

Talking Hands

For the first fifteen years of his life, Anselmo Alemán relied on make-shift gestures to communicate with his family. His homeland, Nicaragua, had no public schools for the deaf until after its 1979 revolution. A combination of civil war, mountainous geography, and a devastating 1988 hurricane delayed the spread of education reform from Nicaragua's Pacific coast to its Atlantic side, leaving Anselmo and other deaf children in the region linguistically isolated.

Anselmo's life changed four years ago when a Rutgers University linguist, Judy Shepard-Kegl, and her husband, James, arrived in the port city of Bluefields to set up a small school for deaf children. During the preceding decade, Judy, now an assistant professor at Rutgers' Center for Molecular and Behavioral Neuroscience, had worked with deaf Nicaraguans on the Pacific coast, documenting firsthand the birth of their signed language. That work grew into an abiding involvement with the country's deaf population by the entire Shepard-Kegl family, which now includes two Nicaraguan-born hearing children whom the couple adopted.

When she first went to Nicaragua's Pacific coast in 1986 at the invitation of the Ministry of Education, Judy discovered a new sign language emerging among deaf residents. It was, she realized, "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to document a language as it came into being." Judy befriended a group of teenage girls studying hairdressing at a vocational school in Managua and set about learning their signs. The girls soon made a sign for Shepard-Kegl herself: tapping a curved hand at the side of one eye and then rubbing the forearm to signify "glasses/white skin." At a nearby Managua primary school, Judy found younger signers using the same homegrown language. It has since been named *Idioma de Signos Nicaragüense* (ISN) — Nicaraguan Sign Language, "a truly rich language with complex and consistent grammar," she says. Judy's research has documented its

*A New Jersey couple brings
the gift of language
to hearing-impaired Nicaraguans.*



BY BILL GLOVIN

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK ROMANENKO

standardization and spread up and down the Pacific Coast.

In 1994, Shepard-Kegl turned her attention to Nicaragua's isolated Atlantic coast, where signing had not been taught and ISN hadn't taken hold. By this time, James Shepard-Kegl had gotten involved — initially "for the adventure," he says. Accompanied by a deaf anthropology graduate student from Texas, James canvassed the Atlantic coast, discovering many deaf children in remote hamlets and seventeen families in Bluefields. In Managua, the two men and Judy showed videotapes of the children to officers of the national Deaf Association, which expressed interest in starting an education program in the area. Soon the Shepard-Kegls returned to Bluefields with a group of signers and offered a four-day sign-language and deaf-culture course. For most of the twenty deaf attendees, who ranged in age from four to thirty-seven, it was their first day of school.

The Shepard-Kegls, their kids in tow, return twice a year to operate Escuelita de Bluefields, which relies heavily on donors in the United States for its modest funding. The deaf teaching staff is drawn from the Pacific coast's pool of fluent signers. Judy has brought in colleagues from the United States, Canada, and Great Britain who specialize in home-signing, speech, audiology, sign language acquisition, and psychology to serve as resources for the deaf Nicaraguan teachers. "Amazingly," James says of Escuelita's de Bluefields' first year, "we were able to run the entire ten-week school for twenty-six kids on \$7,000." And the pay-

offs were priceless: "At the beginning of the summer," Judy notes, "the kids knew just a few gestures, but by the end they could hold entire conversations."

Nicaragua is also Judy's laboratory: Under a three-year, \$385,000 National Science Foundation grant, she's collecting language samples from Nicaragua's entire deaf population, estimated at about 4,000. Her goal, she says, is "to get a nationwide snapshot of language emergence and distribution at an early point in the history of a signed language."

The Shepard-Kegls' involvement in Nicaragua had its seeds at Brown, where the two met as freshman volunteers for Brown Youth Guidance. Judy, a coordinator of the Big Brother/Big Sister program, recruited James to be a male mentor for a nine-year-old deaf boy. "It was much more than a Saturday-morning, let's-take-a-kid-out-for popcorn thing," James recalls. "The kids we worked with are still a central part of our lives today."

After receiving a bachelor's degree in anthropology and a master's in linguistics from Brown, both in 1975, Judy went on for a doctorate in linguistics at MIT, where one of her faculty advisers was Noam Chomsky. James worked for several years as an airline pilot, then earned a law degree from Suffolk Law School. He currently practices law in Princeton.

The Shepard-Kegls hope to expand Escuelita de Bluefields to year-round operation and have the deaf teachers eventually take over running it. They will rely on the skills of students such as Anselmo, who has studied with Judy at Rutgers this year so that he can become a Bluefields teacher.

The Shepard-Kegls will return this summer to work at the school and search for deaf people in places paved roads still haven't reached. Their reward: Anselmo's ear-to-ear grin. As far as he is concerned, something like a miracle has occurred. ☺

Bill Glovin is senior editor of Rutgers Magazine.



James and Judy Shepard-Kegl and student Anselmo Alemán use their hands to say, "I like Nicaraguan Sign Language." (The sentence appears in written symbols on the board behind them.)