

MULAGO SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF

CHARITY BEGINS ABROAD

Most of us have good intentions when it comes to helping people. But few of us actually act on those intentions. Roland Zweers did – and the experience changed his life.

They say charity begins at home. In Roland Zweers' case, it was on a trip to China. The 42-year-old audiologist from Holland was visiting China for the 2008 Olympics on behalf of Widex Holland.

Earlier that year a deadly earthquake struck western China, killing over 70,000 people. "Many people, including children were affected," says Roland. "I thought there must be some children in orphanages, children with hearing loss, whom we can help. So I thought, I'm independent, I'm doing rather well – how can I do something good for the world on my own." The Chinese authorities however, were reluctant to accept his offer but for Roland, the seed of a good idea had been planted.

On his return to Holland he was contacted by a Dutch charity (Lejofonds) to ask if he could help several children in Uganda. Originally, it was a matter of quickly locating a number of hearing aids and sending them to Uganda so an ENT doctor could fit the children, all of whom attended deaf schools outside the capital, Kampala.

However, things didn't go quite to plan, as Roland found out when checking the progress of the children on the internet. "I read on the web that it was not going too well [with the hearing aids] – there were problems with whistling and feedback and the children were afraid of too much noise and things like that. So one Sunday morning, I was looking on YouTube at a film about Ugandan children and my wife said, 'If it's not going so well with those children, then why don't you go there?' Within two weeks I took a plane with a friend of mine!"

Moving experience

Arriving in Uganda and meeting these children for the first time had a profound effect on Roland and he is still visibly moved when recounting the story. "It was a marvelous experience!" he says. "You come by taxi and there are two school yards on both sides of the street. On one side there are many children yelling and screaming at us white people and they want to be in photographs and so on. And on the other side of the street, there was also a school yard with many children and they were jumping up and down – but with no sound! Because they cannot hear, they cannot talk and they want to touch you and feel you to see if you really are white and that their fingers don't become white when they touch you and things like that! And the children have sign language. Being in the school yard with maybe fifty or seventy children who don't make any noise – when you realize it, it is amazing."

Mercy, Mercy

Roland took with him a number of Widex Senso Diva (19) hearing aids to fit four children and they reacted favorably. One of them – Mercy – made quite an impression. "The funny thing was, we started calling her name and she didn't react. Then we asked the (sign language) interpreter, 'Can you please tell her that we are calling her name! That is, not in sign language but that when we say Mercy we are saying her name'. So my friend was calling Mercy! And then she reacted! And then at the end – and that was very emotional – she had gone one way and we went the other way and we said goodbye and then we separat-

ed; then she was I think a hundred meters away and I could see the hearing aids behind her with my camera and its telephoto lens and I called Mercy! And she turned around and waved!"

Mercy is one of an estimated 700,000 people with hearing loss in Uganda. There is often a perception in Uganda that deaf or hard-of-hearing children are 'stupid'; indeed, because they have difficulty communicating, they can risk exclusion, isolation and in some cases, abuse.

For Roland, this provided extra incentive to help. "Many deaf children are abused by the father or neighbor because they can't tell anybody that 'so and so did that to me'. They told me that with the children who are deaf, there is a much higher percentage of AIDS because they are abused so much. And that is motivation for me [to help them]; of course hearing loss is always a motivation but I didn't know this before they told me about it," he says.

Making good progress

Roland takes heart from the progress the children are making. "One of the girls named Sharon - the youngest - left the deaf school (in Mukono) to attend a normal school!" he says. "She started learning to speak and now can go to a school with hearing children. That was the best news of 2011."

Such good news is certainly encouraging for Roland. "I hope I can go back to Uganda at the beginning of next year, to make good audiograms and impressions for the earmolds and then maybe come back in a few months with more people. And hopefully come back with other audiologists who think it is nice to help. You can have a holiday there too. So you could go two weeks for work and one work for holidays," he says. Roland even has plans to involve his wife. "Actually, we have talked about doing something together," he says. "She is an optician. What could be better than going together there and doing your job and helping people at the same time?"



ABOUT ROLAND

Roland Zweers is 42 years old. He has been working as an audiologist since 1997 and has his own clinic in Zevenbergen, a small town of 14,000 in the south of Holland. Roland is married and supports the Dutch soccer team.

DEAF CHILDREN IN UGANDA

According to a report from Deaf Child Worldwide, there were only six deaf schools in Uganda in 2009, with less than two percent of deaf children attending and many poor families cannot pay school fees. Furthermore, the stigma associated with deafness and hearing loss means that many deaf children are socially excluded, with families hiding their children out of shame.

Deaf and hard of hearing children in Uganda are often alone at home, and are frequently undervalued by those around them. This makes them particularly vulnerable to physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

www.deafchildworldwide.info
www.deafinkuganda.org

Tragedy

The final of the football World Cup took place while Roland was in Uganda. The match was between Holland and Spain and naturally Roland was watching it in a bar with many other tourists. During the final, two bombs went off not far from where Roland was.

“We went to a bar with many other Dutch people,” says Roland, “and then we got some text messages from the Dutch Embassy – you have to be careful because there are some bomb blasts around you. We didn’t believe that but it was true. We came downstairs from the pub and everywhere we saw ambulances. From one blast to other, there was about one and a half kilometers I think. One was at an Ethiopian restaurant and the other at a rugby club. This rugby club we had actually passed at the time of the blast – it happened half an hour before.”

“It very much had an impact on us. Because you are going to a country and immediately you are in love with that country and the children. You immediately click with the children and all the people over there. Marvelous people and children don’t have any more than an old tire from a car or an empty bottle and that’s all the toys they have. And the people are nice and fantastic. So you are in love immediately with the country. And then some other country, Al Qaida or whoever is coming there and they kill all these people next to you and you are so close to it.”

“The next day I wanted to go to the next school but we got a call to hear if we could come a day later because one of the teachers had lost his son the day before.”

A Somali militant group, with links to al-Qaida, subsequently took responsibility for the blasts, which killed 74 people.

UGANDA FACT FILE

Full name: Republic of Uganda
Location: Uganda is a landlocked country in Eastern Africa, bordered by the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan and Tanzania.
Population: 33.8 million (UN, 2010) (16 million children 0-14 years)
Capital: Kampala
Area: 241,038 sq km
Major languages: English (official), Swahili (official), Luganda, various Bantu and Nilotic languages
Major religions: Christianity, Islam
Life expectancy: 55 years (men), 56 years (women) (UN)
Main exports: Coffee, fish and fish products, tea, tobacco, cotton, corn, beans, sesame

