

Nicaragua in crisis – thwarting our hopes and plans for Deaf Education

A final report from **Kathy Owston** on her work to improve the lives of deaf children in Nicaragua

I am sad to report that this will be my last article about my work with the deaf community in in Nicaragua as I have had to return to the UK six months earlier than planned. There has been very little about Nicaragua and the political unrest on the news here in the UK. In brief, there was a peaceful uprising of the people in April, who took to the streets to protest against the dictatorial regime of Daniel Ortega and his FSLN party. The government had practised cronyism and suppression of any opposition since 2007. The marches of the unarmed and peaceful opposition, including women, disabled people and children, were met with government forces who shot at their own people, killing an estimated 500 and injuring thousands in the past 6 months. Many students and protestors have been disappeared or imprisoned. Approximately 30,000 have fled to the neighbouring country of Costa Rica as refugees. Almost all tourism has ceased, as hotels, bars and restaurants have closed down. Nicaragua is a very different country now, from when I last wrote, in the article that was published in the May edition, when I was full of optimism.

In June & July, in Leon where I lived, our street was blockaded by walls made of paving stones at each end. Barricades like these were built by local people to try to protect themselves from drive-by police, shooting



Burning tyres and undergrowth were used for barricades in Leon at the start of the uprising (Photo credit Steve Lewis)

randomly at people. This was a very frightening time, seeing armed and masked men hiding behind the walls of our house. No public services operated, no rubbish collected for over five weeks in 36-degree heat. You can imagine the stench and the flies. It became impossible for me to work. I could no longer leave Leon to travel to the deaf hostel in Jinotega, where I had been spending a week every month. In Jinotega there were running battles in the streets, right outside the deaf hostel. The staff had to send the students home to their rural areas for two months, to ensure their safety. All the schools were closed in the country during this time. Our in-country director of MMO (Mayflower Medical Outreach) Monica Falk, had to flee back to her home country in a hurry, after threats of kidnap.

So, all our plans for Deaf Education in Nicaragua came to a halt. This was so saddening and frustrating, just as various hopes and ideas were coming to fruition. These were some of them:

- In January I had visited Gallaudet University, the only University for deaf students in the world, and had negotiated a programme for three deaf summer interns from the USA to come to Nicaragua. They would have lived and worked in the MMO deaf hostel for several months, training the teaching staff in deaf education pedagogy and bonding with the deaf Nicaraguan students. With the unrest, they all cancelled.
- We had just appointed an experienced Nicaraguan teacher to take the role as Education Director. With the closure of the hostel and the schools, he lost his job, after only two months in post.
- We had submitted a proposal for expanding the hostel, to build a Centre of Excellence for training future



Kathy and Monica at the Mayflower MMO hostel two months before the troubles began



The New-born hearing screening programme before it was suspended in Jinotega Hospital



Teachers of the Deaf in Nicaragua. Now no-one is going to invest money or resources in the country, for the foreseeable future.

- MMO has sent brigades to Nicaragua for many years providing ENT and Audiology services, training doctors and audiologists, performing surgeries, fitting hearing aids, and supporting Deaf Education. I had worked with two of the previous brigades in 2017 and February this year. When the unrest broke out, all of the visitors for 2018 cancelled. So many people who were preparing to share their skills and contribute to helping deaf people were thwarted.
- A much-needed early detection of deafness programme has been halted. MMO had trained local health workers to screen the new-born babies in one pilot rural area, El Cua, and were testing the hearing of at-risk babies born in the hospital of Jinotega. They had been provided with OEA (Otoacoustic Emissions) hand-held machines, and were collecting data and planning follow ups, for

those who were referred from the screen. I helped with the training in November last year. It is usual for deafness in Nicaragua not to be diagnosed until the ages of four to six years old, when a child doesn't develop speech. An early-detection programme was going to be such a bonus for appropriate and timely intervention. However, it is presently unsafe for people to travel, and the American audiologists who were providing the training have not been able to return for the follow-up.

- The screening programme which we had planned to identify primary aged school children with hearing loss is now also on hold. Training of the Nicaraguan workers took place, despite the odds, when the troubles began in May. Three students learned how to use portable audiometers and perform tympanometry. However, the trainers became trapped in Leon with us, barricaded in to the city, with no transport to get back to their communities. They ended up staying in our house with us for a week, with no idea when they would be able to



Moisés enjoying speech and language therapy



Katerin being fitted with her first hearing aids. We were hoping she would have undergone cochlear implant surgery this year.



Students learn how to do tympanometry for the primary school screening project which has been suspended for now. Photo credit Steve Lewis



The headteacher of the hostel for deaf students kisses Marjory goodbye as she leaves Jinotega for safety reasons. The hostel was closed for two months as barricades were built (see background of photo) and fighting broke out. All the pupils were sent home.

leave and return to their families. Two of them had young children they had left with relatives. Everyone was very anxious.

- And finally, we were on the brink of providing something that has never been available before in Nicaragua. There is no state provision of hearing aids in Nicaragua, let alone the possibility of having a cochlear implant. When the brigade of audiologists came in February, we saw a three-year old called Katerin, who had lost her hearing at a year old. I assessed her speech and language potential and we submitted her case to the implant company Cochlear, who subsequently agreed to donate an implant for her. We had cochlear Implant surgery planned for her with American MMO surgeon James Saunders, alongside newly trained Nicaraguan surgeon, Karen Mojica. However, with all the troubles, the family have fled to Costa Rica. We are hopeful that the surgery might still one day go ahead for her, and rehabilitation in Costa Rica can be sought. However, it is really now a long shot for this little girl to develop her listening skills and oral potential.

So, a very disappointing end to my time in Nicaragua. After having learned so much about Deaf Education (well, mainly the lack of it), to have all these initiatives thwarted was difficult to take. The whole country has gone one step forwards, but ten steps backwards. It is now a country of fear and oppression. People like teachers or health workers who took part in the opposition marches have been sacked from their jobs, while others have fled to Costa Rica.

Since August however there has been a return of sorts to peace in the streets. Most of the schools have reopened, and pupils are returning to their studies. The Mayflower hostel has reopened for

the deaf students, who have returned from their rural areas to finish the school year. In September Monica came back from exile to continue to lead the programme.

So, a major setback for the program, yes. But Nicaraguan history is full of setbacks – floods, earthquakes, droughts and dictatorships, the Nicaraguans have endured it all. And they will endure this. The hostel in Jinotega is now open again and working hard to catch up for time. The pupils will hopefully pass their exams and graduate the school year. It is hoped that in December three of the teenagers will be the first ever from the hostel to graduate from secondary education. MMO has been supporting Deaf Education in the country for twenty years, and will see this situation out. Over the years local people were trained, and today they are still working in audiology labs in Esteli and Jinotega. The children are resilient and I am sure they will take this in their stride.

My husband Steve and I are now back in the UK and settling in to a quieter life. It is a relief to feel safe, and to get away from the extreme heat and the mosquitoes. Part of our hearts remain firmly with the people we worked with over the past three years. It was a great opportunity, and always fascinating, and we are left with fantastic memories. We wish the Nicaraguan people well and hope that better things will come in the future. ■



Kathy Owston is a Teacher of the Deaf at St Thomas' Hospital and has been until recently on a 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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