



Kids with cerebral palsy inspire speech therapist's return visit to Guadalajara

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SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. (Catholic San Francisco) - On a trip to Guadalajara two years ago, San Francisco native and speech pathologist Margarita Fajardo met young Maria Concepcion de la O, then just two years old. The child, abandoned by her mother at the city dump and found by a garbage man, suffered from cerebral palsy.

Sisters of the Servants' Society of Jesus run a home for disabled youth in the city and took her in. The girl lived there with 21 other children with similar

maladies. Known to most as "Conchita," the child was given the surname "de la O" after the home's founder, Brother Francisco de la O.

Having worked for a year with victims of cerebral palsy as a young graduate in 1991, Fajardo felt a keen interest in the girl. That interest became a deep love, and that love grew to encompass all the children Conchita stayed with at the Sisters' facility, Hogar de la Caridad. Her feelings for the girl led her to return the next year, this time accompanied by two fellow speech pathologists and several teaching aids. Their goal: facilitate communication.

"Conchita was the motivation to come back," Fajardo said. "To hold her and to talk to her, and not only her, but all the other children."

The children at Hogar de la Caridad receive medical care and physical therapy, but no speech therapy. It was this unmet need that Fajardo and her colleagues, Betsy Lance and Paul Stahoviak, sought to fulfill.

House calls

When they arrived last July, a communication mistake between Fajardo's group and the Sisters caused some initial problems. They had been expected in June. By the time they arrive, the children had been sent to foster homes for the summer. These periodic stays at foster homes give the Sisters a chance to rest, and the children an opportunity to interact with a family and with other children.

Fajardo's trio set out to as many of these homes as they could. They would conduct speech therapy sessions at the homes rather than in the care facility. It worked well, she told Catholic San Francisco. The group was able to interact with the children one-on-one and in small groups,

giving each student more attention than would have been possible in the larger group at the care facility.

The few children remaining in the care facility likewise received greater attention. Fajardo said the marathon session outlasted anything in their practices at home.

"Altogether we did four hours of speech therapy that first Saturday, which was incredible," Fajardo said. "Here in the San Francisco Unified School District, we are used to doing speech therapy for 30 minutes, and sometimes that seems like a long time."

Still, because of the miscommunication, Fajardo, Lance and Stahoviak were only able to see about half of the 22 children. She was, however, able to see Conchita again, at a home where she was staying with a young boy from Hogar de la Caridad, Pio.

Fajardo said the Sisters assured her all the children would be on hand for her next visit. Fajardo plans to make the visits an annual ritual, and hopes the care she and colleagues provide enriches the lives of the children. Prior to their first visit, the children were well cared for but had little means of communication.

A need articulated

Cerebral palsy affects the body's motor functions. Because it severely hampers muscle function, the disorder can often limit or even eliminate the ability to speak.

In an effort to improve the children's quality of life, Fajardo hopes to raise money for more sophisticated computer speech aids, called augmentative and alternative communication devices. The AAC device Fajardo hopes to purchase for the children is called a DynaVox. A keyboard and computer that uses symbols and buttons, it is activated by touch, motion or even puffs of air. The device then translates the commands into speech, allowing the user to communicate.

Inspired by the efforts of a German philanthropist who visited the school with clothing and toys funded by concerned German citizens, Fajardo hopes that by spreading the word about the children, Americans will give the children a voice as well.

For more information, Fajardo may be contacted at (650) 784-6092, or daisymf@yahoo.com; the website for Hogar de la Caridad is www.sociedadsiervosdejesus.org/Hogares/Hogares.html.

<http://www.catholic.org/news/national/story.php?id=26760>
