

Changing Lives in the Developing World



The Global Foundation for Children with Hearing Loss empowers teachers of deaf and hard of hearing children in Vietnam with the tools they need to help young children learn to communicate through spoken language. Paige Stringer, who was born profoundly hard of hearing, started The Global Foundation for Children with Hearing Loss to help children with hearing loss in developing countries access the education and resources they need for life success in a hearing society.

It was the moment when I recognized that I could perhaps make a meaningful contribution to this world by helping children with hearing loss in developing countries. I was engaged in a volunteer assignment at a boarding school for deaf and hard of hearing children in rural South Vietnam. The Vietnamese teachers there asked me to share with them methods being used in the United States to help young children with hearing loss learn to communicate through spoken language.

The hunger for knowledge was clearly evident on the faces of more than 50 teachers that filled the room that day of my presentation as I passed along information that my contacts in the United States so generously provided. Later, I dropped by Executive Director Thuy's office to bid goodbye for the night and paused at her door. She was poring over the documents that I had shared, attempting to absorb the wisdom of those pages. That image of Thuy left an indelible imprint on my mind.

As my travels progressed from Vietnam to other points in Southeast Asia, I continued to witness the detrimental effect that the shortage of expert teachers, hearing professionals, and hearing aids, and the general lack of awareness about hearing loss was having on the livelihoods of thousands of deaf and hard of hearing children in the region. It was a stark contrast to my personal experience in the United States. I was determined to help.

A Fortunate Start

I was born with a profound hearing loss with a 98-100 decibel loss in both ears. However, I benefitted from early identification and amplification with hearing aids, and was

provided with family support and all the professional expertise in the United States that was essential to my early childhood language development. I was mainstreamed in kindergarten and attended regular schools alongside my hearing peers for the rest of my academic career.

I earned a tennis scholarship to the University of Washington. Besides captaining the tennis team, I also served as vice president of the student-athlete advisory council and as an officer for the Tri Delta sorority. After earning a master's degree, I embarked on a 12-year marketing career at various companies including Amazon.com and Clorox. I am now a freelance writer with my own business providing marketing and copywriting services.

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My family, friends, and teachers were instrumental in empowering me with the independence and self-sufficiency that I needed to pursue my goals in a hearing society and to attain the happiness that I have been fortunate to achieve in my life.

I currently serve as vice president of the board of directors of Listen and Talk, an organization in Seattle that is helping young children with hearing loss learn to use their ears to hear and their words to speak. The advancements in services and hearing technology that have been made from the time when I was young to what is now available are amazing. I admire everyone who works in the speech and hearing fields for their contributions to this evolution and am grateful to organizations like the Hearing Loss Association of America® that are committed to the betterment of the lives of people with hearing loss.

A Global Foundation to Help Children with Hearing Loss

The course of our lives is greatly influenced by where we are born and the opportunities that are afforded to us. Language acquisition lends itself to cognitive thought and the ability to communicate—essential elements for education and the foundation on which human potential is realized. For too many of the world's deaf and hard of hearing children, the cultivation of language is simply nonexistent.

In many places where these children do have a language, the quality of education available to them is low and the illiteracy rate is high. Only about 10 percent of the world's deaf children receive any education at all. Combine these facts with a shortage of medical and technological support and a general lack of societal understanding about hearing loss, and it becomes evident why most deaf and hard of hearing children in developing countries never have a chance to reach their full potential. They can't even get out of the gate.

I started the Global Foundation for Children with Hearing Loss to help deaf and hard of hearing children in developing countries have access to at least some of the resources and education that I was fortunate to have.

The Global Foundation for Children with Hearing Loss works with partners in the international community to implement sustainable teacher training workshops and hearing aid programs that will directly benefit thousands of deaf and hard of hearing children around the world. The foundation is supported by a talented board of directors that includes experts in audiology, education, and speech language pathology.

Opportunity in Vietnam

Vietnam's government started supporting university degrees in deaf education in 1995. There are no masters degree programs. There are only three audiologists and one speech-language pathologist with advanced degrees in the entire country who are native to

continued on page 32

Photos, top left: Vietnamese deaf and hard of hearing children. Bottom left: teacher and class at Thuan An Center for Disabled Children, Vietnam. Top right: Paige Stringer surrounded by students

Changing Lives

continued from page 31

Vietnam. Most teachers of children with hearing loss in Vietnam are self-taught and very few have been trained in early intervention and auditory-verbal methods. To complicate things further, the supply of quality hearing aids does not sufficiently meet demand. Hard of hearing children often go for extended periods without a hearing device, and valuable time for developing hearing and speech acumen is lost.

In spite of these challenges, interest and support has been increasing in Vietnam for the provision of resources for their children with hearing loss. More hospitals are conducting infant hearing screenings and early intervention centers are being established. Vietnamese teachers of children with hearing loss have requested more training, particularly in auditory-verbal education and early intervention, which are still relatively new concepts in Vietnam.

To address this need, the Global Foundation for Children with Hearing Loss in collaboration with Vietnam's Thuan An Center for Disabled Children, is conducting a training program for teachers. Fifteen American experts in early intervention, auditory-verbal education, audiology, and speech-language pathology will travel to Vietnam next summer. They will mentor 85 teachers in a one-month workshop about methods for helping children with hearing loss develop spoken language. The 85 teachers will represent deaf schools from throughout Vietnam. There will also be evening sessions to transfer knowledge to local families who have deaf or hard of hearing children.

Teach Someone to Fish

Research shows that a child's brain develops foundational language skills in the first six years of life, and that the first three years are the most critical. The sooner a child who is born with hearing loss is amplified with hearing aids and receives early intervention services, the greater his or her chance for developing spoken

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language. Hence, the focus of the foundation's program is on educating children between 0-6 years of age. Since one teacher works with 10 children, a single summer session has the potential to positively affect the language development of 850 children with hearing loss. Because participating teachers will share their learning with other teachers and families, these benefits are exponential.

The University Lions Club of Seattle and Buffalo Tours Vietnam are generous supporters of this program. With appropriate additional funding, the foundation hopes to make this a three-year initiative so that teachers and families may build on their knowledge over time. Ho Chi Minh City University has endorsed the program and is considering integrating it into their deaf education curriculum.

Hope for the Future

Some of the Vietnamese teachers I have met during the development of this project have been surprised to learn that I have been profoundly hard of hearing my entire life. They had never met anyone with my degree of hearing loss who could commu-

nicate effectively through spoken language. In fact, I was asked at one point to take a hearing test to prove the degree of my loss, and, I tell you, it was the first time in my life that I was actually happy to have such a horrible audiogram.

I am not sharing this because I am unique—I am not—but as a demonstration that we can offer hope to the developing world that children with hearing loss can indeed develop spoken language. With quality hearing instruments, dissemination of expert knowledge, and a framework of support services, we can work together to set these children with hearing loss on a path to achieve their full potential. So that they too can dream big dreams...and pursue their own measure of happiness! 🎉

Paige Stringer is founder and executive director of the Global Foundation for Children with Hearing Loss. In 2009, she was awarded the Oticon Focus on People Award for advocacy.

This award celebrates the accomplishments and contributions of individuals with hearing loss. For more information about the foundation or to support its work in developing countries, please visit www.childrenwithhearingloss.org. Paige lives in Seattle and can be reached at paige@childrenwithhearingloss.org. Her website is www.paigestringer.com.



Peer Mentoring Program at Gallaudet University

- ☞ As an individual with hearing loss have you ever struggled with your hearing loss or having your needs met?
- ☞ Do you repeatedly meet individuals who are struggling to cope with their hearing loss just as you did (or still do)?
- ☞ Are you active in the hearing loss community and interested in improving the quality of life of others?

☞

If you answered yes to these questions then you may be a good fit for the peer mentoring program at Gallaudet University; a two-year online certificate program designed to help train deaf, hard of hearing, and late-deafened adults in meeting the diverse needs of individuals with hearing loss. Please visit peers4access.org to learn more about this unique program or email us at info@peers4access.org.