

Spreading love

By Pat Bohm Trostle

Ex-missionary returns to Bulgaria to help children

Deborah Dushku Gardner first saw the inside of a Bulgarian orphanage when she was serving an LDS mission in the country several years ago. The babies lying unattended, the lack of basic supplies, the bare, drab walls made an impression she couldn't forget.



"The children run up to you and say 'Maiko, maiko,' 'Mom, mom.' They want attention so much. You can't help but want to do something for them," recalled Gardner.

After completing a degree in human development and beginning her own family, the Providence resident joined with her missionary companion, Heidi Glyn Barker of Ohio, to form One Heart Bulgaria. The nonprofit, non-denominational group, which Gardner now heads, facilitates improvements at state-run orphanages in Bulgaria. Funds raised in the states supplement supplies of food, medicine, bedding and hygiene items in the orphanages.

U.S. volunteers give their services as accountants or attorneys, deliver diapers, play with babies and children, and supply material for the group's newsletters. Interns live at the orphanages for a few weeks or months, enriching the children's lives with educational activities or just holding and feeding the youngest ones.

While all the U.S. personnel are volunteers, economic conditions in Bulgaria permit only a limited amount of voluntary work on the part of residents. Instead, One Heart Bulgaria representatives receive small salaries to work as caregivers in the orphanages, which are always short-handed. The organization also offers training to state-hired orphanage workers. The group's field director, Nikolai Gavozov, PhD, operates in country to coordinate the group's programs.

Currently, said Gardner, One Heart Bulgaria is seeking interns from the United States who speak the language to spend between five weeks and three months in country.

Cache Valley is reputed to have "clusters of return missionaries from Bulgaria," she said, making it prime territory for an appeal.

The interns will live in the orphanages with the children, she said. They'll help with homework and plan activities such as music therapy or field trips. Living expenses will be minimal, she said, and some matching funds are available for support.

In three years, the group's work has expanded from two orphanages to 15, now including 1,053 children. It has moved into orphanages for teens, teaching them work skills, and into orphanages for disabled children, hidden away in the mountains.

"We hope that the quality of their lives is better. The more you can help, the better," Gardner said.

Individuals or community groups in the states may choose to sponsor an orphanage, she said, mentioning that a book club is sponsoring an orphanage.

The cost is about \$50 per child annually — yes, that is annually, not monthly.

“So little money goes so far,” she said. When she sees well-clothed, salon-coiffed Americans in large cars, using their cell phones, she is impressed.

“There is so much money here,” she said, in comparison to what she has witnessed in Eastern Europe. Gardner said she first started by helping in the Sveta Paraskeva orphanage for babies and toddlers.

“Those babies just lay there in those cribs and cry. You can’t help being stirred,” she recalled.

Meanwhile Barker, her one-time companion, worked with older children at the Ivan Rilski orphanage. Both orphanages are in the capital city, Sofia.

When the two women first met with Bulgarian government officials to set up a not-for-profit organization, Gardner reported an atmosphere of suspicion. She was prepared for “paranoia about outsiders seeing poor conditions,” but they were not even allowed to see the children.

Perhaps because a Bulgarian friend accompanied them, perhaps because Barker and Gardner spoke Bulgarian, there was a breakthrough, and One Heart Bulgaria was born in March 2003.

“It was amazing for that country,” said Gardner. “Personally, I think it was God. It was a real miracle.”

Eight months later, the group received nonprofit status in the United States. Gardner noted that it is not an adoption agency.

“But we do have information,” she said.

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