

# NTID AUDIOLOGIST VENTURES TO NIGERIA, VOLUNTEERS SKILLS

April 25, 2004

ROCHESTER, N.Y., April 25—Don Sims, an audiologist and associate professor at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, recently traveled to Africa where he volunteered his time to test, diagnose, and treat poor and often overlooked Nigerian women and children for hearing-related problems. Traveling with two other hearing specialists from Illinois and South Carolina, he witnessed firsthand the brutal poverty that has swept the country for decades, as well as felt the joy of assisting those who would otherwise go untreated.

The trip was arranged by two different organizations: ComCare International, founded to assist hard-of-hearing people around the world, and Winrock International, whose volunteer assistance program sends experts in a variety of fields to help developing nations grow more prosperous. The audiologists traveled to eight cities where they visited schoolhouses, hospitals and rural villages.

"We worked from dawn till about 9 or 10 at night," said Sims. "I used every ounce of audiology skills that I knew because of the diverse needs we encountered. For example, there was a widow with four children who came to us. She had been isolated from her kids after losing her hearing four years ago. After we tested her and fitted her with a hearing aid, she began smiling and singing. That was a phenomenal moment."

Nigeria is located in West Africa and is home to 120 million people. It is roughly the size of California, and although it is one of the world's leading oil-producing nations, the majority of Nigerians live below the poverty line. Therefore, one of the problems facing hard-of-hearing people living there is the high cost of purchasing and maintaining modern hearing aids. Conventional hearing aids don't perform properly for more than a few months, because they don't hold up well in tropical climates. But ComCare has developed a solar-powered hearing aid that can be charged with sunlight and is completely waterproof.

"The solar-rechargeable hearing aids are much more affordable and practical for people in countries like Nigeria," Sims added. "They cost only about \$100 to produce, and to keep costs down, volunteers assemble them."

NTID, a college of Rochester Institute of Technology, donated 35 of the solar-powered hearing aids, as well as Sims' time away from his job to help the effort.

"I have become convinced that inexpensive, durable, solar-powered hearing aids are greatly needed and I intend to do whatever it takes to see more people with hearing loss in the Third World have access to hearing," said Sims.

Approximately 15-20 percent of the women and children tested for hearing problems were found to have treatable conditions, but Sims noticed a large difference between treatment practices in the U.S. and in Nigeria.

"At NTID, I spend several hours optimizing the hearing aid fitting with high technology tools," he explained. "In Nigeria, however, I spent my time in triage, trying to pick who might benefit most from the few hearing aids we had, then I would fit the hearing aid in about 10 minutes. The need is so great that I had to work as fast as possible for as many hours as possible."

When asked if he'd consider volunteering again, Sims didn't even pause to think.

"It was a wonderful experience. I'd do it again in a heartbeat," he said. "There is a great respect for education and teachers among the people of Africa. The people were very appreciative of our help because they recognized that our motivation was not profit, but to help."

NTID is the first and largest technological college in the world for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. One of eight colleges of RIT, NTID offers educational programs and access and support services to its 1,100 students from around the world who study, live and socialize with 14,000 hearing students on RIT's Rochester, N.Y., campus.

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