Changing attitudes for children - *Similar challenges but individual stories*

*A deaf boy teaching basic signs to other hearing impaired children in Twajaji Primary School, Bidi Bidi refugee settlement*
Meet ..... ERIKIA STELLA

Stella, a young deaf girl who used to be forced to go to school has now become the most punctual scholar in her primary school in Maracha District.

At 13 years old, she had not willingly appreciated going to school. This is partly attributed to her family’s lack of interest in the value of education and also her father, described as an alcoholic, who could not provide any support for school materials, leaving the burden completely on her mother.

Stella’s mother explained that “I love my daughter and I don’t care how much I will suffer to ensure she get a meaning in life. My efforts are being frustrated her father who leaves home early morning and returns drunk in the night”.

Prior to the project operations in Maracha, Stella who had been enrolled at school, seldom attended and eventually she decided to just stay home, due to the twin frustrations of lacking care and support both at home and at school.

With the advent of the project and deaf awareness at school, the field team were able to interact with Stella’s teachers who in turn linked up with the family. According to her teacher, Stella was having low self-esteem and felt like a “social outcast” among her peers as she could not associate with them either during class or out of class activities.

With the joint awareness and child-to-child interactions, other children are now willingly helping her in key subjects including maths and English, and that she has started to join other school activities, where she is given time to catch up.

Following a series of joint family and community outreach sessions in the area, with the help of the focal teacher, Stella’s father is also gradually getting on board and has vowed to stop “over indulging in alcohol” but rather work harder to support his daughter.

This new attitude is partly prompted by exposure to other successful deaf role models such as Dorin Letaru, one of the deaf peer leaders who have been active in the communication training in the area.

Her father commented that "I look forward to seeing my daughter stand the same way before other people to train like Dorin".

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Realising that Stella was still feeling inadequate among her peers, the field team also mobilised resources towards providing her with a new full-set school uniform (including the shoes and socks she's modelling for the first time) and this has made her more excited and keen to attend.

The regular school, family follow-up visits and uniform have consequently yielded good response with Stella now attending school promptly and regularly.

"She is so attentive in class and tries to cope with her peers very well", noted her class teacher

Meet ....... JOKUDU JANE

Jokudu Jane is a 15 year old girl who goes to Cinyi Primary School in P.2.

“She was attacked by malaria with severe convulsion at two years and was taken to hospital and later confirmed deaf by the doctor in South Sudan”, according to her mother

She is the only deaf person in the family of five children.

By the time she became deaf Jane had not yet learned how to talk. During the first project visit to Cinyi Primary School, Jane was so moody and irritable that she would just cry whenever she was brought close to any new person.

“Good morning” - Jane (3rd right in cream dress) and her peers trying out basic signs for the 1st time during a home visit

During the first home visit, Jane's father was not at home. As with other families, her mother cites the communication gap and her “irresponsible” husband as the biggest challenges she has with her daughter in addition to the hassles of displacement and poverty. Picking up from the mother during home visit, Jane's father rarely stays at home, is reportedly an alcoholic and doesn't mind about his responsibilities towards the family.

Jane also lacked a school uniform and was forced to go to school in ordinary clothes which demoralised her, seeing other pupils in uniform. She also goes to school on an empty stomach because her mother cannot afford to provide breakfast every day.

“We have not received our food ratio from UNHCR since August 2017” her mother explained

Jane also recently suffered from mumps which was treated locally with herbs.

“There were no other options available at the time but now I am ready to take her to hospital if she falls sick”, according to her mother
After a few follow-up visits at school and home, exposure to basic signs and other deaf young people, Jane started gaining a little confidence, such that she could greet and interact freely with the team and other children in school. She was also assisted to acquire a uniform which has helped her mix more freely with her peers.

Whilst the mother highlighted the communication gap between her and Jane, at school she is supported by her best friend, Annette, who understands her gestures, sits by her in class and helps her here at school and on the way home.

Jane loves football which she plays with her friends at home, goes to church for prayers and above all loves school so passionately that sometimes wants to go on non-school days! She also does all domestic chores without complaint.

During the first visit by Signhealth Uganda to Jane’s school, Cinyi Primary School, Jane’s esteem was so low that she would just cry whenever she is called or greeted by a stranger.

The same concern had been raised by her teacher: “we do not know what to do with this girl, she is easily irritated. How can we support her? We just look on”.

However during the second and subsequent visits, Jane started getting more confident, such that she could greet and interact freely with the visiting team.

During the last home visit Jane showed maximum confidence right from the start, and even at home she was able to sign freely with her family members and neighbours.

More follow-up is underway with teachers and the family, but Jane reports regaining her confidence and trust in people.

Meet …. AFOYORWOTH DESTINY

Destiny was the third born in a family of five children to her late parents in Arumukeng, Nebbi.

According to her care giver, Lithiwu Comfort, she was born “normal”.

“She was able to cry and giggle well indicating that she will be able to communicate when she grows up”

Destiny deafness developed after a long period of treatment for cerebral malaria from the hospital and she is the only deaf person out of the five children.

In private interactions with the project team, she shared that she gets annoyed when other children call her “abobo”, meaning stupid.

The project team held a number of deaf awareness sessions for the teachers, students and family members. Following this and according to her class teacher, Destiny’s performance is improving.

“She is actively participates in class work despite communication challenges which have an effect on her esteem.”

She now feels better at school now, but wished all her teachers could communicate in sign language.
"Me happy at school, teachers love me”,

She added that due to the (project) awarenesses with the children, pupils no longer call her abobo, but her real name.

Destiny shared that she has a dream of being a nurse, or learning weaving if she fails make it.

Meet …… FIONA MUJA

Fiona Muja is the 12 year old daughter of Wani Julius and Mary Gune. She is one of the brightest girls that the team has met at such a refugee school and is in Primary 6.

Fiona migrated to Uganda from the war-torn South Sudan in January 2017 with her mother, two brothers and two cousins. Her polygamous father decided to remain in South Sudan with his other wife and children who were in slightly safer zone.

During SUs first visit to Cinyi Primary School, Fionah was one of the pupils who shared their problems in a private interaction with the children.

She complained of eye problems. She appeared to be a very sharp pupil but lacked the confidence to speak in public. Whenever she had an answer, one had to move over to her whilst she whispered her response. With follow-up interactions and child to child exercises at school, Fionah gained the confidence to stand out of a group and indeed she is a star who picks any tip shared with precision and is able to stand and give answers to questions with confidence and without fear.

During the home visit, her mother was absent because she had to look for small jobs to feed the family as the father neglected them. The team met Fiona’s first cousin who noted that Fiona had been suffering from the eye problems when she lived in Sudan.

“It normally happens when she eats beans and small fish” the cousin explained.

Fiona says whenever she wants to read her eyes start paining and this affects her performance.

“When the eyes pain, her ears also start paining” said the class teacher

Fiona is now happier at school and acts as a key role model who freely shares her knowledge with her peers during deaf awareness sessions.

From talking to both Fiona and her cousin, it became evident that there was a hint of gender based violence and child neglect. The parents were reported to be repeatedly quarreling and conflicting in front of the children, who sometimes also end up abused.
With more guidance and agreement on medical follow-up with the family, the project team mobilised for a medical checkup from Moyo to Arua Regional Referral District Hospital for both Fiona and her brother Joel who were accompanied by their mother.

The specialist confirmed that Fiona and her brother are suffering from conjunctivitis allergy that is manageable. He also gave them some drugs and tips for basic management to avoid deterioration.

Fiona with her brother during a follow-up medical assessment in Arua

Fiona also teaches other children in the camp what she learned at school, she likes football and plays with her friends.

Their family situation is being monitored by the project team and welfare workers in the zone where they live.

Meet..... OSINGE WALTER

15 year old Walter started to feel ill. He had begun to vomit, had a bit of diarrhea, a temperature, shivers and a headache; possible signs of malaria.

“He was feeling very sick and I did not know what to do, he vomited and had some joint pains”, his mother recollected

Walter’s mother knew that her son was sick and then rushed him to Angal Hospital in Pakwach for treatment which did not yeald positive results. Later it was discovered that Walter was suffering from meningitis which affected him for a long time. His body became paralysed along one side. When he was discharged from hospital he came home and was talking, but two days later he stopped talking and hasn’t talked since then.

“We have tried our level best to rescue the situation but failed, that is why the boy is deaf up to now”
Walter’s case was shared during a FACT session at Panyimur Primary School following sensitisation about the ACT project in the new District of Pakwach. During and following the deaf awareness session, his mother opened up after meeting other parents with deaf children for the first time.

His parents are now active members of the Parent Support Group that was recently formed in the school with the help and guidance of the field team, who also linked them to a deaf sign language trainer.

“We did not know how to communicate with Walter, we were just using our gestures and it was often difficult to understand each other. Now can sign some words like foods and greetings after been trained by Signhealth Uganda” his mother noted with pride.

There are still challenges ahead, but these are the early days as the ACT project moved into Pakwach for the first time as a new District.

Walter like other Deaf children, faces similar challenges at home, school and at the community level such as discrimination from fellow pupils and other community members, isolation and failing to blend in with other pupils and teachers, pupils.

Follow up actions designed to address these identified issues include:

- Parents to be encouraged to hold regular meetings and SL sessions at school with their peers;
- Follow up community awareness to deal with stigma and neglect in the community;
- Work with teachers towards building a more friendly school community and reduce the number of incidents of bullying and abuse.

Despite these challenges, Walter nevertheless has a dream to become a driver when he grows up.

*Hearing impaired children teaching some signs to the community in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement*