



Strengthening Families & Communities

INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION: ROMANIA

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International Adoption: Romania

Kelly Smith, a Team Leader from the New Hampshire Division, has visited Romania twice in as many years assisting on two-week medical mission's teams. Kelly first heard about the mission's trip to Romania through a woman at her church who had previously gone there. Immediately, she filled out the application and raised the financial support needed to make the trip. She attended the meetings with those going with her to learn about the culture, expectations and to prepare the necessary medical supplies that they would be taking.

Kelly's team of 12 doctors, nurses and social workers went to a medical clinic run by a Romanian-American doctor and his family. They visited and worked in extremely remote, poor villages that have limited electricity and no running water.

"The people of Romania are beautiful, appreciative people. After spending a day caring medically for their village, the people would gather their family's supply of food for the upcoming week and feed the medical team like we were kings and queens. From our American standards, Romanians have nothing in terms of material wealth, yet I experienced the most generous, giving, appreciative and loving people," Kelly says.

The team visited an abandoned baby hospital where children live in cage-like cribs. During their first three years of life, these children receive a bottle and have their diapers changed twice a day. The children are swaddled, allowing for little movement of their extremities, and receive little emotional holding.

The medical team visited these babies daily. Team members unswaddled the babies and provided movement, touch and feeding. Initially the hospital staff was confused but, Kelly explains. "In time, they came to duplicate some of what they saw us doing."

The team had translators with them at all times but there weren't a lot of language barriers. There is great power in universal language and non-universal language: laughter, tears, smiles, touch, holding and gentleness in caring.

Orphanages

This past year Kelly had the opportunity to work with two orphanages: the State orphanage, and a private Christian orphanage affiliated with the medical clinic. At this orphanage Kelly was a part of establishing structure and boundaries regarding group care, and provided some basic training around attachment and bonding.

Kelly tells of two opportunities that she was a part of this March that she considers highlights of her career. The first occurred when she, along with two other team members (a child psychiatrist and social worker), went to the state orphanage. Kelly became involved in a conversation with the director of the orphanage regarding why Americans were in Romania. She shared with the director what she does for a living: working with foster and adoptive children and families. Kelly says

he was very interested in what she had to say and told her and her team to come back the next day to talk with members of his team.

"The following morning he had all five psychologists attend a meeting to listen to her and the others. The psychologists asked if we could work with the orphanage staff on their five toughest cases over the next five days," Kelly explains. "So, for the following five days we arrived at the orphanage at 9 a.m., were greeted by the director and team of psychologists and worked with them on one of their toughest cases.

"For the first hour and a half we discussed the first child's history. Then we got to meet the child as a team and talked with him about his perception of the problems, his birth family history and what it was like to live in the orphanage. We then did some therapy with the child and the team around our assessment of the problem. After several hours of working with the child and team we sent the child back to the unit. We spent the next three hours talking about themes, behaviors, we gave a framework to understand the behaviors and demonstrated various interventions through role-playing, demonstration and explanation," Kelly says.

After discussing all five children, the team found that all had issues of anger, loss and grief, feelings of abandonment and were all very anxious and unable to calm themselves down. The team developed interventions for the psychologists that could be used with most of their kids who were struggling with similar issues, which is most if not all of the 300 kids who live in the state orphanage, Kelly says. "We gave these psychologists the themes and tools to work with all their kids ... it was like mass production."

The director and psychologists were very grateful for the advice and techniques the team offered. "This was an amazing experience. It was powerful to see how three women from America and five men from Romania, who live in vastly different ways (politically, economically and environmentally), with all the language barriers, can work together on behalf of 'our' children. There were some powerful lessons to be learned by that opportunity," Kelly says.

Adopting from Romania

The second highlight of Kelly's career occurred when she assisted two Romanian teenagers as they embraced and recorded their culture and history on videotape, before they were adopted and moved to the United States.

Karen, a friend from Kelly's first trip, made a special connection with a 14-year-old girl from the state orphanage last year. When Karen went home to Wyoming she shared her experience with her husband, Steve. During the year they kept in touch with the teen and decided to pursue adoption. Over time, a 14-year-old boy came to their attention and Karen and Steve decided to adopt both children.

Kelly notes that it is very unusual for older children to be adopted from the orphanages. Both children are now 15 years old.

Kelly says the two teens were excited about being adopted and moving to America. During the year of paperwork during the adoption process, the teens moved into the Christian orphanage and together received tutoring and English classes. Karen and Steve visited them at Christmastime.

During the trip this March, Kelly went with Karen, Steve and their adopted daughter to the state orphanage where she lived for 14 years of her life. They videotaped this experience by walking through the entire orphanage. The girl told stories of living there; she showed where she slept, ate her meals, and went to school, etc., Kelly explains. The girl introduced her new family to her friends and favorite staff. The staff gave a message to the child and family of their excitement for the girl and expressed their hopes and dreams for her as she moves and grows up in America.

Then they took their adopted son to the village where he had spent half of his life. He was able to say good-bye to his grandmother and sister and he also visited his father's grave. His family felt very bad that they could not take care of him anymore. They apologized to him, wished him well as he moved to America and most importantly, got to meet his adoptive parents.

During this visit to the boy's village, word spread that Americans were visiting. A tailor who knew the boy's father approached them. He told the boy that he made his father's wedding suit. "This is your father's suit," he said to the boy while showing him the clothes. The tailor then gave the boy the suit.

The videotapes will give these kids an ongoing connection to their country, history and important relationships. It will also be powerful for them as they move to America, Kelly explains.

"The kids we work with in post-adoption most often have not been given the opportunity to say good-bye to their history, capture the value and significance of their history and assimilate their two worlds: life before adoption and life after being adopted. Here was a perfect opportunity. These kids were old enough to know their history, their adoptive parents were friends of mine and trusted me and we had the time, access, freedom and translation to make this happen. I feel very honored to have been a part of this powerful experience with these kids and this family," she says.

"The kids were excited to tell their stories. They loved the videotaping. They had never seen such a fun toy. They got to play photographer and storyteller through a lot of the trip. They did have mixed emotions because there is a lot of pain intertwined in their history, yet joy and safety in sharing and videotaping with us," Kelly says.

Kelly mentions that the bureaucratic process of adopting was difficult for Karen and Steve, but has been finalized. The two teens are now figuring out how to be brother and sister. Kelly continues to be involved in the lives of her friends and their

adopted children. She plans to visit them in Wyoming this fall, and assist in developing a treatment team. She has also suggested various books and discusses attachment issues with them.

International Adoptions and Casey's Role

"One of the biggest issues that kids of international adoptions face is that they will never, ever see their biological families again," Kelly says. There are a lot of cultural issues that the adoptive families need to work on throughout their lives with their adoptive children. Assimilating the children to life in America is so important. There may be different religions, foods, flags or countries involved and parents need to give their adopted children a sense of where they came from. It is important to understand and talk to them about their culture. It is still a part of their history.

Most adopted children have attachment issues. Many adopted from Eastern European countries lived in orphanages and had limited development and nurturing for the first three years of their lives. Casey Family Services helps adoptive families understand the significance of those early years. "If a family adopts a child over the age of three, we help them understand what that child missed, and we go back and with them, do the early developmental activities such as bottle feeding, making eye-contact, touching and singing," Kelly explains. "Many of these children do not know how to have a reciprocal, loving relationship. They don't use eye contact and they don't trust adults and others. We help parents understand that their child may not be able to give back to them, as they would like. We can help change expectations of what kids can give back in return."

Kelly makes a connection from these experiences to her work at Casey. "All of this also filters through my professional life as supervisor of the post-adoption program and being a part of facilitating change with our state regarding pre-service training for all adoptive families and post-adoption services throughout the state. My experiences in Romania are priceless."

About 60 percent of the adoptions in the state of New Hampshire are international adoptions. And in the New Hampshire Division, where over the last three years we've had a post-adoption program, Kelly says the staff has worked with probably 10 Romanian children and their adoptive families.

"Having worked in the orphanages in Romania and visited the country twice in the last two years has given me wonderful ideas and insight in our work with the families that prepare to adopt from Romania and those children who have already been adopted from over there," she said. Kelly has pictures of Romania in her office and has had many opportunities to share these pictures and stories with families and children.

Kelly hopes to return to Romania early next year for a third mission's trip.