

# A Ugandan education

Following a life-changing visit to Africa in 2010 Ceilidh O'Sullivan embarked on a mission to improve the lives of deaf children in Uganda



**D**eafness in Uganda is seen as a disease and a curse. Many deaf children are locked away, hidden in homes, caged, tied to a tree and even starved. Having a deaf child brings shame on the parents, family and community.

As a 19-year-old deaf woman I decided to go to Uganda to learn how deaf children lived. Arriving there in May 2010 from my native Australia, I worked alongside a lovely man, Joel, the Director of Boanerges Deaf Initiative, which is a registered non-profit organisation based in Uganda. We worked together teaching deaf children (as a Teacher Aide in Australia I am seen and respected as a Teacher of the Deaf in Uganda).

Having no car for transport we walked around the communities of Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. I met about ten deaf children from the area and taught and helped them in school. Joel had started a school with free attendance, initially under a tree and then moving into a borrowed garage. When I came along we worked in an old unfinished school building. There were no doors or windows so when it rained we would get wet. Later we moved to better facilities where I and a few friends paid rent for a time. We kept this school free of charge, as the children and families are very poor. We try our best to provide for the teachers' and children's lunches and needs. We encourage families to try to provide something for their child going to school – some may bring a bag of rice, or something that the kids need, others may help with money.

I visited the deaf children in their homes and ate with them, met their families and saw how they lived. One boy named Davis lived with his auntie and grandmother. They struggled to live in a small brick home. I saw where Davis lived and where his bed was. He had an old corn bag on the floor in a dark room. He had nothing else but the black shoes and few bits of clothing that he wore. I was moved and it was very hard to see him live like this. Davis became very sick so we took him to hospital to be treated for malaria and typhoid. He had worms as well so we gave him tablets to help. When I first met Davis he was sad and unwell. Now he comes to school every day and I have seen a big transformation in his life in a short time. Davis is a happy boy, with a unique love and a caring attitude to others. Under Boanerges Deaf Initiative's training, Davis's auntie has graduated as a sign language interpreter and a Teacher of the Deaf.

There are many deaf children just like Davis, living in even worse conditions. I hear stories and have met children who were locked up and treated like animals. Joel and his team have done whatever they could with little or nothing. In two months of being in Uganda I saw young lives being transformed, communities changed and families learning to love and accept their deaf child.

When I returned to Australia I was torn. There was so much to do in Uganda and I remained in contact with my friends and continued my support for their rent and needs. Joel came to Australia in late 2011 to visit me



and connect with some Australian supporters. We have been good friends for a few years, and we decided to marry! It is a big step for both of us as we are from different countries and cultures, and he is hearing and I am deaf. But we are both so happy and nothing will stop us.

Joel returned home and I remained in Australia to continue working and supporting our work for deaf children. I visited Uganda in December 2011 to set up a home for the future. It was the school holidays so I only met some children as some had gone home to their villages. We bought land just outside Kampala in the hope of building a new school there.

Being in Uganda again I was able to recognise the needs of the children, and I was remembered by them all and by their communities too. I was thanked for coming back and for my support, but I wish I could do much more as there are many children in other parts of Uganda in need. I know of one school my fiancé set up in the far north of Uganda where there are about 90 deaf children and one Teacher of the Deaf working voluntarily. We are thankful for our teachers as they love deaf children and want to see a bright future for them. At the moment we operate one school in Kampala and hope to provide something similar in other locations in the future.

I had my mind and heart set to support my fiancé and the deaf children in Uganda. I returned to work as a Teacher Aide and sign language teacher in Australia. I tried to spread the word about the work we do and

I contacted some clubs and organisations and started to network through social media and a website which my fiancé gave me. He called it Deaf Hearing because I am deaf but with the help of my cochlear implant I'm also like a hearing person. We decided to use the little piece of land in Kampala to build a school there as rent was expensive. We kicked off the building with what I had in savings along with some donations from our long-time supporters. I spoke at clubs and to different people. Some people came forward and helped. In such a short time with the little that we had, a school began to be built. We hope to complete it soon, as the children are now in school learning.

I got married in August this year and plan to move to Uganda. Joel and I will operate schools and get involved in many other projects. Support in continuing our journey would be much appreciated. We hope to find sponsors for our Teachers of the Deaf as they volunteer to help us. AUS \$100 a month can provide for a teacher's needs. Deaf children are in need of sponsorship also – AUS \$50 can feed a child and help with basic needs.

I look forward to being in Uganda for a lifetime's work of saving and educating deaf children and their families, and to being a wife to one good man behind all of these great happenings in Uganda.

Check out the websites for Deaf Hearing and Boanerges Deaf Initiative and learn more about the work we do in Uganda: [www.deafhearing.org](http://www.deafhearing.org) and [www.boanergesdeafinitiative.org/](http://www.boanergesdeafinitiative.org/)

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