

# Kenyan school days

Inspired by her friend's work at Kamatungu School for the Deaf in Kenya, **Rosemary Gardner** took time out from her busy schedule to visit and lend a hand



Some of them had had hearing until they lost it and so I felt there must be language to build on. I began working on a fascinating project to get the children properly tested and fitted with hearing aids. I was also anxious to make this a sustainable project so that if and when Helen leaves, it could carry on. I began to fundraise as much as I could, also setting to work on how we could carry out what we needed to do.

For a while, I felt as if I was going round in circles and wondered if I was ever going to achieve what I wanted. First, I discovered an audiologist in Nairobi who said he would travel out to Marimanti to do

Some years ago, a friend and colleague, Helen Moorehead, left her job as Teacher of the Deaf in a unit for the hearing-impaired here in Northern Ireland to work in Kenya. Quite by accident, she discovered in a remote and extremely poor area, a high number of deaf children with no available provision. Due to the treatment of malaria with quinine, there was a particularly high incidence of deafness. For most of the children, it was literally a choice between death through lack of treatment or deafness through the treatment. What shocked Helen was the fact that these children were often either rejected and literally cast out by their tribes and families or beaten continually to force them to speak or to 'beat the deafness' out of them. In 2006 when Helen discovered these unwanted children, many of them did not even know they had a name.

Helen's dream, when she started, was to build a school where the children could board, as most of them would have had to walk for a number of hours to and from their homes. She started off in 2007 with five children and one teacher (herself); in January 2012, she had 49 on the roll and six teachers. The school is now recognised and registered by the Government of Kenya and there is a Headmaster, with Helen as Director. The children communicate by and are educated in Kenyan Sign Language, which is a little like American or International Sign Language.

Two years ago, I discovered that the children had not yet been tested or fitted with hearing aids and were therefore not able to access sound or speech.

the testing, take the ear-mould impressions and fit the aids. However, we quickly found out that he was 'on the make', charged a phenomenal amount for doing very little and was also not good at working with children. So it was back to the drawing board. After months of corresponding with many people, we suddenly got the break we needed. Helen discovered that an education officer in the Marimanti area called Maitima who had some



training in testing and in making ear-moulds could do the testing if I could get him an audiometer. Wonderful! I also found a contact in Northern Ireland who told me about the Sound and Sight workshop attached to Durham Prison where they could recondition old hearing aids for us free of charge and, when this was done, 50 were sent to me. Maitima proceeded to test each child and their audiograms were posted to me. I looked at the



hearing aids, put them through a test box and attempted to advise which aid might be appropriate for each child.

The other aspect of this project was the fact that in such a remote area, batteries are extremely hard to buy. After some investigations, I found a company in South Africa that provided solar-powered battery chargers and batteries to go with them (this was the most expensive part of the project).

And so we decided to go out to the school and visit, which is what I did last July, accompanied by my



**Helen – a small person with huge vision**

patient and supportive husband Paul. The journey to the school was long, dusty and tiring. We stayed in a guest house near the school which was, to be honest, very basic. It was winter there but it seemed very hot to us. And the food was... well, different, but what a privilege it was for us to see first hand what Helen had achieved and what an inspiration she is! It was truly wonderful to see the children communicating so well and I began to learn a little Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) too. In Helen's class, the children's understanding of grammatical structures in their writing of English was most impressive. At the request of Helen and the

Headmaster, I spent the week testing the children and training the teachers to use the audiometer. Paul spent the week painting and planting, which was a great change for him from his usual job as an optician! I had taken another 100 hearing aids with me (again sent from Durham Prison) and I attempted to test the children's aided listening. I was able to see the set-up where the children put the chargers out in the sun each morning and I tried to encourage the practical use of them. The children were so thrilled to have the hearing aids and Helen told us that when they were first given them many became very emotional that they could 'hear' again and people looking on said it was a miracle. I left a list of children I felt would benefit



from seeing an ear, nose and throat surgeon as there were a number who had conductive losses superimposed on the sensorineural loss. I hoped that this would be paid for by the Hearing Aid Fund. However, I am not sure that this has been done as yet. At the end of the week, I used a music resource to show how to encourage aided listening to develop.

We plan to go out again this summer and I would like to focus on developing aided listening. We have a number of speech trainers to take out (again supplied by Durham Prison) and I want to demonstrate a few activities the teachers could do. Any practical suggestions, resources or thoughts on this would be gratefully received. I would also like to know a little more KSL – but to my surprise Amazon does not do KSL books!

For our BATOD Northern Ireland summer meeting this year in May, we are planning to hold a dinner and raise money for the school. If you would like to come to be part of this evening, we would be delighted to see you! Come along to support us and spend a few days in Northern Ireland!

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