



# Experiencing Volunteer ToD Opportunities in Uganda

Chris Haigh reports on what she learned about education for deaf children in Uganda during her two weeks working with Mission Direct

Have you even fancied the challenge of teaching not only in another culture but also in a different sign language without the use of modern day technology? It's certainly not a prospect for the faint-hearted! However, if work sabbaticals aren't available or indeed affordable and you're not yet of retirement age or are willing to commit to longer-term volunteer work with organisations such as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), then perhaps a two-week teacher training programme may be just the 'introductory experience' that you're looking for to put your teaching expertise to good practical use.

This last summer break I did just that: working as a volunteer Teacher of the Deaf with the British charity 'Mission Direct' in the Rukunjiri District of South-West Uganda, about an eight-hour drive away from the capital city, Kampala. In fact, the whole family went with my 14 year old daughter involved in Mission Direct's building programme, constructing additional dorms to accommodate more deaf children at Kitazigurukwa Deaf Unit which is attached to a 230 place mainstream primary school.

## Background

Whilst the Ugandan government provides free mainstream education for all children, there still remains little state run provision for deaf or disabled children. Within Uganda, disabled people are generally regarded as being of less value than able-bodied people, and most would generally be expected to stay at home in their villages to help out with farming or household chores, where possible. In a country where 38% of Ugandans still live on less than \$1.25 per day,

educating deaf or disabled children is not seen by many families as a priority.

Even though the majority of deaf people remain uneducated in rural areas, a small percentage of deaf children can access primary education in residential Schools for the Deaf and some inclusive mainstream schools, where the medium of instruction is generally in SSE using Ugandan Sign Language (USL) derived signs. Most schools are funded via church-based and voluntary organisations such as the Ugandan-based Chilli Children's Project which, through donations and partnership working with Mission Direct, finances the building and running costs of Kitazigurukwa Deaf and Special Needs units where I taught the children this summer.

Prior to the first government-aided secondary school Wakiso Secondary School for the Deaf, opening in 2006, deaf students had to travel widely to access secondary education in deaf residential schools within Kenya. Since then, secondary units attached to mainstream secondary schools such as Ngora High School, within the Kumi district of Eastern Uganda, have been established and serve as a good model of inclusive education whereby teaching and support staff include Deaf adults, who serve as language role models, work alongside trained Teachers of the Deaf from Kyambogo State University, Kampala.

The University's SEN Department has also produced the first official Ugandan Sign Language Dictionary (Busingye et al., 2006), a must-have teaching resource for potential volunteers! Whilst Ugandan Sign Language (USL) was recognised as a minority language within the



Teaching at Kitazigurukwa Deaf Unit



Chris with David Busingye, who is deaf, at Kitazigurukwa Deaf Unit

1995 Constitution, it is not homogeneous across Uganda's various geographical regions, exhibiting variations in handshape parameter; however, these variations are mutually intelligible (Lule, 2001). USL also utilises the one-handed American Sign Language (ASL) alphabet, originally brought to Deaf Africans by the American Andrew Foster, who settled and established many of the Schools for the Deaf across West Africa in 1956.

### Typical Day of a Teaching Volunteer

There were six teachers and five volunteer builders who had signed up for the 2-week July/Aug project with two to three 40 minute teaching sessions running for a half-day morning or afternoon over a six-day total period. English is the medium of instruction and the school day starts at 9am and finishes at 5pm with a longer mid-day lunch break for children to return home for some cooked vegetables.

Whilst the mainstream classes were large, consisting of around 40 – 50 children in each year group, there are presently only six profoundly deaf children at the deaf unit (ranging in age from 6 – 13 years) and nine SEN children taught in a separate classroom (mornings only). The initial challenge was that of communication, understanding USL and the general lack of learning resources, all of which had to be brought over from the UK. I was thankful for the help and support of my Ugandan counterparts, Charity (hearing teacher) and David (Deaf role model) helping out with the signs. My teaching focus, both within the deaf unit and in the mainstream, was on story-telling through the use of interactive story sacks – 'Handa's Surprise', 'Elmer', 'Rumble in the Jungle' and 'Zimani's Drum' (a Malawian legend about the adventures of two brothers, one of whom was disabled through blindness) were my main interests with corresponding literacy and art-based follow-on activities.



Each teacher was assigned to a class/age group and specialist teacher – Ugandan primary teachers generally specialise within a subject area such as literacy or numeracy and then teach across age-groups from pre-primary to Year 7 (up to the age of 13 years). Since many village children (and a high percentage of orphans) start school only when their parents/sponsors can afford the school fees for the cost of uniforms, books and toilet paper, it is not unusual for older pupils to be educated in the same class as much younger ones, progressing into the next class only when they finally pass the end of year school exams.

Many do not progress on to secondary school because the fees are often too expensive for rural households. Instead, without financial sponsorship, they usually return to work on the land with some progressing into some sort of skill-based vocational training programmes in early teenage years.

At the weekend, the teachers had the option of joining in with the building teams, perhaps to paint an interior classroom wall, or being involved in presenting pre-planned teacher INSET or, as I did, just tidying up the classroom and arranging wall displays of the children's work. One enthusiastic teacher volunteered to share his passion for teaching Tai-Kwando self-defence. Opportunities were also provided for teaching in other primary schools within the locality. One afternoon was spent at Nykibale Primary School, a short walking distance away, where there was a deaf unit for 50 deaf children spread over seven classes (6 – 13 years) headed up by Mrs Betty Naturinda and staffed by ten Teachers of the Deaf.

### Other Organised Activities

There was a full programme of activities provided for the volunteers throughout the two-week project which involved visiting various partner organisations such as the work of Mosaic Vision (a charity which looks after child-headed/orphan households), the Chilli Children's Trust (a charity providing an income-stream to families of disabled children through growing chilli export crops) and their Life-skills Clinic (providing physiotherapy and occupational therapy services to disabled children). Information talks on 'Being Ugandan' and a local African traditional dancing show were also highlights. The trip culminated in a visit to the Queen Elizabeth Game Reserve for a day of safari, including a two-hour boat trip to view grazing hippos and African wild-life.

### Audiology Services

Audiology services (and trained Audiologists) remain limited outside of Kampala. The British-built Mulago National Referral Hospital, Kampala, houses an Audiology Department; however, Kampala's massive



Chris with Betty Naturinda from Nyakibale Primary School



*Teaching the deaf children at Nyakibale Primary School*

city population explosion (now estimated at 1.7m) has meant that healthcare provision, and ENT services in particular, have not always been prioritised or received sufficient funding for expansion. The recently constructed Naguru Hospital (China-Uganda Friendship Hospital) has no trained Audiology/ENT professional available to run the newly built department there.

During my stay, I had the opportunity to visit the privately-run Kampala Audiology and Speech Centre (established ten years ago) to meet Josephine Likechom, one of three Audiologists working alongside Fiona Kamywa and Edward Turituwenka. Recently they have received training from the Netherlands in ABR techniques to complement the range of their audiological services provided – OAEs, tympanometry, distraction testing, play/pure tone audiometry, earmould impression taking and manufacture and their hearing aid fitting/repairs service.

Josephine explained that within Kampala, 'Gradually attitudes towards deafness and acceptance of hearing



*Josephine Likechom (Audiologist) and Irene Nabatanzi (Office Manager) from the Kampala Audiology and Speech Centre*

aid provision and management are changing and much younger children are coming forward for testing.' So much so that the team are thinking of expanding audiology services into other larger towns such as Mbale in western Uganda, which would be good for the deaf population of nearby Rukunjiri district.

#### **In conclusion...**

Mission Direct has mobilised over 3,000 volunteers in building schools, clinics, homes and training local people through its volunteer teaching, medical and IT teams working alongside in-country partner organisations

across a range of developing countries, impacting upon the lives of individuals and communities to make a real and lasting difference. Signing up for a two-week volunteer opportunity will be life-changing with teaching opportunities available in Kenya, Cambodia, Zambia and Uganda (Kumi and Rukunjiri Districts). There is no age-limit for volunteers and families with children over the age of seven years are most welcome. For further information contact: [www.missiondirect.org.uk](http://www.missiondirect.org.uk)

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