



A new Approach Gives Voice to the Children

*Discovering a Silent World**



Returned Peace Corps Volunteers Susan Fishman Story

In 1992, Susan Fishman arrived in Ecuador on vacation for two months. She came to hike through the Andes while learning the Spanish language, and she was a professional in Speech Therapy.

On this vacation tour she was invited to visit a school for children with cerebral palsy. Susan saw the need to implement interactive communication work with children. During that visit, teachers asked many questions about teaching with interactive communication. They were so motivated to learn that she realized they needed her. She opened her mind and said: "I have the knowledge in speech therapy that teachers need."

She was amazed by her experiences and went to the Peace Corps Ecuador office to learn of the process to become a volunteer. Then she returned to the United States and, after six months, she was back in Ecuador as a Special Education Volunteer, working as a Speech Therapist.

Susan was assigned by the director of the Youth and Family at Risk Program to the Cerebral Palsy Institute in Quito, where she found the children trapped in the world of silence; even though the teachers wanted to help they couldn't because they didn't know how.



Jose Julio Chica, uses a communication board to communicate with his teacher at the Cerebral Palsy Institute in Quito.

She realized that she could free them from silence through a communication board. This board consisted of presenting a series of drawings or word characters that allowed the person to communicate through the gesturing of images.

It wasn't very long before Susan began training speech therapists and teaching them how to conduct interviews to determine the individual needs of each student.

Each communication board was designed according to the vocabulary, motor coordination and intelligence of the child. Using these communication boards, the children began to wake up with noticeable communication improvement.

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Susan remembers how a couple of children communicated through the board, alone at recess. On another occasion, a quiet girl became the “class gossip.”

The Director of the Cerebral Palsy Institute appreciated Susan's knowledge and suggested that she should participate with other Speech Therapy professionals in training them. The Cerebral Palsy Institute promoted a workshop, which was attended by more than 40 speech therapists from around the country.

At the end of the workshop, Susan proposed to evaluate the students of the Cerebral Palsy Institute, it was very interactive, and the workshop therapists applied the learned method.

Susan realized that the communicative method was important, but needed a reference topic for people to talk about, she decided to take the learning outside of the Institute and took the children to have one day trip, giving them the opportunity to interact and learn. The trip had two purposes, one was improving classroom conversations and the other was the inclusion in the society.



A communication board is essentially a series of graphics which allow a person to communicate pointing at the images.

During her second year of service, Susan worked as a consultant for Cerebral Palsy Institutes across the country. She also created the first Speech-Language Pathology class at the “Universidad Central del Ecuador”.

** Taken and adapted from the Magazine “40 years of Peace Corps Ecuador” of John Zorovich.*