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Kaara Harris

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Making a Difference, One Voice at a Time



A group of students and faculty from the Andrews University School of Communication Sciences & Disorders (SCSD) took their first international service trip to Jamaica from May 30–June 14.

The team of 31 healthcare professionals and speech-language pathology graduate students provided much-needed speech, language, cognitive, swallowing and hearing services to over 200 students from the Llandilo School of Special Education.

This project continues the legacy of J.N. Andrews, who set sail as an Adventist missionary 150 years ago.

The idea for the trip began in 2019, when Heather Ferguson, former chair of SCSD and associate professor, met the then-assistant principal of the Llandilo schools during a visit to the island.

“My parents were both Jamaican nationals ... and I felt like if I wanted to be able to give back and serve somewhere, I really wanted it to be there,” Ferguson says.

The need

Ferguson, now an associate provost of undergraduate and graduate education at AdventHealth University, learned there was a dire need for resources. Families with children who have speech-language disorders lack consistent, affordable access.

“What we would call support services, like speech and language services, ... physical therapy, occupational therapy and behavioral

therapy for autism, those are all private pay there,” she says. “And with poverty being what it is, most people can’t afford it.”

On an island with 2.8 million people, there are only nine speech-language pathologists, and they are focused on working with adults, Ferguson adds, whereas these support services might be part of an integrative educational experience in the United States.

Approximately 15% of Jamaicans are living with a disability, according to government estimates.¹ A lack of specialized educational resources, particularly for those in rural areas, can have a negative impact, according to The Borgen Project.²

“If a child has these disorders and is not able to communicate or understand, there’s a high level of frustration,” said Brynja Davis, assistant professor of speech-language pathology. Lack of engagement may mean students play games or sleep all day in class, Davis adds.

“Another sad outcome is learned helplessness,” said Sue Mondak, associate professor and on-site clinical director. “They just give up trying to communicate.”

Educators, families and children are making do. And that’s where the group from SCSD sought to help.



By Kaara Harris



How they served

They split into teams for eight days of service at the Llandilo sites³—the school’s main campus, the Lucea Centre and the Montego Bay Learning Centre.

The teams screened for language, articulation, voice, swallowing and basic communication to get a baseline of what students, from birth to 21 years, could and could not do. They also worked with teachers in their classrooms to model ways to facilitate or elicit communication.

The full days included breaks for connecting with the students, says Tammy Shilling, associate professor and interim chair of SCSD.

“We took a parachute and [the children] loved the parachute,” Shilling says. “They taught us how to play cricket. They love to dance. They love music. One of our girls brought a ukulele and, oh, the kids loved that.”

When they weren’t at the sites helping children and teachers, the group also participated in local church services on Sabbaths.

Challenges

As the group began screenings, however, they realized they were in for more than they had anticipated, with many non-speaking, nonverbal students, Ferguson said. To address the immediate need, they utilized apps on tablets and created and printed communication boards in their hotel rooms to supplement the materials they’d brought. The

team also encountered a range of disorders and more severe diagnoses.

“We warned our students to be flexible,” said Mondak, who worked with early intervention, or ages birth to 5 years, at the Montego Bay site. She met older students with severe cerebral palsy and nonverbal autism, who hadn’t been seen by occupational or physical therapists, a common intervention in the U.S., making their screening difficult.

The group also had to contend with closures due to conditions beyond their control, including flooding and a taxi strike which meant there were days when only a handful of students showed up. The long commute, pace of work, and heat also took a toll, leading to sickness among the team.

Blessings

Despite the challenges, the group saw God move in various ways during the service trip.

On their way home from the Llandilo campus one afternoon, Mondak said, “All of a sudden we heard a *pop*, then a *thud*, and we all knew this was not good.” Their driver pulled over and saw a flat tire. They searched for a repair shop but kept encountering the same problem—the bus was too big, and the shops didn’t have the tools to fix or replace the tire. As they neared the Lucea school, the driver, who was also a pastor, saw a man he knew sitting on the side of the road. “He says, ‘I have a truck and a jack. I can lift your bus and help you change your tire,’” Mondak recalls. The driver took the group to the Lucea school where they waited until the repair was done.

“This was a miracle because there were about 20 of us on the bus. We would’ve had to exit on the side of the road, in 90-degree weather, 100 percent humidity ... not the safest [option]. So, God brought this man the pastor knew and so close to the school,” Mondak says. They were even able to help the children at the Lucea site while waiting.

“That was a blessing. God protected and God blessed.”

During a hearing loss screening, Rhonda Tomenko, assistant professor of audiology, turned her equipment on and got a “pump error” message, which she’d never seen before. Tomenko and her student assistant frantically tried to get the machine working again. They searched online for instructions, replaced the batteries, and restarted the machine. Nothing worked.

“Finally, I’m like, why am I not just praying about this? So, I just quickly say, ‘God, please, we need this to work. Please let this work.’ And the next second, it’s on the test screen, and it’s ready to test. And I’m like ... ‘thank you so much because we need this to work today,’” says Tomenko.

On the last day of the trip, the SCSD group held a workshop on several topics. Open to educators, administrators and parents of children with special needs, more than 100 people attended and eagerly received the content.

A unique opportunity

The entire graduate student cohort attended the trip, not wanting to miss the chance to work with a unique population.

For Brianna Back, the trip highlighted what drew her to the field. “I’ve seen what a community can look like when they don’t have support and education for parents and families. And I’ve seen how that can affect their kids. Here in the U.S., we do have so much support. ... So, to have the opportunity to go to a place where they don’t have those resources ... maybe we can get the attention of other people who can set up something permanent for them.”

Reception

From the in-school screenings to the informational workshop, the response from the community was positive. Parents were particularly appreciative, Mondak says. “They

were willing to come however many miles and wait however long with their little kids in the heat. They were so grateful for any information, [asking] ‘Will you keep sending us info until you come back next year?’”

The students and educators were receptive as well. “What stood out for me was how quickly our students formed connections with those students. The kids just fell in love with our students,” says Ferguson. “The teachers were really quickly trusting of the team and they were just so open.”

What’s next?

Two weeks won’t remedy the lack of services for these children, but the SCSD group believes the trip has planted seeds that will bear fruit.

“This is something that we went into with the hopes of sustainability,” Ferguson says. “Being able to go back and build on what we just started,” including developing training modules where teachers can learn about a specific topic.

“They’ve already asked us, ‘are you coming back and when?’” says Shilling.

SCSD is discussing plans to return, shaped by what they’ve learned from this trip,

including potentially working with other departments for additional support.

For now, the group is thankful for a successful trip where they were able to help underserved students, overextended teachers and grateful parents.

“It just made you so happy to know that you’ve made a difference for someone,” Tomenko says. ■

- 1 World Bank. “Acting on Disability Discrimination in Jamaica.” *World Bank*, World Bank Group, April 18, 2016, www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/04/18/acting-on-disability-discrimination-jamaica.
- 2 “Living with a Disability in Jamaica.” Edited by The Borgen Project, *Borgen Magazine*, The Borgen Project, Sept. 10, 2023, www.borgenmagazine.com/disability-in-jamaica/#:~:text=Disability%20in%20Jamaica%3A%20A%20General,are%20living%20with%20a%20disability.
- 3 Wood, ROSALEE. “Llandilo School of Special Education Principal Lauds Community Effort amid COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Jamaica Observer*, May 21, 2020, www.jamaicaobserver.com/2020/05/21/llandilo-school-of-special-education-principal-lauds-community-effort-amid-covid-19-pandemic/.

Kaara Harris is an assistant professor of communication at Andrews University.

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