

DISCOVERING DEAF WORLDS: Supporting Deaf Leaders in Costa Rica

Davin B. Searls,
DDW Executive Director
SIGNews contributor

Leo Lopez is the kind of person you feel like you've known your whole life, five minutes after meeting him. He is charming, full of exuberance, and his eyes light up with a delightful welcome when he greets a visitor to his country. He is a natural leader and the central "go-to" person for deaf advocacy in Costa Rica. Born and raised in San José, Leo struggled with oral communication for most of his childhood. At the age of 20, he first contacted Asociación Nacional de Sordos de Costa Rica (ANASCOR), Costa Rica's predominant deaf advocacy organization, to learn LESCO (Costa Rican Sign Language). It was during this time that Lopez discovered his identity as a deaf person and became an active member of ANASCOR.

"I once had a respectable, high-paying job for a publishing company," says Lopez. "But after one year of being the only deaf person in a hearing company with zero communication access or interpreting services, I had to get out of there." Leo then embraced the local deaf community and began teaching LESCO. "I am poorer now, but happier and more mentally healthy with my deaf and signing peers!" Becoming fully immersed in the deaf community, Lopez served as ANASCOR's vice president from 2006-2009.

Costa Rica has over 26,000 deaf people, of which only 10% are literate and 500 use sign language. This is in line with statistics from the World Federation of the Deaf, which state that at least 90% of the 222.4 million deaf people living in developing countries have no education at all (WFD Deaf People and Human Rights Report, January 2009). Lopez and ANASCOR are concerned that with such a small core of signing deaf people, the community is suscepti-



Discovering Deaf Worlds is now inviting anyone who is interested in traveling to Costa Rica.

ble to the influence of imported sign languages.

They have reason to be uneasy — due to the influx of unwitting deaf American tourists, LESCO now shares a 75% similarity with American Sign Language (ASL). As Lopez states, "There has been a heavy influence of ASL in Costa Rica over the years and many less-educated deaf people are just accepting this. But we need to preserve our native language, our home." There is currently no written or video dictionary on LESCO. While ANASCOR has had numerous ideas on how to preserve LESCO, educate rural deaf people and the general public on deafness, and improve the overall quality of life of the Costa Rican deaf community, they have had limited access to the resources, training, and support needed to make effective change on a national scale.

In February 2010, Leo and ANASCOR connected with Discovering Deaf Worlds (DDW), an international deaf advocacy non-profit based in Rochester, N.Y. Recognizing a number of shared values between the two organizations— such as the preservation of local sign languages, empowerment through local capacity building, and the criticality of attaining full accessibility to language, education and community — collaboration was quickly formed. Lopez became the primary diplomat, serving as a representative to both ANASCOR and DDW.

Initially, ANASCOR members expressed a long list of

needs in their community— more interpreters, better education, promoting LESCO, increasing job opportunities, educating the deaf community on their rights ... the list went on and on. But "how" — that was the question. DDW encouraged ANASCOR to pick one need and focus on their solution. An initial proposal to "create a DVD in LESCO" scribbled on a napkin has since evolved into a full proposal outlining a more concrete strategic plan, budget, timeline, evaluation program, and committed workforce of 12 ANASCOR representatives. ANASCOR is now detailing how they will provide multi-media workshops to educate government officials, parents, doctors, teachers, and rural deaf people about LESCO, deaf people's rights, and deaf culture.

"We ask a lot of questions, pull more information, and encourage them to think innovatively," states DDW Co-Founder Dave Justice. "But they are the ones to do the hands-on work." The project is still in its start-up phase, but upon completion, ANASCOR members will be able to look back and say "we did this ourselves," ensuring the project will continue long after DDW's support phases out.

To supplement ANASCOR's efforts, DDW has partnered with socially-conscious travel company GoPhilanthropic to offer groundbreaking travel opportunities that combine culture and adventure while promoting sustainable philanthropic support for deaf associations in developing countries. In Costa

Rica, for example, tour participants will hike through jungles, whitewater raft, and stop by an eco-friendly coffee farm, as well as learn basic LESCO, join an evening deaf social, meet with members of ANASCOR and visit Fernando Centeno Guell deaf school. Part of the tour fee will go towards ANASCOR's multimedia project, and participants are also encouraged to support ANASCOR's endeavors through volunteering, fundraising, or promoting the work of the deaf leaders they connect with while on this journey.

Lopez's story is just one of many. Across the globe, there are thousands more deaf leaders like him and organizations like ANASCOR, creating a better world for deaf people. Since its inception in December 2006, DDW has witnessed the election of the first deaf politician in all of Asia in Nepal, was dazzled by deaf Chinese dancers performing the Thousand Hand Bodhisattva, observed the emergence of Khmer Sign Language in Cambodia, and visited a restaurant in India run almost entirely by deaf people— when is the last time you went to a restaurant and had a deaf waiter/waitress? Story after story, a common theme emerged: deaf people who were once abused and neglected became successful— fighting for their rights and

sometimes becoming the sole breadwinners of their family when given the opportunity.

Lopez, ANASCOR, and an unknown number of men and women out there are working tirelessly to give their communities the rights and opportunities they deserve. These locally-based humanitarians are all planting seeds on their own — DDW has joined to support their growth.

Join DDW on a Journey to Costa Rica from Feb. 24-March 5 and meet with Leo and ANASCOR. Also, travel to the renowned Monteverde Cloud Forest region to explore the jungle canopy, and hike up Arenal volcano! Registration is open until Jan. 20. For more information, please visit: <http://www.discoveringdeafworlds.org/programs/journeys/costa-rica>

Discovering Deaf Worlds is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that strives to advance the capacity of local deaf communities around the globe to meet their social, educational and employment needs. DDW achieves this through joint venture programs and partnerships with educators, employers, and non-governmental organizations. To make a donation, view more information on hosting a DDW presentation, or sign up for our free e-newsletter, visit www.discoveringdeafworlds.org.



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