

Some miracles take a little longer

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THE bearded young man was ushered into my office in answer to an advertisement for an additional artist in our studio. There was nothing extraordinary about him – he looked exactly like so many young people look these days.

When I invited him to sit down he mumbled something and, instead of accepting the chair, he pulled a card out of his wallet which simply said: "I can neither speak nor hear. I am deaf and mute but I lip-read and understand what you say." Then he sat down and the "interview" began.

When I say that this was, to me, a fascinating experience I am not exaggerating. Facing me was a human being who had never heard the sound of music, never loudly recited a poem, to whom the world was practically shut off from all sounds and noises of life in all its forms.

Yet he was perfectly capable of looking after himself, embarking, albeit with great difficulties, on a career which enabled him to earn his living and, above all, to overcome the dreadful problem of being looked at as a handicapped person while being perfectly normal, highly intelligent and immensely talented as an artist.

This was 25 years ago. Today he is a happily married man with two children, owning his own house and a valuable member of the community. All because he found a job which fulfilled him and which, until then, escaped him and so many like him until he walked into my office.

This was the beginning of my becoming interested and aware of all the problems and difficulties that beset a particular section of our community for whom, perhaps, less is done simply because we cannot easily conceive a suitable way of employing them.

When the Rotary Club of London considered a special project for "The Year Of The Child" I was very fortunate to have my proposal accepted, which was to provide a 10 days holiday for 12 deaf and dumb children in Switzerland.

The only conditions were that they came from deprived homes in the London area. Well, this is where the miraculous story unfolds.

It is only when individuals are



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By Claude Calmon of the Rotary Club of London.

made aware of a particular problem that they respond. And so it was on this occasion.

The mere thought of these children, none of them ever having left this country, to be transported to another world, appealed to many and the support received was overwhelming.

It was an ambitious scheme, I admit, especially as for every three children we required an interpreter.

Initially the cost seemed prohibitive. When approached, Swissair responded magnificently by offering free air transportation to Switzerland, and British Airways brought them back at the end of their holiday. The Swiss National Tourist Office organised all the intricate details on the most cost-efficient basis, from arrival to departure, accommodation, excursions and, I suspect, even the weather. Of course, it pays to have the senior executives of both Swiss organisations as members of the Rotary Club.

To this I must add the individual generosity of club members and outside organisations, all of whom contributed to make this event successful. One of the most moving contributions came from the Rotary Club of Battersea, in whose area the school was situated from which the children were selected. They donated a considerable sum to clothe the party adequately so

that no one would feel different from the many they were going to meet. What a kind thought.

From the very start it became clear that this was going to be an exciting, if unusual, experience for all, children and adults alike.

With press photographs at London airport, a tremendous reception at Basle, the wonderful accommodation in a charming family hotel in Interlaken, meeting Swiss children with an identical problem of deafness, these young people were swept away on a wave of incredulity, wonderment and disbelief that this could happen to them.

I never realised how naturally noisy even these handicapped children could be, how both my wife and I, accompanying the party, could communicate with relative ease and thus be involved in all the excitement of the occasion.

Of course, Interlaken in the Bernese Oberland is one of the most beautiful places to visit and with the good weather, the Alpine view exciting, and all made so much more enjoyable by the genuine and warm welcome given to everyone by the members and their wives of the Rotary Club of Interlaken.

The true miracle was still to come. Twelve somewhat nervous, apprehensive and shy children met at London airport. In these 10 days they grew up at a visible rate and when they returned they had become adults in almost every way.

For them, there is no doubt, their eyes have been opened and with the sympathetic understanding and help from

the headmaster, Rotarian Syd Merrifield and his staff, they now know that the world is their oyster.

Moments such as these, when everyone began to realise what fundamental changes were happening to our youngsters, were very moving, not to say emotional.

Yes, there were tears on leave taking and I am not ashamed to admit to it myself. I was happy to be able to share some of these wonderful moments with other members of our club who came to join us for the weekend.

The staff of the school deserve all our admiration for their dedication and devotion and, above all, love for these handicapped youngsters. That they will succeed in life of this there is no doubt in my mind.

I am still hoping for one more miracle to unfold. At the beginning I spoke of one young man whom by chance I was able to offer a career. Everybody benefited from the decision I took 25 years ago. Fortunately there are only a limited number of such afflicted children leaving school every year for whom finding employment, especially these days, presents a tremendous problem.

I am praying that we, as Rotarians, can throw our weight behind these young people to ensure for them that in spite of their handicap they are assured of living a fulfilling and happy life.

It will happen, I am sure. As I said right from the start, some miracles just take a little longer.