



DEBORAH DUSHKU GARDNER spends most days caring for her toddlers, picking up and dropping off children to piano lessons and soccer practice, helping with homework and doing all the other tasks that keep a young wife and mother of five busy.

But thanks to her parents, Deborah gets a break one day a week — one day to call her own. What does she do with that precious time? No pedicures or girlfriend lunches for this mom. Deborah is too busy caring for her other children — hundreds of Bulgarian orphans.

Bulgaria's adoptive *Mother*

By J. Melody Murdock
Photography by Brad Luppino



The inspiration

Deborah can still vividly recount one of her first visits to a Bulgarian orphanage. "Several dark-eyed children ran toward me with their arms stretched out calling, 'Mommy, mommy,'" she recalls. "Each wanted to be embraced, to be touched and held."

After walking the halls of the orphanage, Deborah's heart ached as she saw what she calls the "invisible children," the babies whose only physical contact was a diaper change or quick feeding — babies who no longer cried because no one responded. She wept as she saw the malnourished, undersized children starving for attention and the teenagers who would soon be released into the real world with no social skills, most likely to end up using drugs, turning to prostitution or suicide, joining a gang or the mafia.

Deborah knew her life had changed forever. She knew she could never turn her back on those children. "The only way I can cope with what I have seen in those orphanages is to do something about it," says Deborah. "I've seen how these children live and what they are going through; I feel I have a responsibility to do something. These children need an advocate, someone to care."

The helping hands

After many subsequent visits to Bulgaria, visits with dozens of orphanages, the Bulgarian government and others, Deborah teamed up with her former LDS missionary companion, Heidi Barker, and together they founded One Heart Bulgaria, a nonprofit organization that helps provide Bulgarian orphans with the necessities of life. Approximately 1,300 orphaned children at 25 Bulgarian orphanages currently receive humanitarian aid through One Heart Bulgaria. This organization, now 7 years old, provides emotional support, food, medicines, hygiene items, bedding, dental care and medical needs. One Heart Bulgaria also strives to improve the children's surroundings through renovations in the orphanages such as replacing broken bedroom windows, adding washers and dryers or setting up small libraries.

Deborah says, "We not only want the children to stay alive, but be happy to be alive." One Heart Bulgaria provides opportunities for joy and increased self-esteem through uplifting extracurricular activities ranging from music, sports and dancing classes to an adoptive grandmother nurturing program to life skills training for teenagers.

During Deborah's last visit to Bulgaria, she was able to witness firsthand the impact their music programs are having on the young children. "I sat and bawled uncontrollably as I watched the 40 little orphans ages 3 to 6 sing their hearts out under the direction of the music-time teacher we hired," she recounts. "They were actually smiling, hopping around, clapping and enjoying themselves."

I had never seen so many happy orphans. In that moment, I knew all my efforts were worth it. I knew the work we are doing at One Heart Bulgaria is truly changing these children's lives."

Although she is proud of the work One Heart Bulgaria is accomplishing, Deborah constantly reminds people that it is God's work. "He is the one who moves mountains out of our way so we can go in like the worker ants and get down to business."

The future

During her one "work" day a week, Deborah not only oversees the operations of One Heart Bulgaria but also works relentlessly to raise money for their cause. She tries to explain that it doesn't take a lot of money to make a big difference. She points out, "Just \$100 a month will pay the salary of an adopted grandmother who visits an orphanage daily to hold, nurture and play with the children."

During one of her last visits to Bulgaria, she met a baby named Victor who died because no one had \$800 to pay for the shunt operation he needed at birth. She now calls Victor a hero because he was one of the children who inspired her to create the hydrocephalus program that has since saved the lives of 36 orphans in just one year.

In March 2007, pregnant with her fifth child, Deborah visited Bulgaria to personally tend to two infant orphans as they received their hydrocephalus operations. For hours and hours, day after day, in a dilapidated Bulgarian hospital, she cared for those babies. As she says, they are "babies who [are] going to live because of money. Of course it's not just that, but when it comes right down to it ... it is."

Deborah is humbled by the number of people who support the Bulgarian orphan's cause. For example, her parents moved from their home state of California to Providence, Utah, to be closer to family and to help Deborah with her children — both in Utah and in Bulgaria. Deborah recognizes



One Heart Bulgaria www.oneheart-bg.org

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— DEBORAH

the critical role of her parents, “If they weren’t helping with this, I’d have to fold. There’s no way I could run this organization without their help.”

Deborah also points out the generosity and support of so many other people. For example, musical performers Sam Payne and Mindy Gledhill are ardent supporters. They accompanied Deborah to Bulgaria last spring, where they performed at three large concerts for children from 10 different orphanages. Mindy, Sam, and Peter Breinholt have planned a benefit concert at Brigham Young University on March 5, 2010. “In addition to performing their original songs, they will be sharing some of their special experiences they had with the orphans along with photos and video footage,” says a very grateful Deborah, who invites all to attend.

The present

On the home front, Deborah continues to juggle the needs of her husband and children with the desperate needs of the Bulgarian orphans. “It is always a balancing act, but I work hard to keep my family in first position. I have found that life is about timing. Right now I have to work on One Heart Bulgaria part time and be with my family full time, but that will change later.”

As a mother, entrepreneur and humanitarian, Deborah remains realistic. “You can’t try to have it all or you will go insane,” she says. “I choose not to have a spick-and-span home and a fantastic dinner on the table every night — it’s okay to have pancakes or pizza toast for dinner here and there.”

Deborah is a woman with a cause. Yet, she gracefully compliments all women reminding us of our innate power and will to accomplish great things. “We each have talents, gifts and a personal mission,” she says. “Each woman has to figure out what her mission is and when she is supposed to embark upon it.”

Reflecting on her own desires to serve and nurture her children here and in Bulgaria, Deborah reminds herself and us, “timing is everything.”



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