



# Working with deaf people in Nicaragua

Kathy Owston reports from her new adventure where she is trying to use her skills to help the local deaf community

I am in Nicaragua, one of the loveliest countries in Central America. I have taken a career break from my job at St Thomas' Hearing Implant Centre. Some of you might remember me from the series of articles I wrote for the BATOD magazine at the end of the 1990s, about working at Emerald Hill School for the Deaf in Zimbabwe. This time I am finding it a lot more difficult to find a role, where I can be useful as a British Teacher of the Deaf. Please read this article, and send any suggestions you have as to how I might be able to help here.

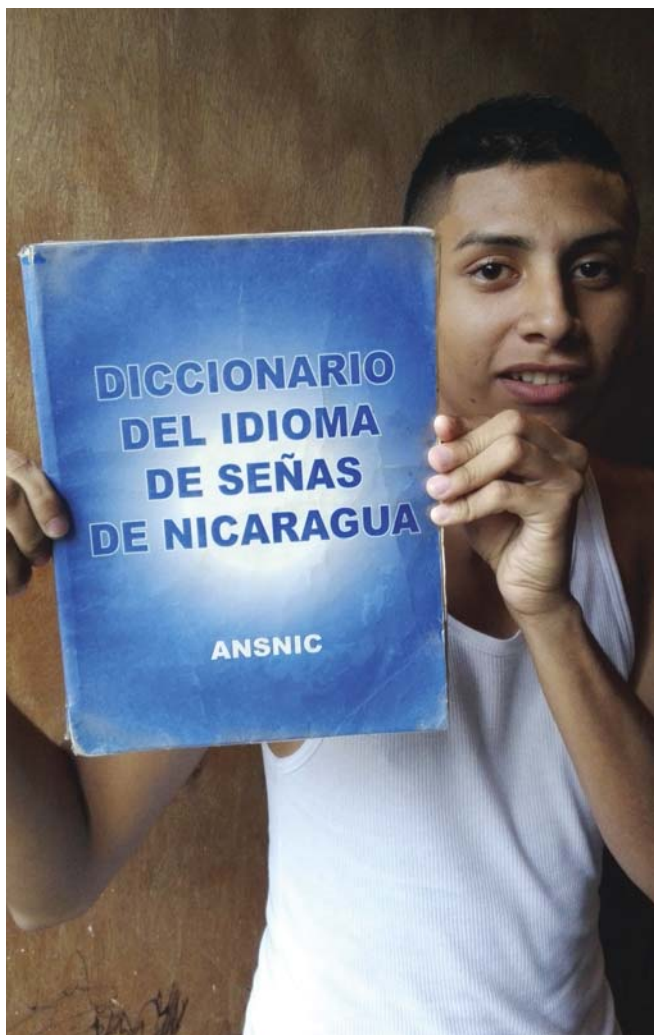
Back in Zimbabwe they used Zimbabwean Sign Language which I didn't know, so I set myself up to work in an educational audiology role. I took audiograms for all of the 250 pupils in the school. I was then able to "best fit" donated analogue hearing aids to the pupils, with my stetoclip and screwdriver, and we sterilised and shaved down second hand earmoulds. Then, by raising money for batteries, I felt that I had done some sustainable good. At least we were able to tap the residual hearing of many of the students, for several years, before the hearing aid battery fund was used up.

Now here in Nicaragua, twenty years later, I again want to use my skills with the local deaf community. But it is

more difficult to find a role. I have the same problem of not knowing ISN – "Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua" which is the official Nicaraguan Sign Language of the deaf. I also have to operate entirely in Spanish, which I do know. At my age, trying to communicate in a second language and use a completely different sign language is a major challenge! So having a teaching role will not be a possibility. What about helping with audiology?

Nicaragua is the poorest country in Latin America, and incredibly, although they have a free health system for the people, this does not include any help with hearing aid provision. There are very few children or adults with hearing aids anywhere in the country. Could I provide some, like in Zimbabwe? With the change seen in our developed countries to digital hearing aids, there are now no longer readily available donated hearing aids of any use to countries in the developing world. For digital aids, computer software and the correct programming leads and technology would be necessary. Even if some analogue aids were available, I think that fitting them here would be just a "sticking plaster" solution. Fitting aids to a few children, with no audiology or ToD support, would not be a sustainable help to deaf children here for the long term.





Examples of the lack of audiological provision I have experienced so far:

- Carlos, a very dynamic young man with bilateral microtia, who has never had the benefit of a bone conducting hearing aid. Although he only has a moderate conductive hearing loss, he prefers not to use his speech. He is training to be a Sign Language teacher.
- Jeshua, a three-year-old child whose parents saved up to have an audiological assessment. The audiograms showed a flat severe loss in both ears, and an estimated bill of \$850 to fit hearing aids. Average daily income for up to 60% of the population is only 2 US dollars a day. So not at all realistic for them to be able to budget for hearing aids.
- I visited a private Christian School for the Deaf in the capital, founded by a missionary couple from the USA. They offer education to deaf pupils from preschool to secondary, but when I asked about the provision of hearing aids, I was told that very few of these pupils wear aids, even though these parents are wealthier, and are paying for private education. The school doesn't incorporate audiology or a listening programme into their curriculum (but

do have a very well-funded library of Bible study materials, from US donors).

Nicaragua has put its focus for deaf people entirely in to developing its sign language, ISN. In 2011 the government conducted a survey which identified 13,000 deaf people countrywide, in a population of 6 million (all statistics here are fairly unreliable). The good news is that Nicaragua's deaf community is actually remarkably developed, considering the level of poverty in the country. This is largely due to the involvement of linguists who have been researching the emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language. Some of us may be aware of these studies from our training. In the late 1970s and early 80s over 400 deaf students were enrolled in two Schools for the Deaf in the capital Managua. The language programme used an oral approach, with the emphasis on lip reading and Spanish, with no hearing aids and no signs, but using American Fingerspelling. This was very unsuccessful and the pupils didn't learn many Spanish words. Instead, the children started to communicate with each other by combining home signs and gestures, and thus they created their own language. The staff at the school were unable to understand the children, so they asked for outside help. In 1986 Judy Kegl, an American Sign Language linguist, came and studied the language being used. Other researchers joined her, and they analysed the language, finding that it had its own grammatical structure and verbs. Judy Kegl and her husband James are still involved with deaf people in Nicaragua today.

In 1997 the first ISN dictionary was published and updated NSL Handbooks came out in 2009 and 2013. Before 2004 no sign language interpretation was available, so deaf people had no way of knowing about national news or current affairs. However, by 2009 the News was broadcast with an interpreter and an interpreting code of ethics was passed.

Last week we visited Esteli, a town in the north west of the country. Operating from a small room in a broadcasting centre there, we found a very dedicated young man, Fannuel Ubeda. He is a journalist who has founded an arts and media project for deaf people.







Around fifty deaf young people are now attending workshops where they make a magazine TV show like 'See Hear' and give news broadcasts for deaf people.

Famnuel then took us to his mother's house, where her two rooms are used to run Sign Language classes. These are both for deaf people, and to teach hearing people who are interested in learning sign. We were introduced to Jeydi, one of the deaf teachers of NSL. She, and her deaf sister Saida, are both training to be Teachers of the Deaf. I joined in a signing class and can now sign useful things like "helicopter" and "military tank" in ISN! This very impressive project does not receive any help from the government and is looking for sponsorship to be able to continue.

Before the 1970s most of the deaf people in Nicaragua had little contact with each other. Deafness was a stigma and deaf children were either all kept at home or were sometimes schooled with children with other disabilities. With all of the advances made in ISN, deaf people in urban areas are now far less isolated and have a recognised language to communicate in, if they

manage to access it. However, in rural areas, deaf children are still isolated. For example, in Esteli we were introduced to Gerald, who at fifteen years old has just come to live with a cousin in the town. He has spent all of his life until this year in the countryside with his close family, hidden away. He had never been to school and had no communication at all. He had spent every day in the fields with his father, doing manual work.

Academic provision for deaf children is very weak across the country. We met Prof Julio, the teacher in a rural primary school. He told us that he has a deaf child in third grade. "She doesn't speak and I have no idea if she understands the curriculum. She copies down what I write on the board, but I have no way of assessing if she knows what it is about". Official figures state that in 2002 only one fifth of deaf Nicaraguans had received any formal education. This has now reportedly dropped even lower because of the lack of trained Teachers of the Deaf and Interpreters. In 2008 there were only 26 qualified Teachers of the Deaf in the whole country.

So, on the one hand a rather depressing picture, but on the other, I have met some very dynamic young deaf adults who are involved with Famnuel's project in Esteli. I am a Teacher of the Deaf with 30 years' experience in the UK, but I am struggling to work out how I can be of any help during my time here. I hope to be here for a couple of years, and still have much to learn about this friendly, but challenging country.

If you have any ideas or experiences to help me, please do send me an email on [owstonlewis@hotmail.com](mailto:owstonlewis@hotmail.com) Gracias por su atencion. Hasta luego!

*Kathy Owston is a Teacher of the Deaf presently on a career break from St Thomas' Hearing Implant Centre, and a recent member of BATOD's NEC.*

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## BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the Nov 2016 issue.

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