

Dominicans visit town to learn about teaching deaf

Steve, Langwehr, Staff writer

IPSWICH | They are called "mudos," mutes, in a small, poor country that is just beginning to understand that deaf and hard of hearing children have a world of opportunities.

"As a mother, people ask me, 'How can you be happy with your child?'" Diorka Guillen said through an interpreter. Her 6-year-old daughter was born hard of hearing. "Some people say, 'Why do you give your child the opportunity to go to school?'"

In the Dominican Republic, deafness still carries a stigma, and stereotypes and misunderstandings are what Guillen and her colleagues must deal with every day.

She is one of eight teachers from the Institute to Help the Deaf in the capital city of Santo Domingo who spent the last couple of weeks in Ipswich getting a look at the latest technologies for detecting hearing problems, and learning the latest techniques for teaching deaf and hard of hearing youngsters to talk.

They were brought here by Joanne Travers, the Ipswich woman who found Partners for a Greater Voice, a nonprofit group working to give voice to children in developing countries.

Her own two children are deaf, and both have learned to talk. Travers acknowledges the controversy over signing versus speaking in the deaf community, but says it's important that parents know there are options.

"It's something I believe children can do," she said of developing language skills. "I'm a firm believer in building independence for children."

Rosa Valdez, an audiology technician at the institute, said what impressed her the most on her visit to this country was state-mandated hearing screenings of newborns, and how much follow-up parents are given.

"It's amazing to see babies with hearing aids," Valdez said through interpreter Herminia Morillo, from the North Shore Community Health Center.

Several of the teachers said their biggest challenge isn't teaching children to speak. It's convincing parents there's nothing wrong with their children, they just can't hear.

"Some feel like this is a sick child, a pain in the neck," said Marina Concepcion, who has been performing community outreach for Partners for a Greater Voice, "but they don't know they have opportunities."

While some families don't strive very hard to help their children, Concepcion said, others make great sacrifices. Two families send their children to the school from a small town an hour and a half away. "Bus fare is very

expensive," Concepcion said. "It could be the base salary for a month. It's a sacrifice."

The institute is 32 years old, and several women said that despite meager resources, it has made great strides.

"When I began, the youngest we had were 7-to-10-year-olds," said teacher Yadixa Arvelo. "Now we're getting 1 1/2- to 2-year-olds. I think doctors are paying more attention and detecting it (deafness) earlier."

The women also proudly noted that 15 former institute students are now attending college, and had to pass a national exam at both the middle and high school level to do so.

Most of the children at the school can't afford to buy hearing aids and learn to talk by reading lips. Travers has started a program called Give the Gift of Hearing, which for a \$150 donation provides a hearing aid for a Dominican child.

Casilda Jimenez is the institute's director. She said the goal has always been to mainstream deaf children, and learning to talk is key to that effort. Like the other teachers, she was impressed by the wide array of testing and treatment equipment here. It is beyond the reach of her poor country, but she said they try to make up in other ways.

"We teach them to be comfortable in our society," she said. "Maybe we don't have the technology, but we work very hard and we have a lot of love."

