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Saturday, August 9, 2003

LDS Church News

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Edition: All

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'One Heart' provides fresh produce to orphans

By **Deborah Dushku Gardner**

I remember the first time I walked into an orphanage in Bulgaria. Several small dark-eyed children ran toward me with their arms stretched out calling, "Mommy, Mommy." Each wanted to be embraced. I watched in wonder at these little ones — born in a third-world country, and now orphans. I picked up a little girl, too small for her age, and held her on my hip. I assured myself that someday I'd return and adopt a Bulgarian child. Little did I know how many Bulgarian orphans would become a part of my life.

Sometime later, looking out the window of the small plane leaving Bulgaria at the conclusion of my mission, I cried quietly to myself. I had been profoundly affected by my mission and the deeply meaningful relationships I developed.

Seated next to me on that flight was my companion and friend, Glyn Barker, who shared my love for Bulgaria. That flight home was the end of one mission for Glyn, and the beginning of another. Years later, she returned to Bulgaria and tried to adopt two orphan brothers, Lyubcho and Ivan.

Health problems prevented her from completing the adoption process and the two were left. If she couldn't be their mother, she felt there must be a way to nurture them.

So she hired a Bulgarian friend, Radost, to make weekly visits to the orphanage and bring fresh fruits and vegetables. Out of this desire to care for two brothers came inspiration to start "One Heart," an organization to aid Bulgarian orphans. It was organized in March 2003 with Glyn Barker as president and me as vice president. Later that month, as companions again, this time on a different mission, we returned.

We took bags filled with baby aspirin, diaper rash ointment, bottles, underwear, developmental toys, bedding and other essentials requested by an orphanage.

Our three goals were to deliver the supplies to two orphanages, seek out additional orphanages that might be interested in our assistance, and to register the organization with Bulgarian officials. With Heavenly Father's help, we accomplished our goals and more.

The Bulgarian government accepted our humanitarian offer with excitement and gratitude, enabling us to organize a Bulgarian sister foundation to "One Heart." We have paid Bulgarian representatives to visit two orphanages weekly.

Two additional orphanages for handicapped children will also soon join the program. Because the

orphans are small from malnourishment or the lack of medical attention, an allowance of \$50 a month is given to each orphanage representative to buy fresh produce weekly. We call it, "The Perpetual Vegetable Program." Funds also pay taxi fees to transport children to the hospital.

Orphans also need love and affection to thrive emotionally. "One Heart" representatives provide for the social, emotional and intellectual development by reading, singing and playing educational games.

Of particular concern to me were the infants who lie motionless. They have given up crying for attention. These infants lie for a year or more of their infant lives, being touched only during diaper changes and feedings. Our representatives at this orphanage hold and rock each infant.

"One Heart" is working on a resource center in Bulgaria to supply items to each orphanage. Many items requested by orphanages are non-consumable, such as books, educational toys, gardening and kitchen tools, musical instruments and picnic equipment. Other items include clothing, bedding, shoes and underwear.

Our non-profit organization now supports four orphanages, each at the cost \$1,400 per year. We feel we are changing their lives, and if one life is improved, so is an entire generation that follows.

Deborah Dushku Gardner, who grew up in Carmichael, Calif., lives in Providence, Utah, with her husband, David, and their three children. She can be contacted by e-mail at ddushkugardner@hotmail.com or through the Web site: www.oneheart-bg.org.

Words: 659

Section: Church News

Additional caption: Orphans in Bulgaria await fresh fruits and vegetables provided by "One Heart," an organization started by returned missionaries to aid Bulgarian orphanages. One Heart representatives buy and deliver the produce weekly.

Credit: Photo courtesy Deborah Gardner

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Additional caption: Deborah Dushku Gardner holds an infant orphan in Bulgaria.

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