



Project Amazon: AN INTERVIEW

BY KIMBERLY BARRY AND ANNA JILLA



Since 2012, the American Academy of Audiology Foundation has partnered with the Oticon Hearing Foundation to send one audiologist and one audiology student to Brazil, to provide audiological care to children and adults.

THE PROJECT AMAZON MISSION

is sponsored by the Oticon Hearing Foundation to bring sustainable hearing care to the residents of the remote, riverfront communities that surround the Oticon Clinic in Parintins, Brazil. Established in 2011, the Oticon Hearing Foundation aims to foster a “community of caring” among hearing care professionals that empowers them to bring sustainable hearing care to in-need people and communities around the world. The Oticon Hearing Foundation accepts donations of gently used Oticon hearing instruments that are then reconditioned and provided to hearing care professionals who volunteer for non-profit humanitarian missions. The Foundation receives its funding from its parent company, Oticon, Inc., William Demant Holding (WDH), and Oticon-related companies, in addition to other organizations and individuals. The goal is to elevate awareness of the effect of hearing loss on the quality of peoples’ lives regardless of where they live and work.

The Project Amazon is a competitive application process with priority given to applicants with extensive hearing aid fitting experience (adult and pediatric), and who have a demonstrated commitment to audiology-related service work with local, national, and/or international organizations. The AAA Foundation is pleased to announce that the Oticon Hearing Foundation will support another mission trip for 2016. Applications are due June 15 and can be found at Oticon Hearing Foundation’s Web site (www.oticonhearingfoundation.com).

Opposite: Prepping to observe cochlear implant surgery.

Top left: Dr. Lena Kyman and AuD student Mia Canale (and their translator) with a young patient who just received hearing aids.

Top right: Dr. Lena Kyman and AuD student Mia Canale with an older patient who received her first-ever hearing aid at the clinic in Parintins.

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Lena Kyman, AuD, of ENT and Audiology Associates in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Mia Canale, an AuD student at the University at Buffalo, SUNY, were selected to travel to Parintins in November 2015. Parintins is a city of approximately 109,000 in the eastern part of the Amazonas state, Brazil. The city is located on Tupinambarana Island in the Amazon River. Parintins receives over half its income for the year during a three-day Boi Bumba Festival; only Carnival in Rio de Janeiro draws more tourists.

Recently, Anna Jilla, Student Academy of Audiology treasurer, and Kimberly Barry, AAA Foundation trustee, interviewed Dr. Kyman and Cancale about their experiences with Project Amazon.

KB and AJ: Why did you apply to Project Amazon?

LK: I've been passionate about volunteering internationally for years. As soon as I heard about Project Amazon, I knew I had to go. I actually applied the previous year and was not accepted. I felt devastated, but perseverance prevailed, so I applied again and was accepted.

MC: I was browsing through scholarships and opportunities on the AAA Foundation Web site, and it jumped out at me. With this being an international humanitarian experience, I saw the opportunity to do some crazy awesome audiology. I thought, "Hey I can do this. I'm interested in this." And I just went for it!

KB and AJ: Have you volunteered for other humanitarian projects?

MC: I haven't done a mission trip quite like this. This was my first time volunteering internationally. I've done some volunteering locally with Buffalo City Mission and Habitat for Humanity. But, Project Amazon was the first volunteering that I've done on a humanitarian trip abroad.

LK: Yes, when I was in college, I spent one summer working on a farm in Costa Rica. In between college and graduate school, I spent a summer working on an orphan bear refuge.

KB: I apologize, but I must interrupt. Did you say orphan bear refuge?

LK: Yes, an orphan bear refuge in Croatia. Most people do a double take when I mention that.

THE PATIENTS WERE SO GRATEFUL FOR EVERYTHING WE DID, AND GAVE US HUGE HUGS AFTER THEY WERE TREATED. IT WAS A GREAT REMINDER OF WHY WE WANTED TO GO INTO AUDIOLOGY IN THE FIRST PLACE.

KB: Have you volunteered for any audiology humanitarian mission prior to Project Amazon?

LK: In graduate school, I volunteered for an audiology humanitarian trip to Guatemala. So, yes, it's a trend and it's a passion. I really enjoy traveling and volunteering. You gain more from those experiences than what you give. You learn from the people and the culture. It's such a great way to experience the world.

KB and AJ: What made you want to travel to such a remote location?

LK: I love sleeping on the ground and eating home cooked meals. I'd much rather stay somewhere remote and rural than stay in a hotel.

MC: Going to the Amazon just seemed like the coolest challenge. I wasn't worried about it being remote, or not having Internet. My parents were more concerned about the mosquitoes than anything else. I'm just grateful for opportunities like this to bring hearing health-care access to those who need it most, along with seeing different health care delivery models and to learn from people that are different from me.

KB: Can you tell us about the area?

LK: Parintins is on the Amazon River and it is accessible by boat or by air. We wanted the entire Amazon experience, so we took a boat from Manaus to Parintins. Manaus is the capital city of the state of the Amazonas. It took 16 hours by boat to get to Parintins.

Parintins is famous for a very large annual folklore festival, called the Boi Bumba. There are elaborate costumes, parades with floats, singing, and dancing. There is also a competition during the festival and two teams (red and blue) compete. During our stay, we toured the stadium where the festival occurs. I'd love to go back during the festival.

MC: We flew into Manaus, which is the capitol of the Amazonas state in Brazil. Even with it being the capitol city, Manaus was not as developed as what one would have expected. On our second day, we jumped at the chance to take a very Brazilian, 16-hour boat ride to Parintins, where the clinic was located. Parantins was very small and basic, but so beautiful being right by the river. Pictures can describe it better than I can. This small city was such an interesting place to be.

AJ: Coming from life in New York State, how was the pace of life different?

MC: The pace of life was a lot slower and relaxed. They realize that the weather is hot, and that people need time to rest. I'm caught in the graduate school, type-A mindset, that is "go, go, go." When I went there, it was like "Wow!" I can do all of this audiology work, and I'm breathing a little bit more. I was really able to take the experience all in.

What was a typical day like at the Parintins clinic?

LK: First, let me tell you a little about the clinic. There was a small room with a tiny sound booth, a table with two chairs, a bedroom with bunkbeds, and a bathroom. That's it! Mia and I stayed in the bedroom, so we both worked and slept at the clinic.

Every day we woke up early and Luh, the cook, prepared the most amazing meals for us. We met with our translator, ate breakfast, and then immediately started seeing patients who were lined up outside every morning. There wasn't a set schedule. We saw patients all day. There was a very diverse range of patients, from the three-year-old who is having difficulty with language, to the 40-year-old who has never heard a sound, to the elderly. We didn't stop until we had seen everyone. No one was turned away. The waiting room is an outdoor courtyard. Lots of families came to the clinic. One family traveled 10 hours by boat to get there. We saw many multi-generational families. We primarily did hearing tests, fit hearing aids, and did cerumen removal. We also saw some dizzy patients, performed Dix Hallpikes, and even treated one with the Epley maneuver.

MC: The clinic was built into the place we stayed. Patients would start lining up outside our building before 7:00 am. They'd come not just from Parintins, but from all over the Amazonas area. We would see patients all day from 8:00 am until around 7:00 pm. We tested patients, fit hearing aids, observed cochlear implant surgeries, and saw some vestibular patients. We even did an Epley on the outside dining room table!

AJ: You must have been pretty close with your preceptor, Dr. Kyman. How was that different from your previous clinical supervision?

MC: There was instant bonding between Dr. Kyman and me. We started off with a 16-hour boat ride, so how could we not bond? We were in close quarters and constantly looked to each other for support because we were pretty much the only English-speaking people around other than our translator. I couldn't have asked for a better supervisor. I felt so comfortable with her. I could ask her any question, and could dialog about our patients.

AJ: So it might be a good team-building activity to introduce a mandatory supervisor-supervisee 16-hour boat ride as a routine part of clinical training for all AuD students. Out of everything that happened, what was the stand-out moment for you?

MC: There was a 95-year-old woman who came in with her daughter. This lady was really quiet and timid. Her daughter led the whole conversation. We fit this 95-year-old woman with hearing aids and her personality did a total 180. She started making jokes and teasing our translator. Her daughter was crying. It was like we gave this woman's personality back to her. They were just so grateful for everything we did, and gave us huge hugs afterward. It was a great reminder as to why I wanted to practice audiology in the first place.



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KB: How long were you there?

LK: We were there just under two weeks. While we were in Paritins, ENT surgeons from Brazil were there to do cochlear implant surgeries on four patients. We were able to observe the surgery and talk to the Brazilian audiologist who was performing intraoperative monitoring for the surgery.

AJ: I know it's easy for AuD students to lose perspective while they're trying to survive and finish school. That's so wonderful to have an opportunity like this to rekindle your audiology fire! Do you think you'd do it again? Or do something similar?

MC: Oh yes! I'd love to go back to Viva o Som and help out. Whether I'm still a student or a professional, I'd still like to be a part of humanitarian trips like this one. I am so happy and honored to have gotten the experience to do service work in my chosen field, and to learn about a new culture. I am so grateful to the Oticon Hearing Foundation and AAA Foundation for providing students with this opportunity.

AJ: Well Mia, thank you for your time! I realize that as a busy AuD student it's hard to take off time like that. The work that you guys did down there is invaluable. You've done so well for the patients and the profession! Thank you!

KB: Where are you off to next?

LK: I've been talking to an organization that does volunteer work in the Dominican Republic. Actually, I'm up for any opportunity I can find. I didn't mention that I was able to return to Guatemala last summer and would also love to continue to volunteer there. Global audiology is only valuable when you set up something sustainable. If you know of anyone who needs a person to travel, I'm that person!

KB: I've always wanted to do international volunteer work, but have never taken the leap. You are an inspiration! Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to talk to me about your trip. 🇺🇸

Anna Jilla is an AuD student at University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, and serves as SAA treasurer and AAAF Liaison.

Kimberly Barry, AuD, is a trustee of the American Academy of Audiology Foundation, and chief of audiology and speech pathology service at Charlie Norwood Veterans Administration Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia.