come for training sessions on Saturdays. I could talk forever about the theme "Deafness and Education", but not giving the presentation in Spanish! Having worked on the content and translation for weeks, I was able to deliver the

presentation successfully. The additional benefit was at the end of the session, several of the teachers came up to me to tell me about deaf children they had in their classes, in rural communities, who were receiving little or no help.

At the end of my second article published in the March 2017 edition, I said: "My vision is to bring communication to deaf children living in the rural areas, by identifying them and then provide a mechanism for local professionals to work with their families". So, by giving this lecture at the university, I am part way there. I now know about a lot more children who are deaf, and where they are. Next time I write I am hoping that I will have been able to fulfil the second part of my vision.

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*Kathy Owston is a Teacher of the Deaf at St Thomas' Hospital on a three year career break in Nicaragua. Kathy is a recent recipient of a grant following the change in the status of the Mary Grace Wilkins Travelling Scholarship and this article is part of her reporting back to BATOD.*

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