A month with The Smiles Foundation, Romania 2012

by Anna Clarke

7th July - 4th August

From 7th July to 4th August I have been working with The Smiles Foundation in Romania. The Smiles Foundation is a Christian charity working in North-West Romania. The organisation aims: "to relieve poverty, promote education and provide hope and opportunity for many through a variety of projects which include evangelistic outreach, food distribution, medical support, social assistance, education, child care, life skills training and housing provision…"

For more information about Smiles visit: www.thesmilesfoundation.org

Week 1: Saturday 7th July – Saturday 14th July



Several years ago some of the kids from Gepiu went away on a camp. This year they really wanted to be able to go away again but lack of funding meant this wouldn't be possible. Nevertheless, these kids continued praying that funding would become available and guess what? God responded… Smiles received news that a group in Northern Ireland had been fundraising for a camp. So in my first week in Romania I accompanied a group of 15-20 very excitable kids from Gepiu to a camp with around 100 children from Bihor and Arad County.

The first day of camp proved extremely challenging for me. Not only had I left not having a clue where I was going, what facilities would be available, what I would be doing…etc… but I was also hit with the realisation that I would now be spending a week with around 100 children, most of whom didn't speak English. My first day left me wondering whether I was going to be more of a burden during the week than a help and the pessimist inside of me was thinking: "what on earth can I contribute here?" But the linguist inside me saw a challenge! ;) Having just spent 10 months on my year abroad (in Germany and France,) the feeling of being surrounded by people and not understanding a word was not unfamiliar and more than anything this year, God has taught me perseverance in such situations. God, however, always knows when we need that little reminder, that little nudge, and during the first Bible study session for the children, Rebeca (a leader from Smiles) kindly interpreted for me and explained how they were talking about how God places us in every situation for a reason. The talk may have been aimed at the kids but I tell you, it seemed to practically be written for me and was exactly what I needed to hear at that point.



From this point on everything improved and I began to be able to communicate more and more with the kids. Admittedly, this was primarily through my made-up sign language rather than a sudden ability to speak Romanian, but still… I was learning. The kids had such an amazing ability to just make you feel appreciated and the more time I spent with them, the more I fell in love with them. I genuinely enjoyed being with them and playing with them… though note to self: starting a tickle fight with children who really aren't ticklish when you are one of the most ticklish people on the planet = bad idea.

The camp itself was brilliant. The children were split into teams and took part in competitions and team games as well as group worship and Biblical teaching sessions. I particularly enjoyed attempting to learn and sing their Romanian songs – much to the amusement of the lucky children who happened to be sat by me at such moments. After a week of intense practice, I now have "Rejoice in the Lord always" in Roma-

nian down to a fine art – I charge £1 per request. ;)

On a more serious note, I cannot even put into words what an incredible opportunity this camp must have been for the kids from Gepiu. In my weeks that followed I had the chance to visit some of the children from camp in their homes in Gepiu. Seeing them in their poor living conditions just made me realise even more what an amazing experience it must have been for them to have this week away. For that I thank the team who fundraised for this camp, thank the kids for their faith, but most of all thank God for answered prayers. I continue to pray for the kids who went on camp and pray that they may have been touched by something they heard, saw or experienced there. It's easy to become discouraged when you don't see immediate results, however I have no doubt that seeds were planted on that week away and pray now that God would continue to work in each and every one of the kids who attended.



Week 2-4: Sunday 15th July – Saturday 4th August

For the weeks that followed I was involved in some of Smiles' key projects. This ranged from delivering food parcels to families on their family care programme, to assisting with a holiday Bible club, to visiting the homeless. Rather than go through day by day / week by week and tell you what I was involved with, I'll talk about some of the projects I helped with and some of things that particularly struck me.

Family Care Project

The Family Care Project supports hundreds of families who live in poor conditions and struggle with basic living costs. Smiles visit these families regularly to deliver food packages. During my time with Smiles I had the opportunity to visit a number of different families. All I can say is that no matter how many times I went with social workers to visit the families, I was always struck by how appreciative these families are. After having played with several kids in one family the mother actually left to go and pick flowers for me to say thank you for the time I had spent with her children. Very touching. One of the most encouraging things for me is to see the development and sense of hope in the families that Smiles have been visiting for a longer period of time.



This is Susan. She's 93 years old – which would be an impressive age to reach even in England; in Romania this is even more remarkable! When she was younger she worked as a babysitter – the baby she first babysat for is now 76 years old! She has no family around after all five of her sons having passed away and said herself that Marius (the social worker from Smiles who visits her) is like a son to her. Without the food packages that Smiles brings she wouldn't have much help in getting food and needless to say, she certainly enjoyed our company!



This is 7-year-old Larissa and her sponsor, Sophie. They live in a small one-room hut alongside a busy main road. In September of last year, her and her cousin left to fetch water for their family from an open pipe just down the road. Adela was killed by a speeding driver who left the scene, leaving Larissa as the only witness. Sophie and her husband Mark have been sponsoring her for three years and she now attends Smiles' school at Tileagd.

This is Catalin. He's severely disabled yet it's currently impossible to give him the care he needs in his two-roomed "house" and they receive little support from the state. Smiles are in the process of building a much-needed centre for disabled children.



(Read more about this centre or donate specifically to this cause here: http://www.thesmilesfoundation.org/projects/NursingHomeandDisabledChildren'sCentre.html)

It was a magical moment for him to feel the bubbles popping on his skin. Just imagine what Smiles will be able to offer him once the centre for disabled children is up and running!



This is a lovely family with their sponsor parents, Heather and Rob, from Northern Ireland. Thanks to the sponsorship scheme, this family were able to be helped with monthly food deliveries and school transport for the children. Smiles gave them that little bit of hope to be able to get back on their feet. The father is now working again, the children are doing well in school and the oldest girl will soon be baptised. It was incredible to see the hope and joy in this family.

If you're in a position to be able to sponsor a family then I can only say: go for it! Smiles is able to make a difference to an increasing-number of families thanks to the generosity of sponsors. It costs £30 a month to sponsor a family. Money that we would perhaps spend without a second thought could literally change a family's life.

Vacation Bible School (VBS)

Every summer Smiles go out to villages and run a Vacation Bible school. This year I helped with this several times in the gypsy village of Cuieşd. The Christian teaching of Smiles here is the only religious message the kids will receive in this remote place. During my time I had the pleasure of teaching them a couple of English Christian songs including "This Little Light of Mine", "He's got the whole world in His hands" and "Oh, oh, oh, how good is the Lord!". It's such a rewarding feeling to hear 40 kids singing back what you teach them! :)



The village of Cuieşd is pretty poor. The most shocking situation here had to be the family of four (including a pregnant mother) living in this horse barn after their house having fallen down. Smiles are working within the village and many of the families receive social assistance as well as medical support.

Homeless Project

Before visiting the homeless we were given the challenge of buying food for a family for one week with 30 RON – that's the equivalent of £5. The fact that some of these people have to live on so little is shocking in itself, but seeing the conditions they live in was even more disquieting.



A family were living in the bushes. The night before we visited them we had had a massive thunderstorm which I cannot even imagine being out in. A young girl was high on glue and another man (presumably the father) was passed out on the path from alcohol – they have nothing else to turn to.



A second family lived in a falling-down factory. There were bottles of empty medicinal alcohol (70%) on the floor and the rooms – well, the pictures speak for themselves. These people need help.



Visiting Smiles' container village at the end of the day was an encouraging finish to a challenging day. It shows just what a difference Smiles can make to these peoples' lives and how worthwhile investing money really is.



Tileagd Nursery and School

I spent a couple of days playing with the children at both Tileagd school and nursery. Tileagd gypsy community was the first village that Smiles began working with and the development here (in comparison to other gypsy communities like Salard, where Smiles are now working), is absolutely incredible. It is truly a testimony to the work going on at Smiles and the children themselves are a real blessing – a joy to be around.

How can you help?

If you haven't seen the work of Smiles first hand, I realise it is hard to fully appreciate the massive impact that their work is having on the lives of the poor in Romania. If this is the case then I challenge you to go – **go and see firsthand what is really happening in Romania**. If this isn't an option then please consider donating to or fundraising for Smiles. Smiles have launched a new fundraising initiative called: MISSION 2012…

If in the year 2012, 2012 people would donate £1 a month to each of Smiles' ten key projects (so a total of £10 a month), Smiles could cover their operating costs for the year! How many of us could afford £10 a month yet still choose to do nothing? If you want to make a difference and commit to donating £10 a month, either donate online (http://www.thesmilesfoundation.org/projects/Mission2012.html) or send me an email and I will organise it: aclarke196@hotmail.com

Matthew 25: 40 - "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"





