



BAA MAGAZINE

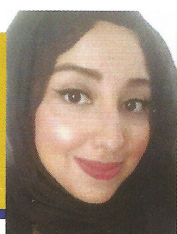
British Academy of Audiology

- 
- BAA Conference 2018 Overview and Programme
 - Reasonable Adjustments
 - NIHR Hearing/Audiology Champions
 - Working with VoluntEars - Sri Lanka 2017
 - Turn an Ear to Hear

Working with VoluntEars, Sri Lanka 2017



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VoluntEars was founded in 2015 by Richard Clowes. He had previously worked with volunteering organisations but wished to create something that would be beneficial to the deaf and hard of hearing community. Through discussions with a close friend who was profoundly deaf, Richard realised that there was a need for an organisation that caters for individuals who use British Sign Language (BSL) as their communication tool. Hence, VoluntEars was formed, with the intention of providing a qualified BSL interpreter on every overseas trip. For the previous two years they have successfully arranged overseas volunteering trips specially designed for the deaf and hard of hearing community.

We are Audiology students at the University of Manchester, currently undertaking our 3rd year of the degree course. Last summer, we had the wonderful opportunity to fulfil a lifelong aspiration of ours - to volunteer abroad.

The purpose of the trip was to complete practical hands-on renovation work for a partner deaf school in





Colombo, Sri Lanka. By the end of the two-week trip, our group of 18 volunteers had successfully transformed a dull and dusty dining room into a bright, colourful and educational space for the children of the school. During afternoons and weekends, we were submerged into Sri Lankan culture; we visited temples, learnt how to play carom - a popular board game, visited a sea turtle conservation centre and an elephant sanctuary. It was a busy two weeks but certainly, a once in a lifetime experience.

The deaf school we worked with is partly government funded, however they do rely on the kind donations of individuals to make ends meet. There were 193 students, aged 6-18 years, many whom actually resided at the school. In Sri Lanka, along with many other countries, there is a lot of stigma associated with deafness. The hearing population lack the general understanding of how to communicate with deaf people, how to make general life more accessible for them and how to incorporate these individuals into mainstream life. Schools such as this one, provide a safe haven for children who may not necessarily be accepted into their families - they equip them with skills they can then use within the work place and in daily life. It was a true privilege to have worked with the teachers from this school and to see smiles all round when they viewed our finished renovation.

The experience as a whole was a huge learning curve. Being in a foreign country with 18 individuals, some hard-of-hearing or deaf, has taught us the true importance of communication. A lot of emphasis is placed on communication within the degree course and we are taught how to empathise with those who have a hearing impairment. However, in order to understand the struggles faced by a deaf person, you must be in an environment with deaf individuals, such as that provided by VoluntEars.



Communicating with our fellow volunteers during the first week was difficult as many of them used sign language, a communication technique that we knew very little of. We felt like hearing people within a deaf world! It gave us a glimpse of how excluded a deaf individual would feel when amongst a large group of hearing people. However, as the days went by, our communication greatly improved and it became a lot easier. A qualified BSL interpreter joined us on the trip which aided smooth communication - we picked up a few words in sign language and began to use them within conversation, albeit very clumsily.

In the coming days, we began to understand each of their communication styles and how they coincide with our own. Many of them used cochlear implants and could communicate with us without having to use sign language, as long as we made the conscious effort to directly face them and pronounce words clearly. These are all skills that we have developed at University; through these, we got to know some absolutely lovely people, with whom we got to experience such a wonderful trip. Although initially we found it difficult to communicate with these girls, we were able to adapt and soon we were communicating effectively, teaching them how to play card games and losing to them too!

Being the only Audiology students on the trip, we were given a guided tour of the Audiology clinic close to the school, by a Senior Audiologist. The clinic was open to the public but also provided their services to the deaf students. We were pleasantly surprised to find specialist equipment available to carry out a variety of audiological tests and the most up-to-date hearing aids from Oticon and Phonak.

Overall, it was a really enjoyable and worthwhile trip, despite the terrifying cockroaches! This trip has made us open to the idea of working with children in the future. The proficiency with which the deaf children communicated in sign language with one another was astonishing. Many of the children loved to communicate with us via sign language and were delighted to tell us their names. It was a real joy to see their smiling faces and waving hands greet us each day through our minibus window, as we arrived at the school to continue with the renovation work. Although language was a barrier, the happiness these students radiated was a wonderful addition to the trip and made our hard work worthwhile. It taught us that the best communication doesn't necessarily have to be through words! We also hope to complete further studying of BSL and remain engaged with the deaf community. It is something that we have always been interested in, now more so than ever.

For further information about VoluntEars, visit <https://www.voluntears.info/>