

Mission to Ecuador

City doctoral student helps orphans through a communications breakthrough

BY LAURA CALVERLEY
FOR THE SUN CHRONICLE

ATTLEBORO

A Northeastern University doctoral student from Attleboro gave a special gift to some orphaned children in Ecuador during a semester break trip earlier this year.

Mike Angelo, 23, a 2008 graduate of Attleboro High School, traveled with 15 other Northeastern students and two professors to the For His Children orphanage in Quito, Ecuador.

While there, Angelo and his fellow students helped three orphans with cerebral palsy communicate verbally for the first time.

The orphans' response was very positive.

"The second we put the iPad in front of him, his face lit up," Angelo said, about one of the boys he worked with.

Up to this point, the boy only had signaled "yes" or "no" and pointed to pictures to communicate.

"Now he was able to play games, tell us what he was thinking, socialize with the other children and tell his caregivers what he needed," Angelo said.

The trip was arranged by Lorna Hayward, an associate professor of the physical therapy department at Northeastern, through her church, Wellesley Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Wellesley, also known as the Village Church.

The church has been supporting the orphanage through its outreach program for many years.

"I've taken 86 Northeastern University doctor of physical therapy students to Ecuador over the past six years," Hayward said.

Before Hayward started bringing students to the orphanage, the church would send parishioners once or twice a year to visit the kids.

"They did mostly service work at the orphanage, painting walls and other building

projects," she said.

Eight years ago, Hayward started the process of helping the orphanage provide therapy to the children.

In that time, the students have brought equipment to set up physical therapy clinics in two of the orphanage's locations, in Quito and another in Latacunga.

They also bring many other supplies, from books to wheelchairs, and also helped hire a part-time physical therapist from Ecuador to sustain the program.

This year they brought several iPads that Hayward paid for through a grant from the church.

"They (Wellesley Congregational) have been very generous. They've given me money every year to pay for the supplies that we bring down," Hayward said.

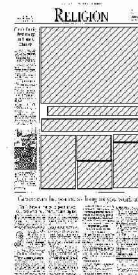
For His Children was founded 22 years ago by two American Evangelicals, Clark and Melinda Vaughn.

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"There are 60 to 80 kids in the orphanage. They're all developmentally delayed, but about 35 percent are severely handicapped and would benefit from physical therapy every day," Hayward said.

The Northeastern students spend a year getting ready for the trip by learning about the culture and preparing therapeutic plans.

This year, Hayward, Angelo and other students on the technology team underwent training at Easter Seals of Massachusetts to learn speech-generating software that would be loaded on the iPads.



Easter Seals of Massachusetts provides services such as assistive technology, employment and training, rehabilitation, and advocacy to help children and adults with disabilities.

The software, Proloquo2Go, was donated by the company that makes it, AssistiveWare. Proloquo2Go enables people to talk using symbols or typed text in a natural-sounding voice.

Angelo and the other students on his team — William Austin of Northampton, Emma Brady of South Burlington, Vt., and Andrea Pallias of Nicaragua — all underwent

training with an Easter Seals augmentative communication specialist, Kristi Peak-Oliveira, one of 20 such specialists that work with people with disabilities throughout the state.

"She was able to give them the training they needed on the software and how to use it with someone who can't speak. They were really excited about it in terms of how it worked," said Kirk Joslin, president and CEO of Easter Seals of Massachusetts.

Angelo said the young people they worked with,

who were 14 and 15 years old, were intelligent, even though they didn't speak.

"The problem with these kids was mostly the physical disability not their mental capacity," he said.

Angelo and the others adapted various settings on the iPad so that it would be easier for the teens and

their caregivers, including translating into Spanish.

Being able to use the device and software opened up a world of possibilities for them.


"We were giving him a voice and maybe increasing his chances of being adopted. We were changing his life," Angelo said.

Finding ways that technology can help people is part of the mission of Easter Seals of Massachusetts, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

"A lot has happened in the past 25 years that's made technology the key thing in helping break down barriers to allow people with disabilities to have equal opportunities," Joslin said.

Angelo, who has always been interested in international affairs and global health policy, wants to work "in the business of helping people."

"I want to work hand in hand with local clinicians and NGOs in order to make a difference in large populations of people in need," Angelo said.

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— Mike Angelo



The students and faculty from Northeastern University who traveled to Ecuador pose during the trip. Mike Angelo is in the front row, far left, kneeling.

SUBMITTED



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Mike Angelo works with one of the youngsters from the For His Children orphanage in Quito, Ecuador.