

# Maine/New England

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## Gift of hearing a medical miracle for Dominican poor

**H**is name is Ector. He's 9 years old and until Roger and Liz Fagan showed up one day and stuck two strange pieces of plastic in his ears, he had no idea what he was missing.

"There he is," Liz said Friday as one slide of Ector, lost in his world of silence, appeared on the screen.

"Now he's figuring it out," she continued, smiling at the quizzical look on the boy's face.

Then came the slide the Fagans live for - Ector, eyes wide, reveling in this strange new thing called sound.

"Now he's got it," Liz said triumphantly.

Yes, it's only a hearing aid. Yes, they've been around for years. And yes, putting one in a kid's ear and turning up the volume is hardly a medical miracle in this strange new world of transplants and implants and other high-tech cures for whatever might ail you.

But we're talking poverty here. We're talking about the Dominican Republic, where many of the estimated 3,000 people who are deaf don't have to be. And we're talking about a couple from Portland - Roger is an audiologist, Liz a speech-and-language pathologist - who recently went there and turned this country's junk into that country's newfound treasure.

"It's quite a concept," Roger said. "We throw away things that can change people's lives."

Some belong to people who have passed away. Others are old and too clunky to compete with the all-but-invisible models on the market today. Still others are broken and one spring cleaning away from the weekly trash pickup.

It doesn't matter. The Fagans, with the help of the Portland Rotary Club, want all the hearing aids they can get their hands on. They promise they'll put them to good use.

Originally, their goodwill mission was to take them to India. Roger went there 10 years ago with a handful of hearing aids he'd collected over the

years and thought last year it might be time to go back and do more. But then came Sept. 11 and the advisories all but prohibiting travel to that part of the world - and the Fagans set their sights on someplace closer to home.

It started off small. Roger mentioned his plans to a few fellow Rotarians and the next thing he knew members of the Portland club were gathering old hearing aids from attics and dresser drawers all over Maine. Then several churches got involved. Then Rotary International kicked in money to help pay for the trip.

Finally, in late February, the Fagans kissed their four kids goodbye and headed for the Dominican Republic along with six other volunteers - including another audiologist and fellow Rotarian from Georgia who'd collected her own cache of hearing aids throughout the Atlanta area.

The plan was to set up shop in the National School for the Deaf in Santiago. Liz, assisted by several recent college graduates with degrees in speech pathology, would test the kids to see if a hearing aid might help them. Roger and his colleague would fit them with the most appropriate equipment. Then Liz would take over again and teach the kids how to start making sounds - maybe even speech.

But news of these miracle workers preceded them. By the time they got to Santiago, people from all over the region had flocked to the school - from parents with children in tow to elderly men and women standing quietly by themselves - all hoping the Fagans might have something in their equipment bag for them.

"It became a very big event," Roger said. "The longest I heard of someone waiting in line was six days."

They did what they could - which was a lot. By the end of their one-week stay, the light had gone on in 169 pairs of eyes. Children who never before knew the sound of a rubber horn or a xylophone held their hands to their mouths and giggled at what they'd missed for so long.



**Bill Nemitz**

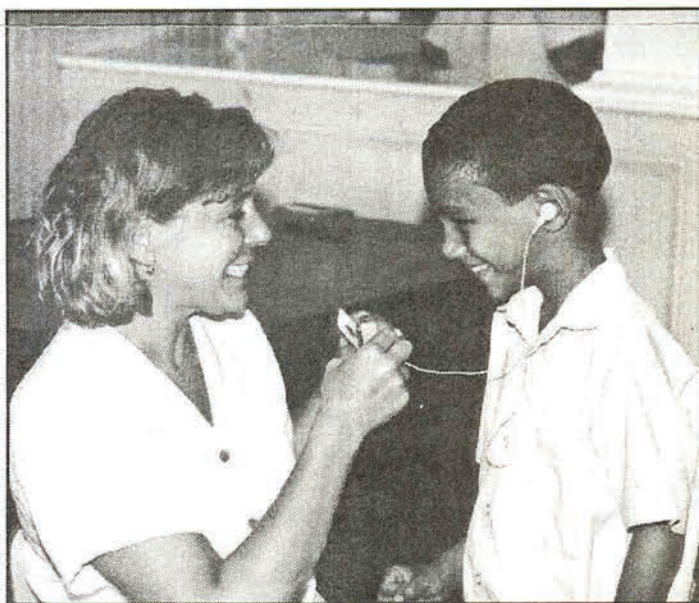


Photo courtesy Roger Fagan

Liz Fagan, a speech pathologist, exchanges grins with Ector, 9, as he hears for the first time, thanks to castoff hearing aids brought to the Dominican Republic from Maine.

"It's hard not to fall in love with these kids," Roger said.

But if there was joy, there was also angst. Some of the children were too profoundly deaf to benefit from a hearing aid - like the little girl whose mother desperately insisted the child could hear a telephone ring when all of Liz's test results showed otherwise.

"We knew she couldn't hear," Liz said. "There was nothing we could do."

What's worse, many of the older people, so hopeful when they arrived, walked home in despair when the rapidly disappearing equipment forced the Fagans to announce, "Only children from now on."

Which brings us back to the slide show. The Fagans want all of Maine to see what they saw - Friday was the Portland Rotary Club's turn - in the hope that they can go back and finish what they started.

They need hearing aids - don't worry about the age or condition. They need new batteries - the hearing aids distributed in February

included only a year's supply. They could also use a computer or two - it turns out the National School for the Deaf doesn't have one. In short, they'd like you to check around the house and call 773-7157 if you find something that might be useful.

And lest you wonder if it's worth the trouble, consider Roger's and Liz's last memory of little Ector. His life has been anything but easy - in addition to being deaf, he has cerebral palsy. But there he was that day, smiling from ear to ear as he jumped up and bolted out the door. "He ran out into the schoolyard," Liz said. "And he started to sing."

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