



Seeing Yourself in Them Romania 2015, David Gal-Chis

This summer I worked with the Charis Foundation, which is a non-profit based in Santion, Romania, which is a little village about 10 km outside of Oradea, Romania. Started in 1991, two years after the Revolution and the overthrow of communism, it has focused on helping Oradea and the surrounding community. Over the years it has grown from its initial base of responding to needs in the community: Charis has now established an orphanage and most recently a campsite for underprivileged youth, which is still in the process of formation. True to its vision, as the needs and situations changed in the local community, so did Charis. Its long history of work in the community has enabled the organization to have connections throughout the community and be intimately involved in what is going on throughout. This is invaluable in a community-centered culture, in which these connections are completely necessary for people to trust an organization and allow it to help. In this way Charis provided the firm foundation needed to be able to help in the community.

I began at the Charis Center, renovating the old orphanage to make it a campsite. There I worked with boys who had gone through the old orphanage program, believed in the vision and wanted to help. We worked side by side at manual labor for long hours: building structures, repairing roofs, erecting fences, plastering walls, painting, moving materials, weeding the volleyball court, leveling the ground for the future structures, fixing foundation issues, and so on. These long hours gave me time to form great relationships and pour into young men whose lives had been filled with a lot of brokenness, which a lot of them still carried around. Seeing some of them work through these things and overcome scars which had burdened their lives was a humbling experience that I was blessed to witness.





I was also able to work with the children in the orphanage Caminul Felix through the connections already made by Charis's director, Mr. Dani Ciupe, who is a long-time friend of the "dad" of one of the houses at the orphanage. Once or twice a week I would go and spend the day with the children. We would have fun, play games, do homework, and I would have English and music lessons prepared that I would do with them. Some days we went and took care of animals, and other days we worked at a farm. The rest of the time, we were working or playing around the house. I also went on three camps with kids from Caminul Felix. Through this interaction over the course of a few months, I was able to gain their trust. As children from backgrounds where the very people who should have loved them unconditionally abandoned them and gave them away, trust is very hard to come by. When one gives without wanting anything in return, when someone loves and forgives, people notice. The impact is particularly large when we are talking about the relationship between a child and a person who can get on their level and who is the right age to be a role model for them. So through things as simple as doing life with

them, having fun with them, teaching them English and music, taking care of animals and farming, and even going on camps, the children opened up and became vulnerable in a way that would allow others to speak into their lives. I saw the children become nicer to one another, more thoughtful, more giving. I also saw them warm up to me in a way that overwhelmed me due to their capacity to love. After all, these are kids and people just like anybody else.

They have the same needs, wants, desires, issues, and problems as anyone else and though their situation may be different, love is a language that is universally understood and doesn't need translating. I may have taught them the languages of English and music, but those would not have mattered if I hadn't spoken the language of their heart. They may have learned a lot from me, but I too learned much from them and this experience formed me in ways that are beyond the scope of this report. In short, I learned a lot about grace, love, and how to work with people.



That same theme carried over to my work with the gypsy children in Tileagd, a small town outside of Oradea. Charis helped me make this connection through a gypsy man that volunteers to help out at the Charis Foundation, and who lives in this community, and thus knows the needs and the people. With his help, every week, once or twice a week, we organized meetings and invited as many children as we could, and I held

English and music lessons with the children that decided to gather there. While at the Charis Center, I formed relationships in a work environment. At the orphanage Caminul Felix I formed relationships as a friend and tutor. With the gypsy children, however, I formed relationships as a teacher as well as a friend. These are children that are part of a culture that doesn't promote values that benefit you in life. These are children that are ostracized in society due to their ethnicity. No one comes to help them, to invest in their lives; no one gives them a chance. So when a Romanian, an individual from a people group who are known to be prejudiced against them, comes and wants to invest in their lives, they pay attention, because no one has ever done that for them before. As children who live in the Romanian equivalent of a ghetto, they saw someone who offered a hope, a role model who wanted to help them; I saw children without much hope and I wanted to help them. Sorting through cultural mentalities, I met them where they were and tried to strike a similar balance of fun and learning where the children were comfortable around me and I encouraged them to go in a good direction with their lives.



At the Charis Center, we held a camp where we brought several of these children. During a difficult time, we brought foodstuffs to the families of the children who came to these lessons. As a parting gift, I bought all of the children bilingual books from beginner to advanced and formed a small library at the common location where we would meet for lessons, the books being looked after by the gypsy man which helped Charis organize its activities in that area. Whether I



was a fellow worker, a tutor, a teacher, a mentor, or a friend, I worked to improve the lives of the people around me, whether that meant erecting camp structures or teaching English to gypsies and orphans. None of this would have been possible without the connections that Charis made for me in Oradea, and they did a splendid

job of starting those relationships in places where the help matters most. I am so glad that I had the honor of working with an organization that does its work so well, and especially one that does its work in my hometown, Oradea. Most of all, I'm so thankful for this experience, for the blessing that it has been to work with all of these people, to form relationships with them, to just do life with them and to try to be a good influence in their lives. I know that we all have been changed for good. I have a new perspective on what sorts of things are really meaningful and purposeful in life. Thanks, Lumos. It has been more than I could have ever imagined.

