

By KATHY ROOTE

In October I traveled to Brasov, Romania with a group of volunteers from Hearts Across Romania, a non-profit foundation founded in 2003 and based in Irving.

Hearts is dedicated to making a difference in orphaned children's lives.

Twice a year, volunteers travel to Brasov, a beautiful city located about 160 miles north of Bucharest in the Transylvania area. It is here where we work with children of all ages in group homes and orphanages.

The group home I visited was a new, nicely furnished home in a residential neighborhood of a small town. Ten children lived in the home and they seemed happy, clean, well-fed and had toys and kind caregivers. They each had their own little bed to sleep in and their own clothes.

On the surface, it all looked very nice. However, these children were so hungry for love; they became almost obsessed with our group while we were there. They couldn't get enough attention, enough hugs or enough kisses. It was all right while I was there, but that night I couldn't sleep thinking about all those children.

Once the toddlers reach school age, they will move to an orphanage. The orphanage I visited housed mainly pre-teens and teenagers. The sprawling, old building is home for 135 children. It is dark, musty and very dreary. It sits on the main street in the center of a busy town alongside shops and restaurants.

Each bedroom in the orphanage sleeps six to 10 children and most sleep two to a bed. There were no lights in the shower rooms, so showers could only be taken in daylight. There was no toilet paper in the bathrooms. There is no privacy. Everything is grouped including showers, bedrooms, bathrooms and meals.

If one child has something another wants — it is taken with little hope of getting it back. This happened the day I was there. One child had received a new pair of sneakers in the afternoon and by evening they were gone — taken by an older child who wanted them for himself.

During our tour, I noticed several teenaged boys and girls with shaved heads. The caregivers told me that these teens had broken rules of the orphanage and this was part of their punishment.

The caregivers seemed overwhelmed and indifferent — it was

very much an institutional atmosphere.

When the teens reach age 18, they must leave the orphanage and go into the world without preparation or support. I couldn't get the thought of the toddlers and their bleak futures out of my mind.

Orphans in Romania have suffered tremendously because of a former Communist rule, which ended in 1989.

For more than 40 years, birth control and abortion were illegal, and families who did not have at least five children were punished with increased taxes. Because the economy was poor and families were unable to financially care for their children, many were placed in orphanages where the facilities and care were extremely inadequate.

Romania's economy has improved, but continues to struggle, and there are thousands of children still living in institutions. Though conditions in orphanages have improved since 1989, they are at best an inadequate substitute for life with a family.

During the past year, Romania has closed the baby orphanages, placed those babies in foster care, and opened group homes for toddlers.

See ORPHANS Page 14



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

HARD WORKERS: Hearts Across Romania volunteers recently met with an eye surgeon (far left) in Brasov, Romania. The piece of equipment shown above was donated to this children's hospital as part of a vision program developed by the organization to help correct strabismus (crossed eyes) in institutionalized children in Romania.

ROMANIA

Continued from Page 10

Hearts has several ambitious projects underway to help Romanian orphans. Two very large shipments of medical supplies sent by Hearts arrived in Brasov this year. The supplies were donated by local North Texas individuals and groups and distributed to Brasov area hospitals and orphanages.

In addition, a vision program has been developed by Hearts to correct strabismus (crossed eyes) in institutionalized children in Romania. To date, 31 children have had surgery to successfully correct their vision.

The foundation is also working on two new programs.

A visitation program to the United States for older children living in orphanages is planned for spring. The children will stay with host families and have the opportunity to see the sights in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and experience a new culture firsthand.

Hearts is also excited about their program for teens that are leaving the government orphanage system. To help them transition from institutional living to living independently, Hearts is working with indi-

viduals in Romania to set up training programs for these teens, including skills training. Plans are also underway to set up a home where the teens will live while they prepare for jobs or attend technical school. This home environment will give the teens a good foundation and the necessary skills to build their lives on.

I saw first hand the wonderful work Hearts Across Romania has been able to accomplish in a very short period of time.

My trip to Romania provided me the opportunity to give something of myself to the children as well as build new friendships and experiences. It was a fantastic experience and one I hope to have again.



HAPPY TODDLERS: Hearts Across Romania volunteer Geanie Burns visits with a child living in an orphanage in Dacia, Romania.

If you would like more information on Hearts Across Romania, visit the Web site www.heartsacrossromania.org or contact Hearts president Geanie Burns at 214-521-8595 or Mariana Achiriloaie at 972-233-2689.

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