

Oltania, Romania: Trip Report 16th - 26th August 2008

By Claire Dunne

After hearing about CAST through the medlink conference I decided it was really something I'd like to get involved in as I'd always wanted to volunteer abroad but was always too young. This turned out to be the best decision I've ever made and after interview I was accepted on to the trip to Slatina from the 16th to the 26th of August

After the initial nerves at going away with 8 people I had never met before with my mothers reassuring words- "I'm really worried, what if no-one likes you or something goes wrong!", we all settled in really easily. After the grim lift experience to the 5th floor, the flat was just what we needed, really homely with all the necessaries and very much part of the fun, although the rubbish chute definitely needed a strong stomach! (Even though we did break the shower and ended up with the alternative jug! ☺) Our 1st day at the plaja (pool) was a really nice way of getting to know each other a bit better before we started working and of easing in gently to the week.



The next morning I think we were all a little daunted by the labyrinth of flats (yes I did get lost!) and the uncertainty of what was behind that first door. Seeing the kids for the first time was a mix of emotions really and it was heartbreaking to see their living environment, but we had been prepared very well for what we were going to see and it was really reassuring having such brilliant team leaders to support us throughout. As soon as I got stuck in it became a lot easier and I was grinning after 10 minutes as soon as I discovered one of the boy's ticklish feet and that he had the most infectious giggle and smile I've ever seen. I developed a real soft spot for one of the boys, who after initially not wanting me to even sit near him whilst he rocked gradually became much more trusting and responsive and easier to break out of rocking. I was amazed at the results of intensive interaction and after a day he wanted to hold hands whilst he rocked and although there had been glimpses through the week by the end he was giving sustained eye contact which was incredibly exciting and heart-warming after having persisted. I couldn't stop smiling after, on the third day when he had been particularly erratic, he finally settled down and stood on my feet and wrapped his arms around me for a cuddle (even though it did produce a pretty big lump in the throat!) and then later gave me his shoes to hold whilst he went to the toilet. Something which quite upset me was being taken to every window with a pair of shoes; he just wanted to be taken outside. So a definite highlight was on the last day when we were able to take the kids to the park, even though I did end up with a bottles worth of sand in my shoes courtesy of guess who (was well worth it though as he had the first giggle I saw!).

The pussy cat of the flat, one of the girls, was equally as rewarding as once Lydia and I had gained her trust she swapped between knees to have her back scratched whilst she curled in a ball and just smiled. She also seemed fascinated by running water and loved the noise of a ring being tapped on and run across the top of a radiator, which really seemed to excite her. One boy seemed the most engaged and able of the flat giving brilliant eye contact all of the time and was much less hazardous once we replaced his lego with a ball to throw and catch! He loved being tickled and was amazing to spend time with, leaving me in a fit of giggles every time ☺ He also responded amazingly to intensive interaction and was great at copying things like building towers with bricks and if started off would continue and build a tower.

In the second half of the morning I was in another flat where I became completely attached to all three children but particularly the little boy. I had the usual workout every day of being taken from room to room and clapping, stamping and being swung round in each. He was always much more responsive after being tired out a bit then he was happy to sit on my knee and clap and when doing this he gave really good eye contact and was so smiley. Although he did get a bit over excited a few times and headed for the curtains and window, he just kept making me smile constantly and seemed to respond really well to using the same set of sounds that he uses. He was sedated at least 3 times in the week, with 2 of which he just lay on the floor in the corner wanting someone to lye with him, which was really upsetting, especially on the last day. The older girl in the home was always the typical girly girl really enjoying colouring, painting nails, having her hair done, dancing with her teddy and singing. She was amazing at recognising colours and

matching them and I don't think I'll ever be able to hear madworld again without thinking of her version- much more tuneful than the original I think!! Most definitely a beautiful girl with a beautiful smile. The other girl was a real sweetie (admittedly a dribbly one!) and once you gained her trust just wanted to plant herself on your knee for the day. She responded really well to being patted rhythmically and swung backwards off your knee with lots of smiles and giggles. Although she chewed anything and everything, she would drop things out of her mouth when you tickled her mouth with something like a feather. It was hard to give her as much attention with the other two around but she came alive when given one to one and would come out of her shell surprisingly quickly. Reckon I'm going to be blowing raspberries and flapping hands at people for a while just out of force of habit!

From the afternoon sessions at the adult institutions my best memories come from Cezieni. Although Caracal was still amazing it was more a case of everyone lump in with arts and crafts and try not to get bitten as there was much less space. It was incredible to see how excited the residents got out of our limited time with them and being able to give them that time was wonderful. In Cezieni after the initial shock at the welcoming stampede and of seeing conditions at the bottom end of the institution I think we all enjoyed every second. On the first day I met a man who enjoyed letting everyone know we were good friends! A gentle 20 year old with a kind heart and amazing smile and personality he was a joy to spend time with. Over the week he painted my nails everyday, drew pictures for my room, danced with me, and took me down to the swing at the bottom end of the garden. He acted as a big brother towards one of the other residents and seemed all round very able, although it was clear he was severely short sighted and said it was better when he tried on my glasses so I hope to be able to take them out once I get new ones. It was an unbelievable feeling to see the residents' faces everytime we came and to be able to give some a new outfit when we left. It was upsetting to think of the kids in the flats in that environment but comforting to know that teams in the future could keep an eye on them. The atmosphere at Cezieni was amazing and I couldn't help but fall in love with it, being able to see how happy the volunteer teams being there made the residents. On our last day a highlight was being able to give my special friend my watch and some clothes and to see his response, which is something I will never forget.

Having to leave both the kids and adults was ridiculously hard after falling in love with them all and we all definitely needed the sunglasses on the way home from Cezieni strictly for watery eye covering purposes!!

Spending the week with such an amazing team was a pleasure and I have made some of the best friends I think I will ever make. Both Lydia and Charlie were absolutely amazing team leaders and were there to support us all the way through. I have to say though Charlie needs a special mention as I have no idea how she managed to keep everything running with the Bucharest team to sort out as well- round of applause needed!! We all worked together really well and I really can't find one bad thing to say about the trip. I can honestly say that applying was the best decision I ever made and the trip was 10 of the best days of my life.

CAST do a wonderful job and should get much more recognition for the amazing work that you do. I can't say thanks enough for such an incredible trip as I'm fast running out of adjectives but I will say that I've never missed anywhere so much and can't wait to go again if you'll have me!!