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Sound Investment

Local Group Brings Gift of Hearing to Kids in Southeast Asia

Sound Investment: Local Group Gives Hope to Deaf

Queen Anne resident Paige Stringer helps children with hearing loss succeed around the developing world.

*by Elizabeth Ralston, assisted by Paige Stringer
Community contributors*

A Vietnamese mother reflected about the challenges faced by children who are deaf or hard of hearing in Vietnam: “My hope, like all parents of children with hearing loss, is that my daughter will grow up to have a happy life.”

Hearing loss is one of the most common disabilities globally. The World Health Organization reports that 80 percent of people with hearing loss live in developing countries and 28 percent of these are children. Unfortunately, awareness about the implications of hearing loss and essential resources to support these children are limited. Communication barriers arise as a result, diminishing the potential of these young people.

Paige Stringer, the Founder and Executive Director of the Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss, was fortunate. She was born with a profound hearing loss but benefited from early identification of her hearing loss, access to hearing aids, and the support of qualified professionals to develop listening and spoken language. Stringer was mainstreamed starting in kindergarten, earned a tennis scholarship to the

University of Washington, achieved a Master’s degree, and has enjoyed a successful corporate career. She started the Global Foundation in 2009 to help children who are deaf or hard of hearing around the world have similar opportunities in life.

Most of us take our hearing for granted, and may not consider how fundamental hearing is to spoken language and our ability to communicate. It is critical to identify hearing loss early so that children can obtain the support needed to ensure successful outcomes in language and learning. Since over 90 percent of children with hearing loss are born to parents with normal hearing, it is essential to screen all babies at birth.

For families who choose for their children to learn to listen and speak, two elements, in addition to early identification of hearing loss, need to be in place: 1) access to hearing aids or cochlear implants and 2) the support of trained professionals.

And time is of the essence. After age 6, it is increasingly difficult for a child’s brain to overcome hearing loss and foster listening and spoken language abilities.

The genesis of the Global Foundation

In 2007, Stringer joined the Board of Directors of Listen and Talk, a listening and spoken language educational program for children with hearing loss in Seattle.

“There have been significant advancements made in hearing technology and early intervention support for children with hearing loss since I was a child,” said Stringer. “While at Listen and Talk, I saw first-hand, the impact of these advancements on the children and their families. This was the catalysis for my desire to help children with hearing loss in other parts of the world have the same opportunities I experienced.”

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Founder Paige Stringer enjoys a moment with a young boy who received hearing aids from the Global Foundation's audiology program.

Photo courtesy of Paige Stringer/Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss



A Vietnamese therapist conducts a listening lesson with a young child with hearing loss in Hanoi.

Photo courtesy of Paige Stringer/Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss



A Vietnamese teacher carries out her lesson plan during the Global Foundation's summer training course for classroom teachers in South Vietnam.
Photo courtesy of Paige Stringer/Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss



Live sessions with families during the Global Foundation's training programs provide an opportunity for Vietnamese therapists to practice new skills.
Photo courtesy of Paige Stringer/Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss

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Stringer left her corporate career to pursue more altruistic ventures. She went to Vietnam for the first time in late 2008. She taught English at Thuan An Center for Disabled Children, a school for kids with hearing loss outside of Ho Chi Minh City.

The Director of Thuan An Center, Thuy Nguyen, marveled at Stringer's ability to listen and talk in spite of a profound hearing loss. She had studied in the Netherlands about the potential of early intervention for deaf or hard of hearing children, and had recently started an early intervention program at Thuan

An Center. She introduced Stringer to her colleagues in Vietnam to show them what is possible with the right early support.

Thuy shared her desire with Stringer to establish a program to better prepare teachers and other professionals in Vietnam to help children with hearing loss. Stringer was inspired by Thuy's vision and felt compelled to help bring her aspiration to life.

In May 2009, Stringer founded the Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss to help partners in developing countries increase expertise and resources to address the challenges faced by children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Children with hearing loss in Vietnam:

180K

The Vietnam Deaf Education Program offers training at 38 schools and 2 hospitals across 20 provinces.

Pediatric Hearing Loss in Vietnam

There are more than 180,000 young children identified with hearing loss in Vietnam. The country has an inclusive education policy and wishes to integrate these children into local mainstream schools. Successful implementation of this policy requires that children with hearing loss and their families receive essential support from trained professionals. However, the universities in Vietnam do not currently offer advanced degrees to teachers, audiologists, and medical professionals in aspects related to hearing health care and deaf education. Professionals who work with children with hearing loss have requested training to better prepare them for their work.

The Global Foundation created a Vietnam Deaf Education Program in collaboration with Thuan An Center to address this need. Each year-long program involves 38 schools and two hospitals across 20 provinces. Summer training programs at Thuan



Early intervention therapy helps children with hearing loss develop listening and spoken language.

Photo courtesy of Paige Stringer/Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss

An Center offer curricula covering audiology, early intervention, speech pathology and auditory-verbal deaf education. Participants return each summer to build on their expertise. During the year, Global Foundation professionals return to Vietnam to conduct Mobile Missions at some of the schools and clinics to further the learning experience. Video analysis is also offered when the Global Foundation professionals are not in-country. Participants will graduate from the program prepared to train others, making the Global Foundation's efforts sustainable.

The heart of the organization is a team of 37 volunteer professionals from the United States, Canada, and Hong Kong who work together throughout the year to develop the curriculum.

"My experiences in Vietnam have reminded me that no matter where we live or what we have, we all want the best for our children and we are willing to go to great lengths to find information and resources to make our children's lives better," said Maura Berndsen, education director of Listen and Talk, and one of the original team members.

—*Elizabeth Ralston is a writer with a public health background and Paige Stringer is the founder and executive director of the Global Foundation for Children With Hearing Loss*

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How You Can Help

To keep their efforts expanding around the world, the Global Foundation seeks contributions from the community.

Recent expansions

Since summer 2010, the Global Foundation has successfully executed four summer training programs, three Mobile Missions and hours of video analysis. It has trained over 220 teachers, 270 families, and 125 medical and other professionals who collectively support more than 1,000 children with hearing loss in Vietnam. In addition, 310 hearing aids have been fitted on children in need.

Every dollar counts

As impressive as these figures are, the foundation still relies on donations from the public. A financial contribution of:

- **\$800 could help** finance a plane ticket for one teacher.
- **\$400 could fund** the cost of one hearing aid.
- **\$200 could help** fund the cost of training one Vietnamese participant.
- **\$50 could help** pay for one interpreter for one day.
- **\$25 could assemble** one training manual, extend guest speaking opportunities, provide networking prospects or donate functioning hearing aids or audiology equipment.

For more information and to donate, contact Paige Stringer: paige@childrenwithhearingloss.org or visit childrenwithhearingloss.org —*Elizabeth Ralston*



Vietnamese children with hearing loss play with educational toys.

Photo courtesy of Paige Stringer/Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss