

# Finding my niche in Nicaragua

**Kathy Owston** provides a further update on her ongoing work in Nicaragua partly supported by BATOD

This weekend I celebrate my two-year anniversary in Nicaragua, Central America – another Easter, with colourful processions, drummers passing our door at 5am, the faithful escorting statues of Jesus carrying his cross. These folk have to get up before the dawn, but at least they escape the clinging heat which envelops us later in the day. Temperatures here in Leon reach 40 degrees C (over 100 degrees F) by the middle of the day. Whilst in Britain I heard that you still have snow. This is my fourth article about the work I am doing here, supporting deaf pupils in Nicaragua. Many thanks to BATOD for making a lot of this work possible, through the award last year, of the Mary Grace Wilkins Travelling Scholarship.

Last year I said, “My vision is to bring communication to deaf children living in the rural areas, by identifying them and then providing a mechanism for local professionals to work with their families”. I have been working towards this dream by linking up with a US-funded NGO called Mayflower Medical Outreach (MMO). I am now a long-term volunteer with their programme and have joined their Management Board. I spend one week every month in Jinotega, where MMO has an excellent hostel for deaf students. This small highland town is a five-hour bumpy bus-ride from where I live, in Leon. The hostel has places for up to thirty deaf students from rural areas to come and live there during term-time. The students are in full-time education. Younger pupils attend two primary classes of deaf students, being taught in the local special school (the school for all children with disabilities). Older pupils attend mainstream secondary school, supported by two trained interpreters in Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL). These two interpreters cover four classes.

MMO was founded following a visit to Nicaragua in 1998 by ENT surgeon James Saunders from Oklahoma USA. He and his interpreter, Mark Falk, established MMO to support all aspects of hearing loss in the north of Nicaragua. Twenty years later, they have built Ear, Nose & Throat and Audiology clinics in two towns. Brigades come from the USA twice a year and have provided hundreds of surgeries, and thousands of hearing aids – a brigade is a group of skilled individuals who come and provide their services free for a week, working flat out, and includes surgeons, audiologists, speech and language therapists and deaf educators. MMO also provided critical training to



*Jairo gets his first hearing aids at the clinic in Jinotega at the age of 16*



*Pupils in Esteli, working hard, now they all have hearing aids*



*Kathy shows Cristal photos of deaf students in the hostel in Jinotega. Her younger cousin interprets for her, using their home signs*

local ENT providers, primary care doctors, and a group of audiometric technicians.

I have now accompanied two of the MMO brigades. Most of the deaf children that were seen did not have any local access to deaf education because they live in remote rural villages in the mountains. Nicaragua is the poorest country in Latin America and the government has no capacity to provide special education in these rural areas. It was from this that the idea of the Mayflower hostel was born. The deaf pupils live in the hostel during term time, attend school in Jinotega, and have an after-school educational programme in the hostel, taught by trained Nicaraguan teachers who use NSL.

MMO has made tremendous progress in these last two decades. They have a good relationship with the Ministries of Health and Education and there is growing recognition that hearing loss is the most common disability of children in Nicaragua. We have big dreams. We are working on expanding our training programme to become a demonstration site to train local deaf educators and speech therapists. We have been collaborating with Manos Unidas, another USA-based NGO, to write fundraising proposals for the work we hope to do – training workshops, a deaf education teacher

training programme and an early years group for young newly-identified deaf children. However, that is all for the future. Let me tell you about the past year, and how things have been going.

For nine months I lived in Esteli and supported a class of students in the special school who are deaf. None of them had ever had their hearing tested, so no-one knew their level of deafness. Through MMO we could conduct hearing tests and now have audiograms for them all, allowing us to identify seven who could benefit from hearing aids. This group has now received their first amplification – but at the ages of 9, 11, 13 and 16. It might well be too late for most of them to learn an auditory language for communication. However, at least they are able to gain some benefit from becoming aware of environmental sounds. Jairo is now riding his bicycle on the roads and can hear the traffic noise. He is delighted with his new-found freedom. Gisselle had been asking for hearing aids for years, and now has the biggest smile I've seen. Gerald could now prove, with his audiogram, that he was deaf and so could enter the national Deaf Olympics. He won four gold medals at the last event! Gerald was fifteen years old when he came to live with a cousin in the town. He had spent all of his life previously in the countryside with his direct family, hidden away. He had never been to school and had no communication. He had spent every day in the fields doing manual work. Now he is a confident communicator with his deaf peers and an acclaimed sportsman.

The diagnosis of deafness had been made for these pupils because they had failed to learn to talk by the age of six, and so were put in the class for deaf students. But when



*Moises and Angela, the youngest pupils at the hostel, enjoying learning through play*



Visiting Cristal in her house in rural Mirafior. Two adults and three children live in this house

we tested 9-year-old Samir's hearing in the audiology clinic, we found he had normal hearing in both ears! He had not learnt to speak, but could communicate well using NSL, Nicaraguan Sign Language. He is a bright boy, especially good at maths. A new diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome has been made and his parents are questioning his school placement. Shouldn't he be educated in the local hearing school? However, how would he communicate expressively, if he left the class with his deaf peers?

Following the last brigade from the USA, we received a letter from a 26-year-old deaf mother, Karina Luna. She wrote to thank MMO for providing her with her first hearing aid:

"I have had a great dream since I was a child, because since I did not hear well, there were few things and words I could hear. I tried to find a way to communicate with others. I am from a very poor family. They never knew where to take me to solve my hearing problems. Many people made fun of me and called me deaf and dumb. But on Thursday February 15th this year a brigade foreign, from my dreams, donated a hearing aid. At the time I did not know what to say. I could only say some cold words, I say cold because a "thank you" is not enough for me to say for such a great gift. Today I have a month of being a mother and that Thursday, when I came home with the hearing aid, I heard crying, laughing, whispering clearly to my baby without having to go near my ear ... I know I need another one for the other ear, but for me it is enough since now I hear super better. Thank you very much for having fulfilled one of my greatest dreams".

Although Nicaragua has a free health-care system, it is very basic. There is no provision of hearing aids for adults or children. To buy a hearing aid here would cost about \$400. Most people only earn about \$2 a day. Even a teacher only earns \$250 a month. So, buying a hearing aid is out of the question for most folk.

But cost is not the only impediment for families with deaf

children to send their children to the Mayflower hostel. Six months ago, a small team of us went to visit some deaf children we had heard about who were living in rural communities. We hoped to persuade the parents to send their children to study in the hostel in Jinotega. First, we visited Cristal and her family in Mirafior. Her teacher had told us that he had a deaf child in his third-grade class. "She doesn't speak and I have no idea if she understands the curriculum. She copies down what I write on the board, but I have no way of assessing if she knows what it is about". Cristal was initially very shy to meet us, but soon was poring over the

photos on my iPad of the hostel and the deaf students who live there. She could communicate with a cousin who helped interpret for us, using their system of home signs. She was keen to learn more about our programme. However, her mother and grandfather were not convinced, and they haven't been to visit yet to find out more, despite several follow-up phone calls of persuasion.

A similar story for Jaime, 11 years old, the only deaf boy in a mainstream school, and Moises Alexander, 6, a school refuser, whom we went to see in San Ramon. Given the information of a possible source of help in learning to communicate and get an education, their families remain very suspicious, and don't want to "regalar" (gift) their children to our project. Of the seven new children who started at the MMO hostel at the beginning of this school year, only three have stayed longer than the first three weeks. The children themselves were happy and wanted to stay, but their parents or grandparents decided that they couldn't live without them at home, as they were needed for the household chores, or they thought they were still too young, or just couldn't trust having them live so far away from home.

So, a lot still to do in my final year here, and a lot more to learn. The cultural differences and obstacles to developing and providing an education for deaf children remain. However, a lot has been achieved in the last two years. Onwards and upwards! I've found my niche, but with several setbacks along the way.



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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