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*H*ello everyone from minus 20 degrees Celsius. Despite the cold temperatures that we have in Romania at this time of the year, all the Projects Abroad Romania team want to wish you a Happy New Year! May the year 2011 bring you a lot of joy, happiness, memorable and magical moments together with the dear ones at home, or in Projects Abroad destinations, doing volunteering work all around the World. We hope you're all good and warm because right now we really hope you enjoy reading the first issue of our newsletter for 2011.

Alright, first things first, we are starting this issue as usual with Romania Inside – Out, where we have an article written by Victoria Richman, published in The Village Magazine, issue 6, entitled 'A Knot in Time'. Victoria is sharing with us her experience in Brasov and gives us details from her encounter with a local artist.

Things are starting to get very serious here, as we will find out later on, inside the Projects Updates Section that Alexandra Ichim, the Drama, Dance and Journalism Supervisor, keeps us updated on the latest new drama placements, providing some inside happenings from the auditions time she had together with the drama volunteers in January.

Since we are still in the month of celebration, a tradition in Romania for mothers is to cook; this bringing Alex, our desk officer, to his favourite section of all time, the Cookery Corner. This time, we'll provide you with a recipe of a traditional Romanian desert, one of which most of us Romanians grew up with during Christmas or Easter holidays, so please, check it out!

Of course we have some News and Updates for you. Things started to change around the office, as you may already know from the previous issues, our location has been changed and apparently some of our jobs will be modified as well, but in a good way of course. Related to those changes, you can find an article written by our Care and Teaching Supervisor, Dani Cristea, who is now working for two months in another Projects Abroad destination - Togo. Good Luck Dani, we miss you a lot!!

Furthermore, you can find our Volunteers' Stories Section, which are always a pleasure for everyone to read at all times, especially when one is travelling or just taking a moment to relax or remember the time spent in Romania.

Something new the year brings - this time, as well as in the December issue, we will have a section entitled Highlights of 2010. Since it's not possible to post 1000 pages of newsletters to highlight things we did with the volunteers last year, we will only post some of the articles from our former volunteers that would be added to the ones appearing in December.

All this brings us, Alex and Alexandra, to the part when we say 'Goodbye' for now. Until next time, when we hopefully enjoy +20 degrees Celsius and not -20, we can only hope you will enjoy this first edition of the 2011 Projects Abroad Romania Newsletter as much as you enjoyed the ones in 2010.

*By Alexandra Ichim and Alex Parasca*

## A Knot in Time

By Victoria Richman – Journalism Volunteer, UK, July - August 2010  
Article published in “The Village” Magazine, Issue 6, 2010

Since the 1400's Brasov has been a walled city, thanks to Saxon settlers who fortified the city for protection. Positioned along the walls were bastions and towers that represented the different trade guilds of the city; such as The Blacksmith's Bastion. Nowadays Brasov has broken out of its walled confines and is a sprawling modern city. Yet the old town still has the remnants of the walls and several of the towers still stand.

One tower, a five minute walk from the centre, is the 'Funarilor' Tower, meaning 'Rope Tower.' Unlike the other towers, which represent dying trades, this one's name is still valid. It is occupied by Mrs Neuvirt, a local artisan who weaves with rope and sells her wares from the tower.



The stone tower, rather austere from the outside, is cool and bright inside.

The walls are hung with Mrs Neuvirt's colourful creations, these being accompanied by wooden spoons and figures, and carved by her husband who is a sculptor.

Mrs Neuvirt mostly weaves wall hangings, but she also makes bags, rugs and bracelets. Her creations are juxtaposition between the rough hemp wool that she uses and the brightly coloured symbols she weaves into her work.

Many of her wall hangings contain sunflowers which are a Romanian symbol of wealth and happiness. She also uses owls, which are a worldwide emblem for wisdom. Mrs Neuvirt likes to combine beauty with practicality; she makes several 'face masks' as she calls them, which are hangings in the shape of a face with a spoon, carved by her husband, as the nose.

Her designs are a modern take on an ancient tradition. Weaving is the oldest and most widespread trade in Romania. It dates as far back as history can record and the skills are handed down through generations. Mrs Neuvirt grew up in the Fagaras Mountains where they cultivated a lot of cotton.

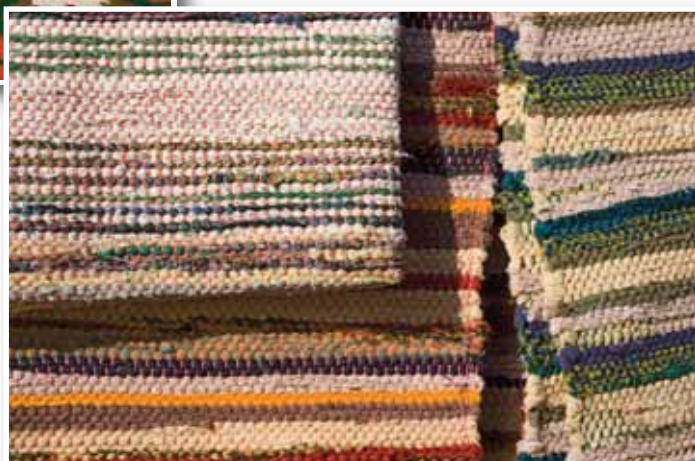
Her family could all weave and she learnt the skill when she was very young. In the past weaving was used for practicality; in the small villages and remote areas there were no stores in which to buy clothes so people used to weave their own. Weaving was mostly done during the winter months when weather prevented people from working the land. Weaving was also a social occupation; Mrs Neuvirt remembers the ‘Sezatori’ which were gatherings of the community to discuss council matters or just chat and tell stories from their daily life. The members would all weave at the same time.

Mrs Neuvirt weaves by hand, in much the same way as would have been done at the ‘Sezatori’. Her work is based on three knots; the simple knot, the round knot and the square knot. From these basic beginnings she can create pieces of complexity and beauty.

She likes to be alone somewhere peaceful when she makes her wall hangings, they can take up to three hours to be made and she likes not to be disturbed. The relaxation is the aspect she enjoys the most about weaving; it has a therapeutic nature to it. Weaving used to only be a hobby for her; she used to do it in her spare time. In the 90’s she and her husband decided to try and sell some of the pieces they had made at a winter fare.

They had such success that they realised they could make a career out of it. Mrs Neuvirt’s designs are now bought by people in several different countries such as England, America and Japan. She even sold a ‘face mask’ to someone from Abu Dhabi.

By sending out her creations to different countries Mrs Neuvirt is helping to bring the traditions and history of Brasov and Romania to the notice of the world. She is also a living part of history as, through her, the “Rope Tower” still continues in its original use. Perhaps the best thing of all for Mrs Neuvirt is that she is making a living by doing what she loves; a situation most people would be envious of.



# Drama Auditions

By Alexandra Ichim – Drama, Dance and Journalism Supervisor; Social Manager

January was a month of many challenges, responsibilities and hard work for our two drama volunteers from Romania at the moment. Sarah Slaunwhite from Canada and Greg Walker from the USA, together with me as their supervisor, went along Brasov and the surrounding communities to find members for new drama groups. The auditions that we planned were meant for us to form new drama groups in schools where the possibility to have such extra curricular activities is very weak.

It all started in December, when Sarah arrived and when the children and teenagers from all schools in Romania were having their winter holidays. It was then when we set up the visits to different Primary Schools and High Schools in and outside Brasov, to establish New Drama Groups, besides the already existing ones. Sarah, as she was the only drama volunteer back then, was very thrilled with the idea, and so, we started to create posters and talk to the principles and English Teachers to settle the auditions dates and conditions. Everyone, as in teachers and principles, were thrilled about the new drama project that we presented and the children were excited to get the chance to be part of such a group.

After leaving the posters in schools for a week, we started running the try-outs. Students had to prepare a monologue or a poem in English and to present it in front of us. The first audition that we had was in a primary school, where both I and Sarah were amazed by the amount of children that showed up, being interested in participating. It was School 27 from Brasov, where Sarah and I had a nice time and joy listening to all of the 16 children that showed up to the tryouts. We enjoyed seeing them perform in pretty good English and so, we formed two groups, with which Sarah would already be making plans for working on a performance.

By the time we had our second audition, Greg, the second Drama volunteer arrived in the country as was of a big help. Both drama volunteers, Sarah and Greg, are very hard workers and very keen to learn about the new culture and traditions, but also very enthusiastic to share from their own experience with people that never had their opportunities to learn drama techniques.

This time, the auditions took place in a high school in Brasov, called Grigore Moisil – for selecting new members for the already existing drama group of Projects Abroad – Black Juice. There were a couple of girls that showed up, true talents, who were very interested in participating in performances and drama festivals. They had very good drama skills and their interpretation of monologues was impeccable. The three of us, Sarah, Greg and I, were very impressed and thrilled to be having new members for our own group with Projects Abroad.

The third and fourth auditions were happening this passed week, when we went to two of the most famous high schools in Brasov. The students there were very excited about the whole idea and that's when we discovered great talents and skilled people, ready to be part of drama groups in their own schools.

So, we formed other two drama groups in Antipa High school and Ioan Mesota High school. Greg was very impressed by their skills and interest in participating in such a group. From those students we also chose 7 members for our own drama group, having rehearsals in our Projects Abroad office. There were around 20 people who showed up to these auditions both from the mentioned high schools, but also from other ones, who just found out about the try-outs. They prepared monologues, sketches, small performances and poems in English.

Our biggest surprise from all of these groups was of an 11 year old boy who showed up to our high school auditions, proving his desire to be part of the teenagers' groups. He had very good English and his skills of reciting and performing were amazing. He had never done that before and so, he appeared in front of us, starting to recite his perfect poem in English. Everyone was stunned by his interpretation and Greg was very impressed with everything he proved. His wish of being part of our drama group was very well appreciated and he was accepted without any hesitation.

Of course not everything went perfect, as the Romanian educational system is not one of our biggest helps. Some teachers were very reticent when I went to discuss forming drama groups, some principles were not very receptive when it came to do something creative with their students.

And so, even though they accepted us to go and have auditions in their schools, they lacked interest in promoting the event and presenting it in the right way to the students. As a result to that lack of interest, we went to auditions where no one showed up or where there were 20 children who appeared, without being announced to prepare a piece of text in English. Sometimes, the little knowledge Romanians of the old system have on the creative activities might affect the future of the children in Romania. In a solution to that, we reorganized two of the auditions and we would have them in a week's time, when they would be ready to perform in front of us.

Despite the challenges that we encountered among some schools, we are very happy to say we formed 6 drama groups and we still have 2 more to be formed next week. All of these groups were added to the already existing 4 groups that our drama volunteers are more than thrilled to work with and create a performance that is due to the middle of March.

I want to give big thanks to Sarah and Greg for their great work in selecting the students and for being willing to work with the groups in their best ways. Keep up the good work!



## *A Romanian in Togo*

By Daniela Cristea – Care and Teaching Supervisor for Romania,  
currently working in Togo

*Bonjour,*

I'm happy to say that for the next two months I will be working with my colleagues in Lome, Togo.

I came here to work with Kwame, Delfine and Sam on improving and extending the project in this country.

After a long day spent on planes and in airports from London-Brussels to Lome via Cotonou, I arrived at my final destination at 10 pm. Sam waited for me at the airport ready to introduce me to my new family. Very soon I met my host mom and host aunt, Dope and Colette, who welcomed me with open arms, Togolese style, in their home.

On my first day in Lome, Sam picked me up for a very early induction, 8.00 in the morning. I was then about to find out that Togolese are morning people (Dope, my host mom starts her day every morning at about 5.00 am). Sam showed me where the office is and took me to important places that I needed to see and know, and afterwards we made the plan for the next day.

On the second day, Sam was very kind to show me the projects going on here, and that helped a lot in understanding the order of things. It was also a great opportunity to meet the volunteers and see them in action. The most popular way to travel here is by motorcycle and there is always someone available to give you a ride; it's safe and a lot of fun.

One of the places we visited was the national branch of an international organization named "Handicap International". We talked about the problems they confront with in Togo regarding children with disabilities and the projects they run with the help of the Projects-Abroad volunteers. I was invited to meet the children and mothers they work with at the party organized for them that afternoon, to help them hand to the mothers the awards for their involvement in different projects.

Monday, at the weekly social event, Delphine said a few words in Ewe, the second most spoken language in Togo.

Even if people communicate with you in French, they would be really happy and impressed if you say a few things in Ewe. For example: Leke woyoanawo-what's your name? Oionam Dani!

During my two months in Togo I am planning to follow the advice I give to the volunteers coming to Romania, which is to take in any opportunity, to see as much as possible, to enjoy every day and to make it the best experience of my life.

A big thanks goes to the Lome team for their warm welcome that made my first days here very enjoyable.

Aicpe,

*Dani*



## Romanian Walnut Panetone - Cozonaci cu nuca

### Romanian Panetone dough:

- 2 lbs/1 kg flour
- 10 oz/300 g sugar
- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 6 eggs
- 2 oz/50 g yeast
- 7 oz/200 g butter
- 2 tablespoons oil
- vanilla stick
- salt
- egg for washing the dough
- grease for the pans.



Make a starter from yeast and a teaspoon of sugar. Mix until the consistency of sour cream, add 2-3 tablespoons tepid milk, a little flour and mix well; sprinkle some flour on top, cover and let sit in a warm place to rise. Boil the milk with the vanilla stick (cut in very small pieces) and leave it on the side of the range, covered, to keep warm.

Mix the egg yolks with the sugar and salt, then slowly pour the tepid milk, stirring continuously. Place the risen starter in a large bowl and pour, stirring continuously, the yolk-milk mixture and some flour, a little at a time. Then add 3 whipped egg whites. When you finish this step, start kneading. Knead, adding melted butter combined with oil, a little at a time, until the dough starts to easily come off your palms. Cover with a cloth and then something thicker (like a blanket). Leave in a warm place to triple in bulk. If during kneading the dough seems too hard, you may add a little milk. If, on the contrary, the dough seems too soft, you may add a little flour.

### Filling:

- 10 oz/300 g ground walnuts
- 1 cup milk
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup rum
- vanilla

Melt the sugar in the warm milk with vanilla in a pot on the range. When the sugar is melted, add the walnuts and keep stirring. After a few minutes of boiling, and after the filling has thickened, remove from heat and add rum. When the filling is cold, roll a sheet of dough about one finger thick, uniformly spread the walnut filling on top and roll like a jelly roll.

Grease a bread pan; place the roll inside, let rise for a while. Wash with egg and bake at medium heat. Take out of the pan as soon as it is done, place on a cloth and let cool.

## My Story

Leanne Wainwright – current Care Volunteer, Canada, January – April 2011

When I was asked to write an article about my first impressions and experiences in Romania it was a difficult question to answer, most importantly because it is the question of where to start. The first ever impression that I had about Romania was that it was going to be a vastly different experience from home, and that hopefully I would not come to regret my decision to stay for three months. Although of course that was just a first impression, and I am happy to say that it has changed considerably since I have been here (although it has only been about a month). The first few days that I had in Romania were definitely the most challenging, as I had to remember when to get on and off the buses to and from work, while also having the barrier of not speaking any Romanian.

Although true to their word the staff here at Projects Abroad have been really helpful whenever I had a problem or if I did not have the right vocabulary to ask for something they would always be ready and willing to help. They are also very good at trying to make the office (and your home stay) feel as comfortable as possible. The other worry that most travellers have when going to a foreign country is the language barrier, although I have learned that it is better to try speaking Romanian (even when you say it wrong) because people are generally very happy to try and help you, and (in the case of my house mom) laugh at you when you mispronounce words.

When I first went into the care project I wasn't sure what to expect exactly (other than maybe having my head examined, when I realized I had close to no experience with babies), but to my great surprise it was not as difficult as I believed. Although it has been difficult to try and understand what good the few hours a day we spend at the hospital does, it is possible to see it in the faces of the children that we work with. The experience of coming in the morning and counting the babies, and to watch the smiles that light up their faces when you come in, is an experience that I would not trade for the world. Although the contribution that you make as a volunteer may seem small to you, it does truly make a difference in the lives of those that you are working with. So even though there have been some ups and downs in my short time here I do not regret the decision that I made to volunteer my time with those who can and do benefit from the time that you give them.



## *It was the best of times...*

By Natalie Taylor – Care & Drama Volunteer, Australia,  
November – December 2010

Late last year I spent four weeks with Projects Abroad in Romania, working on both the care and drama projects. As part of my work schedule I visited Sacele Hospital and worked in the paediatrics unit for about four hours everyday. On Tuesday I visited SCUT, a day care centre for adults with schizophrenia and worked with the clients on various performance training and techniques. On Wednesday and Friday afternoons I travelled out to Talungeni to teach drama to the children from Patrocle, Luzuca and Arlechin which are foster homes for abandoned children. All three of three projects were incredibly rewarding but for the purposes of this article I will focus on my work in the foster homes.

There are 36 children in total at the three foster homes, ranging in age from 4 to 14 years. The children at the foster homes had not experienced drama classes before but they are inherently creative, playful and full of energy so they took to learning and performing drama well. The children speak about as much English as I do Romanian but the language barrier was never really a problem because Laura, the psychologist at the foster homes, acted as a translator in all of the classes. Language barriers were also overcome by focusing the lessons on movement, mime and using the body as an acting tool.

I spent the first two weeks of classes introducing the children to drama through various games and exercises with the emphasis on creating an awareness of the body in space. I told the children that actors are like athletes who must warm up and train for every performance so we spent time exploring different body movements, stretches, facial warm ups, gestures and characterisation.

The children made it clear very early on that they wanted to work on a performance, so for the last two weeks of my stay we rehearsed for a Christmas play.

Each of the children had costumes or props and a role within the play which I believe really boosted self esteem and confidence in the children. I believe that drama is a powerful form of self exploration and self expression. It's opportunity for these children to forget their sometimes harsh reality and become someone or something else... even just for a little while.

I think that drama opens up a whole new world of imagination for these children but all the while they are learning life skills such as teamwork, effective communication, problem solving and resilience.

If you are at all contemplating a volunteer project I'm urging you forget your hesitations and just do it! I can highly recommend the drama project in Romania because it's such a rewarding experience and it really is a lot of fun. You will meet the most amazing people during your stay, see the most beautiful sites, eat the most delicious food and the children...oh the children! They are just gorgeous little people, full of the most amazing spirit, love and affection. I miss them everyday.

I came to Romania to teach drama but little did I realise how much Romania was going to teach me. Whilst I have the happiest memories of my volunteer experience, I can't help but feel a little sad as I write this article, because the experience of a lifetime is over and I wish I could go back and do it all over again.





*For some came a bit late....*



*Meet some of our staff...*



*And some of our former volunteers...*



*.. but SANTA was eventually there..*

## *My Time in Romania*

By Matthew Salakas, Care Volunteer, Australia, June- September 2010

(article published in Projects Abroad Romania Newsletter, Issue August 2010)

As I arrived at Bucharest airport on the 2nd of June, my 3 month stay in Romania began. However, my journey had in fact begun many months previous as I first considered the idea of taking part in a volunteer project. When the idea first came to me I had little idea of how one would go about volunteering overseas. So for me, the logical place to start was the internet, and so I began searching for ways to achieve my goal. I found that there were so many companies offering volunteer placements that I did not know where to start. However, as I began looking through each website I found that many companies were quite limited in their options for volunteers.

Projects Abroad seemed to offer me exactly what I was looking for. There was a great variety of countries I could choose from as well as many different volunteer projects. As I explored further, reading about the experiences of other volunteers as well as considering my own interests, I finally settled upon the care project in Romania. Even after making this decision, I had little idea of the experience that lay ahead.

I arrived in Brasov at around 9pm after a 2 hour drive through the spectacular Romanian countryside which featured picturesque mountain peaks, green fields as far as the eye could see, small rural villages and even a few old oil fields. As I walked in the door of the old communist apartment block that would be my home for the next three months, I was introduced to my host family. To my surprise they all spoke very good English, which made the settling in period quick and easy. After some hot food and a hot shower, I unpacked my luggage and settled down in my new room wondering what the next few months would bring. I was excited and eager to experience this country that I new little about and looked forward to meeting the people who lived here.

Over the next couple of days I was introduced both to the city of Brasov as well as the staff of the Projects Abroad Romania Office. Soon after, my care supervisor Daniela Cristea, introduced me to Domino Shelter, the first of 3 care placements that I would take part in during my stay in Romania. The Domino shelter is located in the town of Ghimbav, just outside of Brasov city. It caters to children from as young as 3 up to 18, and from various backgrounds including from the streets or an abusive or neglected home environment.

While this initial description may seem rather depressing, in truth Domino represents for these wonderful children a chance to grow up in a facility that is not only safe but provides them with life skills that they will need in the real world.

Growing up with both other children as well as caring adults teaches them how to interact socially with their peers, learn that their actions have consequences, both good and bad, and discover that there are adults that are loving and caring. The facility also provides a healthy and clean environment with plenty of food, clean clothing and health care when required. In essence, the Domino centre allows children to experience life with a semblance of normality, which would otherwise not be possible.

When I arrived on my first day at Domino I was excited, but at the same time I really had no idea what to expect. Would I actually provide anything useful for these kids? Would they enjoy having me around? How would the staff receive me? These questions and many more were racing through my head. However, from almost the first moment that I met the staff and kids I felt welcome and appreciated. The initial stares of wonder from the kids were quickly replaced by broad smiles and laughter once I began playing football and basketball with them.

The one thing you can always rely on kids for is an appreciation of the smallest things, whether it be a high five or a small compliment, these can often make the greatest difference for any child. And so it was with the children at Domino. During my placement at Domino, the children and I interacted in a variety of ways. Whether it be sports, board games, art and craft activities, or a simple conversation the children were always excited to have someone to communicate and interact with, and the smiles on their faces that I witnessed on countless occasions was more than enough of a reward for me.

While the domino centre performs an extremely important role for the children it is in no way perfect. They are forced to run a pretty tight budget which means they often have to rely on donations from both the local community and from abroad to fill the gaps. Toys and play equipment is one thing that the children always require and it is a never ending requirement.

There are always things breaking and being lost, especially soccer balls which seem to be extremely popular for most of the kids. The facility is also relatively small which is no problem when there are a limited number of kids residing there, however, as they never know how many kids may arrive in any given week, a sudden influx of children can have the place feeling extremely cramped. Domino really was an amazing experience for me. The kids are just so excited to have volunteers there that it makes the whole experience extremely rewarding.

As well as Domino, which was my main care placement, I also worked at two other placements, the Day Care Centre at Prejmer, and the Bradet Orphanage. When Daniela first told me about the Bradet Orphanage project, I had already been in Romania for a couple of weeks, working at the Domino Shelter. Daniela told me that one of the staff members at Bradet had raised a significant amount of money in order to build some outdoor ropes course for the children of the orphanage. He needed a volunteer one day a week to give him a hand building the play area, performing tasks such as digging holes for the foundation posts, mixing concrete and fitting off the ropes. I was more than willing to help out as I thought it would add to my Romanian experience.

When I first met Adrian, the staff member whom I would be working with over the coming weeks, I was very impressed.

He went out of his way to make me feel welcome, and was very thankful that I was able to help him out.

As we drove up to the parking area of the orphanage in Adrian's car, children immediately came out of the surrounding buildings to see who had arrived. I noticed immediately the great affection and respect that the kids had for Adrian, and saw how positively they responded to his affection.

Shortly after meeting all the kids we began work, heading down to the nearby river to collect sand for the concrete. A hard day's work was ahead of us, but together with some of the older children at the orphanage we were able to load up the small pick-up that one of the staff members owned 5 times with sand from the river bed. This ended my first days work and I can safely say that I slept extremely well that night.

The following weeks we worked on digging the foundations for the posts and the fence that would surround the play area. And once again the kids were very excited to be able to help with the work. Next, it was time to begin putting in place the foundation posts and anchor points and cementing them in place. And finally came the time to attach the ropes and put the finishing touches on the ropes course. Bradet for me was a great opportunity to work with a different group of kids, and gave me an opportunity to help build something that they will hopefully get much joy from using for many years to come.

My final care placement was in the Prejmer Care Centre. My work here involved me teaching English to the local children. The children from Prejmer were a very different group of kids from those I was working with at Domino and Bradet. These were local children on there summer holiday, looking to further there education with lessons during their holiday. They were at a higher level of education, and on the whole came from much more stable backgrounds than the children from my other placements.

My placement at Prejmer demonstrated to me that the experiences of the children I had been working with at my other placements were not the norm. These children were extremely intelligent, and this presented for me a different challenge as I planned classes that would engage them intellectually. I used a variety of methods to try and teach in a way that would not feel like school for these kids. It was after all the summer holiday.

So through a combination of games, craft activities and work sheets the children both enjoyed our classes and at the same time, hopefully improved on their English skills. My time at Prejmer was a pleasant change from the disadvantage of the children at Bradet and Domino, however at the same time, my experiences at Prejmer perhaps highlighted to me more than anything the great disparity that does exist in Romania. To see such intelligent and educated kids on the one hand and the neglect and lack of education of many of the kids at my other placements on the other demonstrated the worth of the work performed by the volunteers. Hopefully each of us in some small way can help these kids realize the potential that each posses.

As well as work, my time in Romania provided a fun and at times hectic social side. During the week, all the volunteers would often meet up in the city centre for a drink or a meal. With so many volunteers always coming and going there was usually an excuse for us to go out, whether it be someone's birthday or their last night. The bars and restaurants are all very good and very cheap. Weekends too provided a chance to meet up with other volunteers and experience Brasov, as well as some of the surrounding towns and villages. I had many fun filled weekends with great people that I will never forget, some of the most notable including a trip to the black sea town of Mamaia, an afternoon hike up the Piatra Mare Mountain and a weekend away in the nearby village of Cetatea de Balta.

So, at the end of my stay in Romania, what can I say about my experience? Firstly, that I am definitely glad that I made the decision to volunteer. From the outset, my host family was very welcoming and provided me throughout my stay with great food and a comfortable and friendly environment for me to enjoy my stay. Each of my work placements were rewarding in different ways and the children at each placement were wonderful. Finally, the people I met, both volunteers and staff at Projects Abroad were just incredible. What has been perhaps most surprising for me on my trip is that I have made life long friends both from Romania and around the world. They really have made my trip enjoyable and unforgettable and I will miss them all. I enjoyed all aspects of my Romanian experience and I would not hesitate in recommending it to anyone. It really is an eye opening and life changing experience.



## *Dance and Drama Projects*

By Alexandra Ichim – Drama and Dance Supervisor

(article published in Projects Abroad Romania Newsletter, Issue October 2010)

Dance and Drama Projects were very productive in September and the beginning of October, as Danielle Convery, the drama volunteer and Sabrina Reidinger, the dance volunteer, did an amazing job working on therapy sessions with the members of several day care centres.

### Therapy sessions at Scut Day Care Centre

The first day care centre where they held therapy sessions, both on drama and dance, was Scut, a lovely placement for people with mental disabilities. Both of them organised specific drama and dance exercises based on developing the members' communicational skills and helping them be aware of their disabilities. Drama and Dance therapy sessions were very helpful for the members of Scut Day Care Centre, being held once a week for an hour each. In these sessions, our Projects Abroad drama and dance volunteers did their best in organising interesting activities making the members be aware and talk about their disabilities and about their personal experiences. At the end of the sessions they discuss about how the therapy workshops had helped them improve in their daily activities and how they feel more sociable and aware that they can rely on the other people from their group.

Their therapy sessions were divided into two parts: one with therapy exercises of 45 minutes, having the last 15 minutes to learn a dance routine in the dance classes and prepare a performance of a poem in the drama workshops. The members were very happy with both projects and they were very excited for the final result. The result was amazing: a Twist Dance Routine presented together with Sabrina and two Drama performances guided by Danielle, all being held in front of the thrilled audience: clients' parents and friends, some of the Projects Abroad and Scut Staff members. Everyone was very happy with the mini-show they all prepared for us and they were surprised with the members' enthusiasm and natural talent to perform in front of an audience.



## **Therapy sessions at Rafael in Codlea**

The second placement where both Sabrina and Danielle held dance and drama therapy workshops was Rafael, a day care centre in Codlea, for people with both physical and mental disabilities. The level of perception of the groups is slightly lower than Scut members, but still, the sessions we held for them were very helpful and we could very easily see the results in the end. The Drama sessions were held twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays, for one hour with two different groups. The Dance Sessions were held only on Thursdays, with the same groups, for the same amount of time.

The clients of the day care centre experienced drama therapy sessions for the first time, while having the dance workshops for the second time, after Corinne – our first Dance Volunteer, from Netherlands. This time, the members of Rafael were more aware of the activities in the dance classes, while being very excited and thrilled of the new drama exercises. Along the workshops, people got to know exactly what they loved, being very familiar with the activities and getting to move and act very easily.

They loved drama activities such as: the name game, the picture game (they were given a picture and had to put themselves in those positions, establishing relationships and feelings they saw in the given image), freeze frames and also miming actions from a given poem on disabilities. When it came to dance therapy, they wanted to remake the mirror exercise they first started with Corinne (they worked either in pairs or in a circle imitating the moves of the leader). They also liked new games that Sabrina had taught them, such as: the Freezing game (they had to dance to music and when it stopped they had to freeze in a certain position), dancing to sad/happy/angry music – expressing their feelings and also learning easy dance routines in a circle.

At the end of both volunteers' projects, the clients of the day centre were so happy they got the chance to perform a drama pantomime based on the disability poem and they were willing to do more from now on and to hold drama performances more often. Regarding the dance sessions, they already asked us when the next volunteer is coming or if Sabrina and Corinne are coming back to work with them. They got very fond of every volunteer they worked with and they created that special relationship that no one can ever forget.

Both Dance and Drama Projects were very worthwhile for both the volunteers and the members of these two day care centres and everyone is already prepared for many other experiences. Thank you Danielle and Sabrina, you did an amazing job and you will always remain in their hearts.

# *Finding Joy in Romania*

By Sharon and Philip Romey – Care and Teaching Volunteers, Australia, September –October 2010

(article published in Projects Abroad Newsletter, Issue October 2010)

## **Philip's Experience**

*Writing this just at the close of our placements here in Brasov in the Transylvanian Alps of Romania my wife and I have to say that it has been a most wonderful experience of our lives. Whilst Romania is not a third world country, there are many problems. Some are associated with the transition from a Communist system to more of a free market one and some that are endemic, solutions to which are delayed or impeded by economic and social stresses brought about by this transition, compounded by the economic environment following the Global Financial Crisis.*

Life continues to be hard for most Romanian people and their ability to help the people even more in need is nowhere near what they would wish it to be. In a brief conversation with a kind young Romanian woman who stopped to help us with the purchase of a SIM card from a news stand in Bucharest we told her how two Aussies came to be in her country. She said “You’ve come all the way from Australia to help us – shame on us”. We then protested to her that it was no shame on Romania with the problems it’s had and is still facing. We can now add that it has brought us such joy to come and get to know the Romanians and work with them as they struggle with very limited resources to improve things for children and people unable otherwise to help themselves.

I, Phillip have had the pleasure to be able to teach English for two afternoons a week to underprivileged children from families who are mostly very poor and don’t have parents who can help with homework. This is because they work very hard and long hours or often because of their own lack of education are illiterate or semi-literate. I was told before I started that children have been known to turn up in work clothes still smelling of the farm work, but no, I found the children were not only well presented but a couple of the boys were turned out in little tailored black suits, such was the obvious care of their parents.

The children were keen and eager to learn English and I took the approach of mainly teaching vocabulary, encouraging them to speak the words and learn the pronunciation from me with as little Aussie “twang” as I could. I found this the best using flashcards etc. as the range of ages and English ability from negligible to basic, mixed together with a lack of continuity due to variable attendances, made a progressive program unviable. The kid’s infectious enthusiasm was so rewarding though and I would have loved to continue.

Another volunteer has now started at the school, working with the children in their classrooms which I see as the next logical step in promoting English study in this village.

My main assignment though has been in a Hungarian School here in Brasov. There has been a Hungarian presence here in Transylvania for centuries. Transylvania only became part of Romania after the 1914-1918 war and the local population of Hungarian descent cling resolutely to their language and customs and are provided with their own school using their language.

So they learn in Hungarian, they live in a community where they must know Romanian and are required by the Romanian Curriculum to learn English, Spanish or French - usually English, and due to the wishes of the parents these children learn German as well. Volunteers go into the school to give the children help and encouragement with English. Without some stimulation the children can think that English is useless as apart from volunteers, they probably never come across an English speaker and being able to tell them about Australia is an added bonus as to them it's such a far off and exotic place.

In most lessons the Teacher and I worked to the curriculum but encouraged role playing and vocal exercises alongside the lessons, often with the shoe on the other foot and me struggling to pronounce words in Hungarian so that they might see that learning another language is not easy and no-one is expected to get things right the first time! Just one example -I was most encouraged to see that two boys in one class greatly outnumbered by girls, were quite disinterested in English. When asked to do a small presentation on Romanian animals made unprecedented efforts and stood in front of the class to speak, nervously and haltingly but wow! I was blown away.

If nothing else, that alone would have made the trip worthwhile, but the joy of meeting and sharing lives with the children here and the people who work so that they may have a future, has given me so much more joy and pleasure than whatever the cost may have been. When it comes though to seeing the happiness brought to children in foster homes and shelters by being able to pass on gifts, many provided unsolicited by such generous Australians there is another story entirely. Sharon did so much to ensure that these gifts were packed and transported here that it is really her story to tell...

## Sharon's Experience

Phillip and I have for some years wanted to do something tangible to help people less fortunate than ourselves. A chain of unrelated incidents showed us clearly that Romania was the place for us to go. We knew of the country's troubled history and the problems associated with orphans here. The National Office of Projects Abroad being in Adelaide, our home city, made it easy for us to go and talk things through with the staff. We were impressed by their friendliness/helpfulness, and the fact that the accommodation through Projects Abroad is with local Romanian families, giving us a chance to "live" and experience their culture first hand.

I chose to do a Care Placement working with Babies/Children/Mum's at the Sacele Hospital which cares for the Roma (gypsy) population. For me it has been an extremely challenging, confronting, inspiring and joyful experience for these last 5 weeks. We applied to the airlines we were travelling with to allow us to bring an extra 20kg of luggage to accommodate the gifts, resources etc. we'd been given and bought.

A couple of examples - an almost new camera with a compact docking station/printer, paper and ink cartridges was given to me by a work colleague.

I was expecting it to be something Phillip would use at the school, but after seeing how excited the children at the hospital were at having their photo taken and just looking at it on our own cameras, made me realize it could be a wonderful chance of interacting with them and the mums staying in the hospital. It proved to be a lot of work to take each of their photos, and wait for them to print. They watched fascinated as the picture progressively appeared from the printer. It was well worth the effort as it was such a highlight for them to have a photo of themselves and their children/babies, some of whom had never had one before. They showed me clearly how delighted they were, and with the help of my phrase book, along with gestures and mime, I was able to relate to them how happy I was to be able to do this for them. It opened a doorway of communication.

Through another work colleague who goes to Church with an elderly lady who knits beautiful bright dolls, I was able to bring 30 with me. We had the opportunity to visit a foster home, in a village outside of Brasov. They greeted us at the gate, hugging us, and making us feel so welcome. To see how well they're looked after and happy and well-adjusted the children are, was inspiring. We were able to give each of the girls their own knitted doll and the boys a choice of stuffed toys we'd brought.

They were so loving, and excited to perform for us dances/recitals they'd learned from staff/Projects Abroad volunteers. The group of us who went were all so moved by what we saw.

I could share so many of the unique experiences we've had, but it would take a book. I can only say that we're looking forward to going home to the birth of our first grandchild, but with regret at leaving this life so different from what we know in Australia. Our "Host Mother" took us in like her own family, and cared for us so well. The Projects Abroad team in Brasov who work so hard, always found the time for us if there were any problems we had. The Romanian people we have found willing to go out of their way to help us. The staff at our placements, despite the language difficulties sometimes, responded to us treating them with courtesy and respect when working with them. We enjoyed many happy and fun times with other volunteers from all over the world doing different placements here. Finally, words cannot do justice to the joy of caring and loving the babies/children to foster their recovery, growth and development.

My advice to anyone thinking of volunteering is to learn as much about the country you're coming to as possible, to come with an open mind and no pre-conceived ideas. To be prepared to work outside of your "comfort zone" as you know it, and a desire to get to know the people even though you may not always like what you see or understand. Also importantly is to be willing to work as a team with the other volunteers you're doing a placement with, and learn how things are done from those who have been here the longest. There are procedures to follow with every placement for a reason, and the progress I've seen in just 5 weeks with the staff/volunteers where I worked is wonderful. The hard work Projects Abroad have done to liaise with local organizations is so important, therefore it's critical that volunteers all work towards enhancing these relationships.

