

Neighbors CLUBS & ORGANIZATIONS

Romanian orphans receive support from Irving nonprofit

By KATHY ROOTE

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

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

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 and 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, hugs or 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 and sits on the main street in the center of a busy town alongside shops and restaurants. It is dark, musty and dreary.

Each bedroom in the orphanage sleeps six to 10 children with two on a bed. There were no lights in the

shower rooms, so showers could only be taken in daylight. There is also 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 teenage boys and girls with shaved heads. One of the caregivers told me that these teens had broken rules of the orphanage, and this was part of their punishment.

When the teens reach 18, they must leave the orphanage and go into the world without preparation or support. I couldn't get the thought of the the children's 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 bad and families were unable to financially care for their children, many were placed in orphanages.

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, they are poor substitutes for life with a family.

Hearts has several projects under way to help these orphans.

Two shipments of medical supplies sent have arrived in Brasov this year. The supplies were donated by local North Texas individuals and groups and distributed to area hospitals and orphanages.

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

A visitation program to the United States for older children living in orphanages is planned for spring. They have be able to experience a different culture.

For teens who are leaving the orphanages, Hearts will help them

transition from institutional living to living independently.

I saw firsthand the wonderful work Hearts Across Romania has been able to accomplish in a 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.

■ For more information, visit www.heartsacrossromania.org.

Kathy Roote is a resident of Coppell who volunteers with Hearts Across Romania in Irving.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A VISIT TO ROMANIA: Kathy Roote, right, meets a young girl in a toddler group home as part of a project with Irving-based nonprofit Hearts Across Romania.