



## Just when you think it's all over...

Marian Nash discovered that retiring didn't lead to settling down to a quiet life but to an exciting new life working with deaf children in Egypt

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'I can't speak Arabic and I don't know Egyptian Sign Language, but can I help?' So began my email to the Deaf Unit in Cairo in September 2012. After thirty-nine years of working, first in Surrey, then with the Deaf Children's Communication Aids Project/Provision (DCCAP) and finally in Brent, I retired at the end of August 2011. I thought my long career with deaf children was over. I believe now that God had other plans. Egypt was brought to my attention every day for six months before I realised I should actually do something. I contacted the charity Embrace the Middle East and was given information about the Deaf Unit. Therefore I decided to email the address at the bottom of the fact sheet. The answer from the Director, Rev Faraj Hanna, was simple. 'Yes. Come and help with Christmas.' So I went...

I discovered that the Deaf Unit is not a few deaf children attached to a hearing school, but rather an organisation governing several enterprises, not all on site. There is a boarding school for the deaf; a Deaf Club; a Deaf Church; an audiology clinic; a Vocational Training Centre; and Community Based Rehabilitation to help Deaf families and their children in poor areas.

Three per cent of the population in Egypt is deaf due

to intermarriage and disease, ie 3.4 million people. The doctors in the hospitals identify a child with a hearing loss and provide audiograms and IQ profiles. The options of education for deaf children are either a school for the deaf, a local school without support, if the parents have the money for the fees, or nothing. There are 103 government specialist schools for the deaf where the teaching staff use auditory/aural methods. The Deaf Unit has the only private primary boarding school for deaf children with a bi-lingual approach using Egyptian Sign Language and Arabic. English is on the curriculum too! This centre was established in 1982 and there are sixty-five pupils in Years 1 to 8. It is licensed for Christians and Muslims. There are twenty-seven staff including teachers, house mothers, accountants, cooks and security guards. Most classes have a ratio of one teacher to eight pupils. The students are mainly grouped by age or ability. Some of the pupils wear hearing aids, but most do not. The teachers deliver speech therapy too. Most pupils board from 9am on Sunday morning until 1pm on Thursday. Others stay over the weekend due to the distance they have to travel. The parents bring the students to school and stay on for another hour when they are taught to sign by the Director and the deaf teacher in order to communicate with their children.



When asked how the Deaf Unit was funded, Rev Faraj answered 'God provides'. The fees are a fraction of the actual cost and he depends on funds from outside organisations to function at the moment. He raises Deaf Awareness among the local businesses, churches and charities, so receives some donations from them. International aid organisations also give him grants. He asks the parents to donate rice, macaroni and oil to provide the staple diet. The lack of money becomes obvious when you see pupils searching for their only stub of pencil, which has fallen on the floor. The staff are aware that they may not always get their salaries paid.

What struck me most on my first visit was the fact that there must be hundreds of deaf adults in Egypt who have never had an education and may not be able to communicate. The work of the Deaf Club is vital in bringing some of these people together into a community. They meet on a Friday afternoon and evening. The men play football together. Then, if they want to, they can get support for their faith through the Deaf Church, where there are deaf lay ministers trained and nurtured by the Rev Faraj to assist him in his role as their priest. The children at the school attend the Deaf Club and the Deaf church and so have plenty of opportunities to mix with deaf adults.

Wondering what I could do to help, it soon became clear that my years of experience as a manager were very useful to Rev Faraj in his running of the school. He asked me to become his mentor. Fortunately, he speaks good English. We Skype once a week to discuss any issues that have arisen or are forthcoming. My church has also been able to help with the financial situation and I held an organ-athon as a fund-raising event when I was sponsored to play the church organ continuously for one hundred minutes and managed forty-eight hymns in that time.

I have just returned from my second visit to Cairo, the purpose of which was to help with the appraisal of the teachers. It is amazing how much you can observe in a class when you do not understand what is being signed and spoken. I was then able to feed back some general points to the teachers as Rev Faraj interpreted for me in Arabic and they asked questions. They were very interested and responsive.

The room where I stay is opposite the girls' dormitory, so I visit them and the boys regularly and so get to know the children. They enjoy teaching me some signs. I adapted the well-known story of a bear hunt for Egypt.

So arming myself with images from the internet and carrying out some actions to accompany the signs, we went on a lion hunt. We walked through the papyrus, jumped over the canal, struggled through sand and climbed the hill to the lion's cave. After feeling the lion's nose and whiskers, we ran back the way we came very quickly to much laughter. The signs are based on the one-handed American Sign Language and mostly different from any that I know. The most common is the international sign for 'I love you', which the children use as soon as my camera emerges. I also communicated with the pupils through paper and pencil. They taught me how to write my name in Arabic and wrote out all their names and birthdays. Another activity, which engaged them, was when I drew a face and they drew the body.

I know there are deaf people all over the world but I have been drawn to a country where a third of the population is illiterate and no-one is guaranteed a place in a school. The Deaf Unit provides a happy, caring environment, where deaf children can communicate through sign language and thrive. Sadly, this establishment is in financial difficulty. Some of the parents cannot afford to contribute any money at all. If income is not generated, then these students may have to leave, so fee-paying scholars can take their place. I feel that God has placed these children on my heart.

*Marian Nash is a retired Teacher of the Deaf.*

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in association with  
**Burwood Park Foundation**

## Deafness and Autistic Spectrum Disorder Training day on Communication

**Thursday 13 February 2014**

10.00-4.00  
at

The Bridge Conference Centre  
251 Hungerford Road  
**London**  
N7 9LD

BATOD members £55  
Non members £75

Enquiries to  
**burwood@ewing-foundation.org.uk**

## **BATOD Magazine**

This article was published in the January 2014 issue.

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