

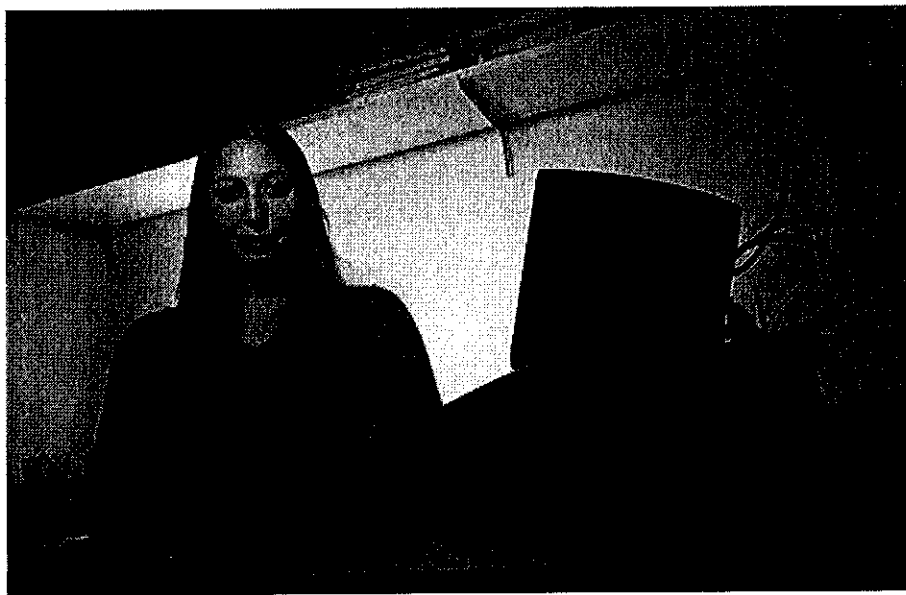
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Jamesville-DeWitt graduate Jodi Bova travels to Guatemala, fits children with hearing aids

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Frank Ordonez / The Post-Standard
JODI BOVA, an audiologist with Oviatt Hearing & Balance, sits inside one of the examination rooms at Oviatt. Bova traveled to Guatemala to fit people with hearing aids.



Photo courtesy of Jodi Bova
Two Guatemalan children show off hearing devices they received from a medical mission through Faith in Practice. Syracuse audiologist Jodi Bova was one of those participating in the effort.

Jodi Bova's patients don't usually travel for hours to see her, only to spend eight more hours waiting for their turn outside her office.

But that was the situation last January. And those patients all had grateful smiles on their faces.

Bova, 29, an audiologist at Oviatt Hearing & Balance in Syracuse, recently returned from a one-week medical mission trip to Guatemala.

The graduate of Jamesville-DeWitt High School, who now lives on Syracuse's North Side, said she has had an interest in doing medical mission trips since beginning her studies at the University of Buffalo. So when a colleague called to tell her about an upcoming mission with the group, [Faith in Practice](#), she jumped at the chance. Two weeks later, Bova and about 30 others with a wide range of medical specialties arrived in Antigua, Guatemala, ready to volunteer their services. The team stayed in a hotel in Santa Rosa. Early each morning, they drove over an hour via bus to the remote villages of El Tule and La Conoa, where they set up clinics.

Bova said the seeing those villages was "sobering."

"The first thing that struck me were the houses," she said. "It looked like someone went to the garbage heap and took everything they needed to build their house."

The remote location provided many challenges to Bova and the medical team. Their clinics were set up inside government-built schools -- small, tin-roofed buildings with no air conditioning and no running water. In El Tule, there was no electricity. They had to run a generator off of a bus.

Bova recalled the challenges.

"For testing hearing, it's not an ideal situation," she said. "You want to have a really quiet room to eliminate extraneous noise. That's not an option in a village. We just found a quiet place and did the best we could."

During a hearing test in the United States, a patient typically listens to a series of beeps set at different volumes and raises his or her hand if it's heard. They were not able to use that kind of setup, so some improvising was required.

"We'd have them listen to a toy, and when it talked to them, they'd toss it into a bucket," Bova said.

On top of the technical difficulties, the language barrier also presented a challenge. Fortunately, English-speaking Guatemalan volunteers had offered to help. During the one-on-one diagnoses, the translators ran from room to room, mediating between doctors and patients so that the best-possible service could be given.

Bova's main purpose was to diagnose hearing loss in children and give hearing aids when needed. While it is a fairly simple task in her Syracuse office, the situation in Guatemala provided ethically difficult challenges.

In four days at the clinic, the team saw more than 2,000 patients. Bova said she saw hundreds of those. Among them were many children and adults who needed hearing aids. Faith in Practice only had 25 to give out.

"It was hard," she said. "We had no idea who was coming in during that time. So we were trying to hold back."

Bova kept a list of adult candidates, making it clear they were saving most of the hearing aids for youngsters. That made some of the older patients upset.

"There was one man we saw in the first day who was 85 and really wanted one," she said. "His son brought him in and was like 'I know they're for the kids, but can you please give him a hearing aid?' We had to keep saying no. This guy hung around all day waiting to see if we'd have some left over. That was hard to see."

Bova's empathy for older patients comes from her personal experience. She said she prefers to work with adults because she gets the most satisfaction out of it.

"Children don't know what they're missing, but adults and elderly know what it's like to hear and they know what it's like not to hear as well as they used to. The adults that we did fit, when you turn it on, their face just lights up and they're just so grateful for that," she said.

As difficult as it was for her to turn away so many adults, there are sound reasons for favoring children.

"It's especially important because a lot of the kids needing hearing aids weren't talking properly because kids talk how they hear. If they're not hearing well, that really delays their language development all around," she said.

As Bova browsed through photos from her trip, she smiled as she came across a picture of a young boy. He had been fitted with a hearing aid years before but had outgrown it. So he had been going without one.

"When I gave him the new one, he was so excited about being able to hear again," she said, smiling. "He kept coming

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back in and sticking his head in the door and waving at me."

The hearing aids given out are much different than those used here. Manufactured by ComCare International, they are designed specifically for impoverished people in third-world countries. They are waterproof, durable and solar-powered. An hour of charging can provide a full day's use. Each one costs \$125.

"By our standards they're very, very crude," she said. "But these people have completely different needs than we do. They can't come back for fine-tuning or new batteries."

Bova said the experience was very rewarding. The gratitude and warmth she received from the villagers was unprecedented. She plans to do it again.

In the meantime, she's got a new appreciation for the luxuries we often take for granted.

"That's something you don't think about. Simple things like that when I'm thirsty, I can go to a sink, fill a cup with water and I can drink it and not get sick. That was the biggest thing that hit me when I got back -- how spoiled we are."

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