

Teen is giving the gift of hearing to deaf children



Grace O'Brien is 18 years old and has already changed the lives of hundreds of deaf children. VPC

Theresa Chong, For USA TODAY 10:20 a.m. EDT October 23, 2015



(Photo: Theresa Chong, for USA TODAY)

PALO ALTO, Calif. – Grace O'Brien is 18 years old and has already changed the lives of hundreds of deaf children.

“As soon as he put on the hearing aid, his whole face just lit up,” said O'Brien, founder of Ears for Years, Inc (<http://www.earsforyears.org/>), a non-profit organization that distributes solar-powered hearing aids to deaf children in developing countries. “You could just see in his eyes that something had changed.”

At the young age of 14, O'Brien knew she was destined to help children around the world. Her father had been suffering from hearing loss due to a brain tumor. “I became interested in the issue,” she said.

In 2012, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 360 million people experienced disabling hearing loss of which 32 million were children (<http://www.who.int/pbd/deafness/estimates/en/>). WHO also estimated “the prevalence of disabling hearing loss in children is greatest in South Asia, Asia Pacific and Sub-Saharan Africa.”

“Hearing aid batteries cost about a dollar a week,” O'Brien said. “For some families that could be their salary for the week.” She searched high and low for a sustainable solution and found Solar Ear (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXNXrTnoGXo>), a Brazil-based company that developed solar-powered hearing aids. The battery takes approximately two hours to recharge by harnessing energy from the sun or a light bulb.

O'Brien recalled the first time she fit a child with the hearing aid. He was a 3-year-old boy in Mexico. “This tiny little thing,” she said. “His mom was right beside me and she started crying. You could just feel the emotion in the room,” she remembered.



O'Brien fits Jesus, a student at the Lakeside School for the Deaf in Mexico, with hearing aid molds. (Photo: Ears for Years)

She has traveled to Mexico, Sri Lanka, Honduras, Nicaragua and South Korea fitting children with these hearing aids. "This hearing aid is giving them a chance to escape poverty. It's giving them the chance to get a valid education and I think that's really amazing," she said.

O'Brien is currently a freshman at Stanford University and was among the [2015 winners of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes](http://barronprize.org/) (<http://barronprize.org/>), an honor awarded to 25 young leaders ages 8 to 18 years who "have made a significant positive impact on people, their communities and the environment."

"It was so amazing to see that in that moment, I had done something that would make a difference in somebody else's life," O'Brien said.

For more inspiring stories of young people doing incredible things, visit Humankind on Facebook. (<http://www.facebook.com/humankindvideos>)