

Faces of Peace

Saving a War-Torn Childhood

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Orphans reach out across miles, years

Greater access to electronic communications has revolutionized Project Life's ability to keep in touch with the international children it serves. As well, some children have successfully used traditional mail and telephones to contact us in recent months. In some cases, host families receive e-mail or letters. At times volunteer staff are the recipients. Whatever, the case, it is always a joy to hear more about a child's life after their return home; especially when years have passed and they have had a chance to reflect on their experience in America.



Here are some messages we have received since our last issue:

"We remember and love you! We send huge reverence to everyone there from Chechnya, in our little town of Podgoron. There has not been one moment that I have forgotten you. I was so happy to get the letters and presents that Linda brought me. Thank you so much! Mother Debi, all of my family members send you their best, and kisses for all. My mother sends her best to everyone I know in the U.S."

"Hannah and Olivia, how are you both doing? I love you both so much! I sit here crying while writing this letter. Please help your mother in every way you can and never ever forget me! I know I don't speak English very well when you call, but I still love to hear your voices. I send from all of my family huge hellos!"

(letter sent by Madina of Chechnya to the Renner family who hosted her in 2007)

"My name is Meldin and I am boy from Bosnia. I am one of boys who there in Waterport before eight years (2000 year). When I was there I had 11 years and now I am 19 years old and I am going to college (studying geography). I still remember you all. I just want to say thank you for everything you do for me and my family. I hope we will see again after this 8 years. If we don't remember always you will be in my mind."

(e-mail received from Meldin J. of Bosnia via Project Life website December 2008)

Meldin added this after PL staff wrote back to him:

"It has been a while but I still remember all of you, as I saw you yesterday. I was looking at your site (Project Life) and saw that you do not bring kids from Bosnia anymore. (I see) you bring those kids from Sri Lanka...I think it is a good idea that you are helping these kids...they live in terrible conditions. The situation in Bosnia is a lot better now, so no complain.

"i was the part of this project in summer 1997,when i came to america with other four boys from bosnia.i just want to say thank you for everything you did to me.this is great project and you must keep doing it...."

(note left in guest book on Project Life website by Jusuf K.)

We've also learned through the electronic grapevine that Amra H. (2000) will marry this summer. She moved to the U.S. several years ago.

Amir (1998) has also been in touch. As well, we've had calls from Samiullah and Rahmatullah (2002)

and Safan (2007). We've heard that there are instant messages going between Sarajevo and Waterport quite frequently these days.



Forging friendships, bridging differences

From mid-July to late September 2008 six very special children visited western New York as guests of Project Life. Dali, Markha, Adam, and Khamzat are Chechen orphans. The two girls and two boys were joined in late July by a boy and girl from Sri Lanka, Mubasseer and Nilufa. The six spent their days at our program center in Waterport learning English every morning, enjoying swimming and field trips in the afternoon, and spending evenings and weekends at home with their U.S. host families.

Below, Nilufa enjoys waterfall at Stony Brook Park along with other orphans, hosts, and volunteers



Pastor Jim Renfrew of Byron Presbyterian Church reported that his Youth Group enjoyed a wonderful experience volunteering with Project Life during August. Here is his account:

There were about a dozen of us involved, with our youth concentrated in the 6th, 7th and 8th grades. This proved to be a nice match with the ages of children at Project Life. Because children from Afghanistan were held up by visa problems, there were only six children from Chechnya, Ingushetia and Sri Lanka involved in this summer's War Orphans program at Project Life. We were therefore able to include only a few of our children in their morning classroom work. One day, some of those not

in the classroom painted fence posts around the perimeter of the Project Life property in Waterport.

Our entire group joined in afternoon field trips to Brown's Berry Patch, a local pool for swimming, and Hamlin Beach. We rotated our children each day, so all would have a chance to be a part of the morning program. It was challenging for our children to befriend the war orphans because of the language barrier. But on the final day there was an exciting soccer game at Hamlin Beach State Park involving all the children from the church and Project Life families, and at departure time there were many hugs. There seems to be a universal language for the human family that children are usually the first to learn!

On September 19th we invited Project Life children and host families to a dinner at our church. Our families served some of the food we like and also attempted to make food from the homelands of our guests. It was a lot of fun. We played games, searched for distant home towns in a world atlas, made new friends, and offered farewells to the children who would soon be heading back to their home countries. During the meal, a donation check from the Mission Committee of the Byron Presbyterian Church was presented to Linda Redfield to support the work of Project Life.

We have discovered that other Presbyterian churches in our area, upon learning of our excellent experience volunteering at Project Life, are interested in joining the effort, too. Amen!

Grace Kent of the Swan Library, Albion told us that it was quite an unusual challenge, presenting an hour long program to orphan children from war torn countries. "Just what could I offer to young children whose languages and cultures I did not know? But it turned out that their glee-filled attitude and engaging manner with one another and their delight in discovering the library surmounted all my concerns about our "differences". We found a common bond in books."

"Just the right picture books set the foundation for the several hours we spent together," said Grace. "Books, activities, and crafts were met with such enthusiasm it only motivated me to try harder to please them. Such simple things bring the children joy--to watch them and work with them brought me joy! Perhaps the message is a universal one--simply get to know us, work and share with us. We can be friends and live in peace.

Opening new territory for upcoming season

Volunteers are currently in the thick of planning Project Life 2009. We remain focused on serving children of the Caucasus and Afghanistan. The Project also plans to invite orphans from Lebanon and Gaza for the first time. Project Life sees a strong need and opportunity to aid refugees and displaced children of war in these troubled lands.

PROJECT LIFE WAR ORPHANS

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WHOM DO WE SERVE?

Orphaned children of war and natural disaster. Children are 9 to 13-year-olds with high socio-economic, psychological, and emotional needs. All children live with family members in their home countries. We do not select children from orphanages or seek permanent fostering or adoption for them in the United States.

WHY? We aim to provide peace and support for each child's rest and recuperation from trauma. Our program improves physical and psychological health, builds trust and confidence, and inspires new hope.

HOW? A three-month program of education, recreation and health care, along with hosting by volunteer American families in the western New York region. All children return to their families overseas at the completion of the program period.

Volunteer visits tent camps in Gaza

Rochester Institute of Technology photography student Janet Zimmerman was touring Israel in late 2008 with a group of U.S. college students. When taking photos near the famous Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem Janet met a journalist who invited members of her group to join him in documenting the situation in Gaza, which had recently been under attack.

A small group had to make several attempts before they were finally admitted to the Gaza territory thanks to documents obtained from the press bureau in Cairo. Janet had to sign a waiver at the U.S. Embassy, who would not take responsibility for her safety while she was in Gaza.

She spent the first night in the territory camped at a hospital, and later stayed at the home of a local family, the parents of a Palestinian journalist. She managed to remain in Gaza for a full month, photographing residents of camps and meeting prospective orphans who will eventually travel to Waterport.

According to Janet about 1,500 women and children died in the recent military action, while 15 to 30 Israeli soldiers perished. The homeless are now subsisting in tent camps. Janet visited two of these, Beit Alahia and Jibalia, near the border. Residents are civilians who are petrified of the shelling and firing that still goes on sporadically. Their houses have been destroyed and they lack food, medicine, and running water. They must cook outside in the very cool winter weather, and they are plagued by insects and chronic illnesses. Many of the women and children have persistent coughs and flu.

Janet found an enthusiastic response to her suggestion that camp children may eventually visit the U.S. "The Palestinians love Americans, they just think that they may not have much information about the situation. Arabs also worry they may all be seen as terrorists. People want food; they want to pursue their dreams of education. They want to travel for the sake of study; they want open borders, and they want survival without a political agenda. They do not want to live in fear," she said.

"I thought I would just go for a brief visit to Gaza and then return to my regular life," Janet commented. "Now, seeing the faces of the kids, it amplifies my determination to get some of them here. Leaving Gaza while they had to stay was the worst feeling."

One boy she met is 9 or 10 years old. He lives in a tent camp with his uncle. He was greatly affected by witnessing his mother's death, when she was shot by a sniper. Their house was shelled so it is partially destroyed, and then it was fired on for 5 hours. After that paratroopers landed on top of the house. The boy faints sometimes at night because of the trauma he suffered.

A second boy saw his house entirely destroyed. He is now living with his mother and siblings in the upper level of an uncle's partially destroyed house. His father died on the first day of the recent military activity.

Another child's father was going to the seashore to buy bread and fish when he was killed by a sniper. The boy now lives in a tent with his mother and a large number of brothers and sisters. He suffers from frequent nightmares.

Program can't succeed without your help

The total cost of sponsoring a war orphan who will spend three months in western New York is \$3,500. This includes airfare, chaperone costs, documents, and regional travel. It also includes all the programs and services arranged and provided by Project Life, including education, recreation, field trips, medical and dental care. What can't be quantified is the value of the nurturing care given by host families and volunteers, who dedicate so much time to the children while they are visiting western New York. As our story on page 1 attests, three months of Project Life provides a lifetime of positive memories for needy orphans of war.

Project Life director Linda Redfield said the program is looking for:

Hosts who can take on the care of an orphan for 12 weeks from mid-summer through September. Must live within a 30 mile radius of Waterport, N.Y.

Volunteers of any age for the daily program that runs summer through early fall. This includes helpers for the classroom, arts and crafts, recreational activities, and field trips.

Sports equipment, especially soccer goal nets.

Brand new swimsuits, socks, and underwear for ages 9 to 12.

Last year's orphans doing well in Grozny

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that we as people should not go where the path may lead. Instead we should go where there is no path and leave a trail. I have worked with children from Chechnya since the age of 13, and have traveled there four times. This February I was able to travel again to the Caucasus to make contact with past children and to see first hand the changes that have taken place in Chechnya.

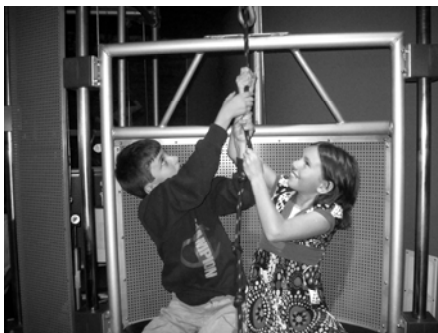
I was very surprised to find a strange balance between peace and a level of tension in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. The city has undergone a great deal of reconstruction. I met Ayub (1999) who took me on a tour. I did not expect to feel relaxed there. Yet at times one would almost feel as if the city was no different than Manhattan or London. Then, I noticed the military guard on the streets, and the fully armed soldiers at checkpoints demanding passports and documents.

It is a strange feeling to witness the juxtaposition of normal everyday life with a "casual" level of threat to the populace. Apparently this is the everyday life of someone living in Chechnya. It is no wonder to me now why the eyes of these children are filled with such surprise and wonder at the smiling faces and welcoming arms of strangers when they first arrive at Project Life.

I interviewed the families of Khamzat and Markha from last summer's program. Both children are doing such better in school. Their level of health and their social interaction with other children has increased dramatically.

"My son used to get sick at least 15 times a year," said Khamzat's mother. "Since he returned from the United States he has not been sick once." I was told that Markha talks daily about all of the people she made contact with during her summer in the States. She describes afternoons of swimming and going for picnics in the park. It isn't the stories themselves that inspire awe, but rather the notion that there is a place where people have noticed the speck of geography that is "Chechnya" and have taken an interest in the plight of the youth there.

One of the most important treasures to hold dear in life is hope, and that is exactly what is given to not only the children that come to the United States via our program, but to the children they interact with upon their return home. The borders of Chechnya no longer imprison the minds of the young people. Hope reaches through the skies, across the ocean, and over the mountains of the Caucasus into the hearts of children waiting to receive it with open arms.



Left, Khamzat and Dali trying pulley chair at Rochester science center last summer; right, Khamzat and Markha with relatives Feb. '09.



