

Trainee of the Year Reaches Out to Give Back | CPD

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Ana Caballero fits a hearing aid for a young patient during a humanitarian mission to El Salvador

Ana Caballero already had an impressive resume before being named Trainee of the Year by Utah State University's Center for Persons with Disabilities—medical doctor, researcher, Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (URLEND) trainee. But she plans to add even more to it.

Caballero, a native of El Salvador and a research assistant at the National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management (NCHAM) at USU, is beginning the third year of a five-year, dual-track Aud.D and Ph.D program in Audiology.

"I feel very good about it," Caballero said during an interview squeezed into a busy schedule that juggles work at three clinical sites. "It's very gratifying, being able to combine it all."

Part of the combination has been the opportunity to give back. Caballero coordinated a humanitarian mission to El Salvador and participated in a URLEND exchange opportunity in Hawaii in March 2014.

"Being an international student from El Salvador and being able to help my own people was a wonderful experience," Caballero wrote after the humanitarian mission. "It helped me realize how important our roles are as audiologists in the lives of our patients. It was very emotional for me to see the reactions of these kids and their mothers after hearing for the first time. An amazing experience!"

Of the URLEND experience as a whole, Caballero said, "I learned that families of kids with special health care needs have a lot of things going on," she said. "It's not just seeing them as a professional who wants them to do what we want them to do, there are a lot of other things they have to do in their lives that they have to work around. I know families have a lot of struggles but they won't tell you about them."

Caballero herself is no stranger to struggle. She fled to the United States with her mother and younger brother in 1989, at the height of the civil war in El Salvador. Caballero's parents were both medical doctors. Her mother worked with UNICEF, and all the international members of her team were killed in the fighting.

"The U.S. gave her a visa to come," Caballero said. "She was a physician, but she had no work visa."

Caballero, her mother and brother lived in a garage and saved pennies in a fishbowl. Her mother did house cleaning and babysitting to make ends meet, and pushed her children hard to succeed.

"At the time, I didn't know how to speak English," she said. "Mom said, 'you'll figure it out.' I started third grade here and went six months without opening my mouth."

Her goal as a third-grader was to be named Student of the Month, an honor that included lunch with the school director. When she finally decided to speak, she reached that goal several times.

Caballero returned to El Salvador in 1991, and started medical school in Cuba in 1999. She completed her degree in 2007 and worked in El Salvador for three years. She returned to the U.S. in 2010.



Ana Caballero

“Those memories are always with me,” Caballero said. “At some point all of these experiences have built what I am now.”

And what she is now, according to mentor Karl White, is a persistent, caring professional who goes above and beyond what is expected, and is always looking for ways to improve whatever situation she’s in.

“There aren’t many students that can come into a situation and really understand the big picture, and then come back with suggestions to improve,” said White, NCHAM director.

For example, he said, about 20 percent of babies born in Cache Valley have Hispanic surnames, yet a few years ago in the Sound Beginnings pre-school, there were no Hispanic children. Caballero volunteered to help.

“It’s incredible,” said White. “There are now six or seven (Hispanic) children in the program, and she has created a Hispanic family support group of 35 or 40 people who come—aunts, uncles, cousins.

“Ana is a physician, so she has much more training than the students that we usually get,” White continued. “But she wants to be an audiologist. She’s a real breath of fresh air.”

An audiologist, yes, but Caballero wants to be even more.

“I want to be the ambassador to help people find the opportunity and access to health services,” she said. “I would like to be an audiologist that can be accessible to the Hispanic population in underserved communities and have the opportunity to help both in the United States and in El Salvador.

“Normal people like me can get these goals if they’re passionate about what they do and believe they can,” she said with a smile.