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## Speech language pathologist volunteers in Turks and Caicos



**Speech language pathologist volunteers in Turks and Caicos.** LEARNING: Oakville speech language pathologist Deborah Venditti recently went to Turks and Caicos Islands, volunteering to help assess children with learning disabilities. *Submitted photo*

In 20 years of practice in Oakville, speech language pathologist Deborah Venditti says she's never worked so hard as when she recently volunteered her services in the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The long-time Oakville resident recently spent time in the Central American British territory, on a volunteer basis, providing assessments to children with learning disabilities and giving suggestions to their parents.

"We worked harder than I've ever worked in my entire life," she said. "We did a whirlwind 35 assessments in two weeks. It was a very ambitious project, however we accomplished an unbelievable amount. It was very much a success."

One World Foundation approached Venditti to be part of a two-week long visit this past January. The program was spearheaded by InterHealth Canada's consultant pediatrician Dr. Helen Leonard, who is serving in the tropical islands, where such services simply do not exist.

Leonard got the wheels spinning, but it was a multi-party effort to get the project moving. One World Foundation paid for travel and meals for Venditti and her counterpart in the project, a

New York-based occupational therapist Dr. Claire Richardson. The Sands Resort in Providenciales, where the medical centre that the pair worked out of is located, provided them with free board. The local government also paid for the families of the children to be brought from the surrounding islands to Providenciales for the assessments.

Venditti and her partner worked together on team assessments for 35 children. During the first week they examined a group of 35 children and revisited them in the second week.

They met with the children during the day and met with a developmental pediatrician to review the cases in the evenings.

“I never worked so hard in my life,” Venditti said. “It was incredibly rewarding because of the way we were received. People were so excited about us being there.”

She said most of the parents she saw didn’t even know the role of a speech language pathologist and occupational therapist. It was by way of Dr. Leonard’s suggestion that these children were brought to Venditti and Richardson.

“We tried to give suggestions that their parents or laymen could follow,” Venditti said. Our goal was to give one or two suggestions that might impact their lives. It’s much different than here where we are able to then provide weekly therapy.”

Venditti said the islands have a lack in services and this was the first time professionals went there for such work.

“There are absolutely no services there for children with special needs,” she said. If a parent can afford it, they will fly their child from Turks and Caicos over to Miami. Those would be the only professionals that anyone has ever seen.”

There is also a higher incidence of special needs children in Turks and Caicos compared to North America, she said

“One of the things Dr. Leonard was trying to do with our visit was to show: ‘Look, there is a need. These two professionals impacted their lives.’ She’s hoping the government will find some money to have someone go down there as a paid position.”

Venditti said there may be a return trip to the islands for a progress assessment of the children she and Richardson have seen.