

Dear Friends,

This mission trip update letter is actually is a travel journal. Through it I would like to share with you my experience of the trip I took to Ukraine in December 2010, to work with orphans. Many of you have supported me financially and with your prayers. But many of you do not even know that I took this trip. I hope that this journal will enrich your lives, and that is why I am sending it to you all. As well as to say:

“Thank you for sending me”.

Marina James.

Introduction

This entry is a reflection on the time in the small village a long way drive from Odessa where it feels like time stood still for many years. I want to clarify that not every orphanage in Ukraine is this poor. This specific orphanage institution is one of the worst of because of the actions of the previous director. How I came to be here is a story of its own.

I cannot thank you enough for sending me here. And the staff and children are so grateful also. They wanted to know if I can stay longer, like an extra week...or a year, and when am I coming back? There has not been a situation during this trip when I felt inadequate in any way. There have been so many time when I would have flashbacks of my life when God was preparing me for this. From the time when I lived with my grandparents with no indoor

plumbing to speaking 3 languages; from "enchanted" children to noticing small details of what is needed; from being able to handle the cold weather to problem solving skills; from love of children to being able to write to you about all this,...you name it- everything seemed to-no, everything did lead to this. All the hardships that I faced in my life, that God has led me through, including and especially finding and following Him- it all has led to this trip, this mission.

I still cannot believe that this dream I've had for many years is now a reality. I get teary eyed thinking about it. I know many think me crazy to be thankful to live a week in accommodations with no indoor plumbing during below freezing weather. To travel 40 hours to get there and to give my heart to children who are not born to me; to be away for 16 days from my own family. I spent all the money you gave me plus more, but I left richer, knowing that that some of those children can see and experience the love of God, and that He allowed me to show it to them.

While still in the orphanage in one of the conversations I had with 15 years old girl named Kristina, I tried to talk her into staying 2 more years at the orphanage (she has that option). She said, "No one wants me, no one cares what happens to me. Why should I stay?" I tried to ensure her that she is wonderful, hard working, good student and a helper. That caregivers love her, they just cannot show it. And that I care very much about what happens to her. Does she believe me?- She was not sure if she believed it. The day I left the orphanage, from the train station, I called the kids

from group# 6 on the phone, and got to speak to Kristina. I told her that even though I cannot adopt her legally. In my heart she is now mine, forever. Her answer to me was: " Yes, I believe you. You are mine also, like a real mother". I just made a difference in her life and in life's of several others like Kristina! Once again, thank you for sending me.

Day 1 – Dec 8, 2010 (Wednesday) -On the Plane

The whole experience feels like a dream... of course the lack of sleep does not help. It is 10:30 am in Kiev and 3:30am in Philadelphia. That means my night's sleep was condensed into about 3-4 hrs in a chair. I have been on the plane for several hours now, and I know that in about 30 min I will be in the Ukraine and experience what I have been imagining now for days, month and even years will be a reality. But that reality has not hit me yet. I think, maybe, because it has been a dream for so long, it still feels like one.

Same day- Landed in Kiev

It finally hit me- a reality- I am in Ukraine. It happened during the wait in a rather long line to have passports checked. Long lines - I remember them well.

At present I am at my friend's house, and in a few hours I will be taking an overnight train to the south of the country. I already took 2 buses and a metro (subway), avoided hoards of pesky taxi drivers, who tried to overcharge me, and was tricked into paying

more (but by only \$5) for the train ticket by the woman at the ticket desk.

It feels (almost) like I never left. Like the time stood still here, especially when I was taking the Metro: it was probably the same train cars that ran when I was here 20 yrs ago. Some things did change: there are commercials for everything, everywhere. You can buy anything in stores, if you have money! 20 yrs ago even if you had money, you could not buy anything since there was nothing to buy. There are also lots of cars on the road and the gas stations every mile or so, including Lukoil and BP.

Day 2- Dec 9, 2010 (Thursday)

I am writing this from a small village outside of Odessa. It was a long day, and I have finally settled in. The train ride was much better than I expected. I remember overnight trains from my childhood: the insides were decorated with black and brown colors- probably to strategically cover the layer of soot. There were 2 toilets, one at each end of the wagon for 40 passengers. When you flush- you could see the tracks as the waste falls down bellow. There are still only 2 toilets for 40 passengers, but it flushes into the septic tank! The inside walls are white and the seats/ beds are light blue. There is no soot or even dirt anywhere! Everything is clean and the controllers are courteous and helpful! I was pleasantly surprised and impressed. I want to thank you for your prayers: the fact that I was able to sleep on the train was a miracle. I have a back problem, and I sleep on an air mattress...everywhere, I brought a travel air

mattress for this trip also. The train beds are too narrow for my mattress, but somehow, with a gentle rocking of a train (thank you Lord) I was able to get a good 4-5 hrs of restful sleep.

I was picked up from the train station by the orphanage director, who then took me to a small car in the parking lot where I was greeted by 2 more people: the orphanage nurse and a driver. All three of them got up at 3am in order to get me from the train! We squeezed the large suitcase filled with jacket for kids and other donated clothes for the children in to the trunk. The smaller suitcase had to be placed in the back seat between me and the nurse. As we started driving I learned that the orphanage has no car, only an old bus to transport the children, but no money for the gas, so it mostly just sits there. The car we were in was the nurse's, she lives in the village a short distance from the orphanage and commutes to work. She only feels comfortable driving locally, so someone else had to do the driving. From my research I expected the drive to be about 1.5 - 2 hrs long, but I was told it is actually 3 hrs because of the state of the roads, and they were not kidding. Half way through trip we came to a road in between 2 bodies of water: a black sea and a lake . That stretch of road was about a mile long and 30 ft wide, that road must not have been paved in at least a few years. It was the worst workable/ as in not shut down stretch of road I have ever seen. So I said:" Yes, this road is pretty bad". The director gave me a raised eyebrow, and said: "This is still a good road, just wail till we get closer to the village".

In another 30 min or so it became a normal practice to drive in a wavy line or in the middle of the road to avoid potholes that seem to be growing in size as the time went on. Occasionally I saw an incoming car doing the same kind of driving and wondered will one of us ended up in a pothole, ditch, or will we collide? But all the drivers were skilful enough and accustomed to the local driving practices. Once again I nodded and said: "yes, the roads are bad". And once again I was told this is not the bad road yet. When we had to get off the road to drive along side of it, because the road became pothole upon a pothole, some the size of a car (you would think they were bombed), I was finally told welcome to our world- this is our roads!

During that drive we took a rest stop to use the facilities. Behind a few small stores in a small town there was a small bathroom. Like any public bathroom in a small Ukrainian town or village it had it had an entry way (no door) large window opening (not a window), on the upper part of one wall. It was made of brick and the floor was concrete- old, and uneven with ...potholes. Behind a small wall partitioning the door way and the ...what no one would recognize as toilets: there were 3 toilet size holes in the concrete where you go while literally freezing your butt off. Of course there were no toilet paper, running water for flushing anything or to wash your hands and no electricity. I wanted to take a picture to show it to all of you, but when I asked the nurse if it's OK if I go back to the car to get my camera to take a picture, because you, guys, would never believe me otherwise, she said:

"this bathroom is pretty good compared to some others, so you can take lots of pictures later. By the way, gaping window opening serves a good purpose of air circulation, and even though it is freezing; at least you do not pass out from the smell.

Our next stop was the closest supermarket to the village we were headed to- 60km away (about 30mi). With your help I brought enough money to get some things needed for the orphanage. It was a like a mini mall- a supermarket with a few small stores in the same building. The most important and expensive things were in the electric appliance store. They had what we needed: we picked out the largest chest freezer that they had (about 20cu. Ft) - for the kitchen and a smallest/ cheapest refrigerator- for the medical office: to keep the medicines in that needed refrigeration. We got a 3 year warrantee on both and a promised delivery on the same day. The total for that purchase was a bit more then the director quoted to me, but I assured him that there was still some money left to get other things for the kids. So we went to the supermarket part. I was pleasantly surprised because last time I was in Ukraine the shelves were bare. Now it looks like many stores I saw in other European countries. You can get anything there (if you have money) and I saw all the common brand names: Pantene shampoo, Gillette deodorants, Dove soap, etc. Of course brand names were more money so we filled 2 carts with no brand name stuff. For about \$150 we got 10 brooms, 200 notebooks, 100 pens, 4 bags of laundry detergent, 50 bars of hand soap, 15 bottles of shampoo, a Connect 4 game, chess, checkers, backgammon game, and few

other things. It might look like the prices there are so low, but consider the fact that the average salary in this region is \$100 a month - we just spent someone's month salary with over time (most work job and a half)! Electronics and clothing were about the same as in the Phila area, and appliances 20% more.

Appliances arrived at the orphanage just 10 min after us. Everyone was going "oh" and "ah" and "thank you, thank you". When the Head Caregiver, Nina Ivanovna, saw the brooms, she just could not stop smiling.

Shortly after, all the staff headed to the teachers lunch room. It is just off the cafeteria for a welcome celebration meal. Apparently it is a custom to "pay" for the gifts by putting up alcohol to the table. The kitchen staff opened a bottle of champagne to "pay" for the freezer and the Head Nurse, Inna, brought a pitcher of home brewed wine for the small refrigerator. There were many toasts and thanks. I was asked if there anything that I need in my accommodations, and I asked if I could wash up/ take shower- at this point I have been on the road for about 40 hours. There were strange looks of...at that point I was not sure what the looks were- I thought maybe I said something that is culturally wrong to discuss at the table? The director put his head in to his hand, and then said I am not sure where we can give you a place to wash up. I still was not getting it: the director lives on the premises most of the week, the kids shower...right? So what is the problem?

"Can't I just wash where the kids wash?" I asked.

After a long pause the Director said:” If that is your wish- but I apologize ahead of time- because what we can give you is the best that we have. Today is Thursday and that is when the kids take showers after school, we will get the bathhouse ready a bit earlier for you.”

When I saw the bathhouse, I realized what all of the hesitations were about. The bath house is split into 2 parts: girl’s side and the boys. Each side has 2 rooms. First room is where you wait your turn if it is raining; also on boys side is the opening in the wall where a grounds care taker would put in coal to heat the place: it called "pechka" the wall is thick and hollow inside to let the hot air circulate in it. That makes the joint wall warm, the heat then radiates out into the rooms. The second room is where kids can undress: there is a bench there, a few hooks and wooden boards- so they would not be standing barefoot on the concrete floor. The third room is where the showers are- a pipe runs most of the way of the room. In that pipe are the openings on which shower heads should be attached. I say should be- because most of the heads were missing. The head caregiver kept apologizing for the in adequate conditions for such an important guest as me. I learned later that I am a VIP - "a rich American lady who came to help". It is strange for me that this is what they think of me. To me I am just simple regular me. I explain when that came up that I am not at all "rich", and I came here on money of many friends who wanted to help the kids. I think then their opinion and gratefulness only went up. They told me to please tell everyone who helped me to come here and to

get them all the wonderful things- thank you so much from the bottom of their heart and from the children.

The first time I met Vladic in person was when I was going to the shower house. I walked out of the medical center (they housed me in the living room of the isolator). There were several boys sitting on the bench. School was not out yet, but some kids did not have later classes (and some were cutting school), one boy was looking directly at me- staring. I had my eye already out for a boy about 15 years old, but a bit size smaller than his age with rather protruding ears- I have only seen his picture taken last spring. I have made friends with him through letters and phone calls. All the kids had hats on, so that did not help. When I glanced at the children on the bench, most looked away, but one boy held my gaze, he had a thin freckled face and somewhat resembled the boy in the picture. I walked over and with a question in my voice said: "Vladic?" He nodded his head. I extended my hand and said: "Finally, we meet in person". He shook it and glanced down. I followed his gaze and realized that in his other hand was a small photo album opened to the picture I sent him of me. He look up and down few times, I asked if I look like my pictures, he nodded again. He seems shy, even though he seemed not to have problems talking to me about anything on the phone. I learned later that it very out of character of him- normally he and his sister Kristina are the first ones to greet any guest who comes to the orphanage. When I came back- he was gone. Kids said he went looking for Kristina.

I had a bit of time to settle in, but first I needed to know the basics. Anna Ivanovna, shoved me around a bit- explaining the "facilities" situation. There are 3 bathroom locations (there are none in the children's quarters). One- in the "club building"- it has an actual toilet, but no seat, with rusted pipe and water leaks. That toilet is only open during special programs at the club, and for the caregivers during other times who can find the key- because there are only 2 copies. That is also the bathroom director uses when he lives on premises- and he lives there 1/2 of every week.

Bathroom # 2 is near the medical center, but was deemed unsanitary by the inspectors. With 110 children using the facilities so close to living quarters, it just did not drain well. The bathroom was locked...but at night it was unlocked for the kids to use- it had ...once again -squatting stalls, open window holes at the top, no water of any kind, and no lights. You might ask: "Why use the bathroom basically condemned by the inspector for sanitary reasons and not just use the bathroom #3?" Well...the bathroom # 3 is actually NOT on orphanage grounds, it is between the living quarters and the schools, it is also the public restroom of the village. And the caregivers do not want children to go there after dark. Imagine walking a 1/4 mile every time you need to go...but first you have to get dressed, find some sort of paper that is no longer needed, because the toilet paper...well it's not in the budget...as well as many other things like toothpaste, and other personal hygiene items. I am sure you do not understand how thing so essential, things we in America, take for granted, is not

budgeted. Well the care givers do not understand it either. But it is what it is, and they are just glad it's not worse. They rely on humanitarian aid for that, and it is sporadic. I hope to fix that, at least for that specific orphanage. Oh yes, there is also the option #4- and that is "in the middle of the night option only"- there is a bucket in every dorm .

The new director has managed in the short amount of time of being the director (1 yr) to get the government to give him some money to build a new bathrooms: They will be heated, with windows (not just holes), flushing toilets, heated showers with stalls, a boiler room to heat that building up, and laundry facilities, but...there always a but...there only enough money to get 1/2 job done. And there is a great hope...lots of hope, but not great chance, that...MAYBE...next year...maybe...in one year it will be complete...??? For now...(as they tell me)... "it is what it is".

Day 3 - Dec 10, 2010 (Friday)

I got up today before the kids, but did not want to bother them while they were getting ready for school. As I mentioned, I am being housed in the medical building. When you walk into the med center there are 3 rooms off the hallway. On the left is the nurses' room with a very old wooden table, a bed, and a cabinet with no lock and broken doors, and also old tables on wheels, a wooden floor with some rotten spots (covered up by small rug as you walk in). Notice that there is no sink, and the room is not sterile in any way, and just yesterday they finally got, with your help, a small refrigerator to

store medicines in. Before that medicine needed refrigeration was stored in the local hospital, or if needed daily for some child, the head nurse had to beg kitchen staff to let them use some fridge space. On the right is the doctor's office. It has a table, a chair, 2 benches and a cabinet for storing files. The local doctor comes in almost every night for a few hours to see if anyone needs her care. Straight ahead is the isolator...which when you enter has like a small reception room with a couch, a chair, and a TV. The Head Nurse was very proud of that area, she painted it all and decorated it this past summer...with her own money. The couch they also just acquired, the new director somehow got them one...from somewhere. This "reception room" is going to be my "home" for the next week. On the opposite side of the entry door in a drape covering door to what is meant to be an isolator...but at present is not.

At present 4 rooms in the back are a temporary (about 5 months and counting) living quarters to the group#6 : a small bedroom containing a dresser and 5 beds, a walk through room where the walls are lined up with 5 more beds; on the side of that room is a wash room. Straight through is a play/ living room. The washroom has 2 sinks, shelves for kid's clothes, and a closet where cleaning supplies and a small washing machine is stored. It also has a small table on which there is a tray with cups, one for each child, and a bucket of drinkable water. On the wall there is a place for soap, towels, and toothbrushes (notice- no mirror). That also is my washroom while am staying here. The play room has a caregiver's

desk, a couch and 2 arm chairs, a table with a TV. TV would work if they had an antenna or DVD player to hook up to it, which they have none at present. There is also a wardrobe where all of the school clothes are hanging. The wardrobe also serves as divider between play room and an entry way. In the back of it are shoe shelves and the only, small mirror. A blanket is hanging on the doorway to keep the cold out when the door is opened. Lighting is not too great. The heat is from radiators... there are only 4 of them in those quarters. The radiators are newly installed in the last year by the new director. Before the heat was from "pechka" a central wall in each building is hollow inside and you put coals there to warm it up, radiating the heat from the wall into the rooms. Now the heater room houses a burner for coal that heats up water running through radiators. There always has to be someone present in that room to keep an eye on the fire and to feed it.

After the kids went out to the dining hall I got to get ready for the day, just in time to be picked up by the Head Care Giver for breakfast. It was just 3 of us for breakfast this time: caregiver, director, and myself. The director wanted to know if all of my needs were taking care of, and to apologize, because he will have to leave for the weekend to be with his family. He lives about 1/2 of the week in the orphanage, and travels the rest of the time conducting orphanage business and stopping at his home on the weekends. He To get home, he travels 3 hours by car to Odessa plus several more hours on the train. That is his weekly commute. I asked him once, later why he ever took the job so far from home. He said the pay

was better, and they just needed a temporary director. He had no idea of how bad the shape of the orphanage was, and how much work needed to be put in. If he knew, he said, he would have thought twice over it. But now, that he took the job, he plans to see it till the end. I personally think that he is doing a great job with what he has. He has accomplished a lot in about a year. The staff and kids love him. They say life is much better now thanks to him. There are fruit, veggies, and meat every day, and butter served with breakfast and dinner. The head nurse said that kid's immune systems are much better this year compared to the previous once due to the better nutrition. And the care givers say, the kids are finally not hungry. If they do not like what is served there always bread and butter to fill up on. Of course if you ask the kids, they will still complain about eating things like oatmeal.

Today I am being given a tour of all the living quarters. There are 110 kids living on campus of this school-orphanage. The campus is a series of one story buildings around a soccer field. Kids are divided into 7 groups that vary in size from 13 to 20 kids in a group. Each group has both boys and girls that are all different ages. They are organized so that siblings are placed in the same groups. In addition to housing for children, orphanage also has a kindergarten for children who live in a village, a club where all of the orphanage and school events take place; a med center for 110 kids; a few storage buildings where food is delivered and stored, and so is the wood for kitchen stove.

Of course in the central location there is a dining hall with a kitchen which provides lunch to all of the elementary school kids during school lunch (orphan and village kids), and feeds 3 meals a day to kids from families in the village who cannot provide well for themselves. All of that is accomplished by a staff that consists of a head cook and 6 helpers. The helpers work in every other day shifts of 3's. They cook majority of meals on a wood burning stove, wash dishes by hand in sinks that are really bathtubs on height legs- heating water in large pots first. There are only enough dishes for 1/2 of the kids- so kids eat in shifts. Did I mention they have few very small antiquated refrigerators and a freezer with broken lid from some store that used to sell ice-cream? That freezer that is being replaced with a 20 cu. Ft. chest freezer with the money you all contributed. And I am to tell you all from the kitchen staff: *"Thank you, thank you very much. You do not even know how much it means to us. Thank you."*

When the kid's school was out Kristina and Vlastic took me to the "center" of the village. As we were walking through the campus the Head Caregiver introduced me to a woman who is , as she put it: "Not only a caregiver of one of the groups, but an orphanage hairdresser. And if there any money left in my budget, would I please consider getting hair buzzing machine, and possibly a hair dryer?" So we went into town (sorry, village) on a mission to scout prices for those 2 items and possibly even get them. The way they talked, I thought it would cost a fortune, and for them, as I learned

later it was. For me however both items were ... about \$30. As we were looking through a store the kids were telling me how much they wanted a DVD player, they have been saving up money for it. The older kids of group #6 when they get occasional jobs, like digging potatoes, throw money into a common pot for larger purchases for the group. At one point they were up to 60 Hryvnias, but then they all needed socks, because it got colder, now there are up to about 60Hryvnias again, but he DVD player costs over 350 Hryvnias.

Before heading back we stopped in the produce store and I had the kids pick out a snack for the group for later and something for us for now. Kristina picked the cheapest-"boobliki"-sweet pretzels, \$1 for a large bag. She told me that that is enough and that they personally do not need anything. As we walked outside I conveniently remembered that I forgot to get a bottle of seltzer water for myself and while picking it up got 3 frozen cheese cake bars. They are very delicious and I have not had them in years. So I gave one to each kid, and which they just brightened up, and Christine said, "Thank you, this is one of my favorites!" I said:" You could have just asked me for it" her answer was:" No, I could not do that".

Before heading to quarters of group # 6 we stopped in to deliver a hair cutting machine to the hair dresser. There were lots of "oos" and "aaaaas" and "thank you's". When we got back we played board games and ate "boobliki" and talked. I asked what do the kids normally do on Fri nights. They said not much, before I came they did not even have board games. Sometimes they might

do a craft, or homework, and in a nice weather play outside. Soccer balls are available only when the school is open. They are school property so at night they just run around, and hang out. My mind went to my families Friday night. We often have a family movie night on a Friday or Sat evening, and I just had the craziest idea... I said : " I'll be right back" and headed for the door. I asked Vladic and Cristina if they wanted to accompany back to the store before it closed at 7pm. I said that I wanted to get something else and did not want to walk in the dark myself.

They eagerly got on their boots and jackets and walked me to the grocery store. At that point I thought for sure the surprise I had planned will be guessed because I said:" no not this store, I need to go the one that has a DVD player in it". You, the reader have probably guessed it, I planned to get them a DVD player, but for them...it was totally over their heads. Vladic just said:" what do you need there?" I answered:" you 'll see". As I got closer to the shelf where the DVD player was...and then reached for it, Kristina's knees started to give out, she grabbed her brother with one hand on the shoulder and put her other hand on her heart, with a deep breath out of her mouth came out:" hhhha ...for us???" Do not worry she recovered quickly, but for several days she kept saying" I will never forget the DVD player!".

That night most kids fell asleep while watching movies that we borrowed from their friends in the village.

Day 4- Dec 11, 2010 (Saturday)

It s Saturday, and the kids were off school. This is the day they do general cleaning and have free time, and some help out in the kitchen with a special meal. Vladic and Kristina were going to take me to Lemoore. It's a body of water separated by a piece of land from the Black Sea. Apparently it is only 15 min from the center of village and the same amount if time from the orphanage, since the gates to the school / orphanage grounds end where center begins. I found Vladic, but Kristina was called to the kitchen with a few other older girls to make pilmeni. It's a national dish: stuffed dough pockets- something like raviolis. So instead I spend the morning with Vladic, talking about life America and Ukraine.

After lunch we tried once again, to get to gather to go on our excursion, but again Kristina was busy - this time giving a hair cut to one of the girls...with the pair of almost dull paper scissors, the kind you could get at a \$1 store. I mentioned to her the fact that those scissors were definitely not meant for hair cutting, she said: "What can I do? Anyway, I am used to it." I asked the other girl why she did not go for the hair cut to the hairdresser- she answered: "Kristina is really good at this, I'd rather she cut it" So we went without her. 2 other boys joined us- Pavlic and Nikita. Nikita is one of the kids who got one of the donated jackets, he was thankful for that.

It was windy and cold but we had fun walking down a few small streets, looking at houses- some were neatly kept. The smells in the fresh air from the coal burning fire places took me back to

the time I lived with my grandparent in a small Ukrainian town when I was 6 yrs old. The beauty of those small village streets and the Lemoore astounded me. The kids showed off their somersaults skills. They jumped off the stone piles and asked me to make a movie of it. They ran up and down the hills to keep warm, and told me stories of some mischievous things that they have done. On the way back, even though we were frozen stiff, I decided to stop at the small grocery store and we all got ice cream- just like when I was a kid!. We got back to our rooms frozen from head to...tong ...to toe, but with fun memories.

Yesterday Vladic complained that the jacket he had before was stolen, so now he does not have a good one. So as we were walking in this cold weather I realized- jacket he is wearing (it was not same one as the day before) looks fine. I mentioned that to him to which he answered:"This one is not mine, I borrowed it from a friend, because mine does not zip". Apparently it is very common there to borrow friends clothing or shoes when you do not have what you need, like jackets, boots, schools sneakers...etc. That night I had to make a decision.

You see I brought a jacket with me for a boy in another city, but there was no guarantee that he will be able to come to meet me. Should I give that jacket to Vladic? After a bit of thinking and praying I called Vladic in to my room and asked him if he needed a backpack because I had an extra one in my suitcase (jacket was stuffed into that). He said, yes he could definitely use one. So I handed him the stuffed backpack. I am not sure how to describe his

reaction. He seemed a bit unsure on what to say and do when he looked inside the bag, I told him that what's inside is for him also, and to take it out and then to try it on. At this point I would expect a child to give me a hug. Maybe he wanted to, but was not sure how I would take it. So he just said thank you a few times with this unsure look in his eyes. I did not know if he liked it or not, especially when the next day we went outside to play- in his old jacket! I confronted him and he explained:"I went sliding and did not want to ruin it!" Also, the Head Caregiver told me at supper : " I came into the group#6 quarters earlier today, and Vladic was sitting on the couch in a new jacket looking very happy!". So he will wear it in inside where it is relatively warm, but not outside were he really needed it so that he would not ruin it. He did not just like it, he treasured it!

Then we spent some more time playing board games, listening to music, watching DVD's and when the electricity went out- practiced English. After supper we went to the club for an evening of dancing. Everyone in the village grades 7-11 invited to come there every Saturday night, there is not much social life here, so for young people it's the highlight of the week.

Day 5- Dec 12, 2010 (Sunday)

It is Sunday, but there is no church today since the local pastor's wife has been ill. A few weeks ago he took her to the large city where specialists can give her treatments, and they are still there. I was told that the local church is a protestant church, and

even thou many locals believe in God, only few older people actually attend the services on Sundays.

Since Kristina was not able to take a walk with us the day before I offered to walk around the town with her this time and Pasha, Vladic's best friend, asked to come along again. Vladic was nowhere to be seen. Apparently he and a few other boys got a job digging potatoes for someone in the village. Later when I saw him he was happy that he got to earn 10 Hryvnias= \$1.20.

While walking to the water front we saw lots of frozen puddles of water. Kids skated on them a bit. A goose was trying to get a drink of water from one of them, but without luck. When it walked away, Pasha decided to crack the ice, after stamping on the ice for a while and almost falling though he succeeded. As we walked away the flock of geese that was walking nearby went to the puddle with the broken ice for drinks. Pasha had so much fun cracking the ice that he continued doing that to every puddle we passed by, eventually he miscounted and his foot went straight into the water, soaking one of his feet! He said: "No big deal, am fine". On the way back we stopped at the store to get snacks: sweets for now and kefir (a yogurt drink), some cheese, and bread for a snack in the evening.

While in the store the head nurse, Inna, found me to tell me that today she will be taking me to her house for a visit. Her family wanted to meet me and her daughter is visiting for the weekend from Odessa. So as soon as I dropped off our purchases we headed out to a nearby village, an even smaller one than this one. Inna has a car now, but only for the last 4 yrs. She has worked in the

orphanage if I recall correctly 8 yrs, and the first 4 she rode her bicycle to and from work every day 6 miles - snow or rain.

Her husband is at sea 9 month out of the year and that pays for her daughter's college. She grows all her own veggies, has chickens which gives them eggs and ...chicken. Her parents and her sister's family raise geese and pigs for meat that the whole family shares. She even collects her own mushrooms from the woods to can for winter and makes her own wine! She says that the only things out of produce she gets from the store are things like sugar and sometimes bread. I was very impressed with the care and pride she takes in her homemaking.

I was introduced to almost her whole family (except her husband, who was at sea). Her daughter, parents, sister, brother-in-law, and nephew all came for lunch. We spent time talking eating, looking at pictures, and trying to connect to the internet through her daughter's phone service, but with no success. Before I left I was given a gifts: A jar of home canned mushrooms from Inna, and a 3 liter jug of peach preserves (also home canned) and a towel from her mother. This whole trip, so far has been an experience that I could never have imagined!

Day 6- Dec 13, 2010 – (Monday)

Last night I talked till late with my family, husband and kids- till midnight, and so it was hard to get up. After getting dressed I went outside ...to use the facilities. As I opened the door I was blinded by the snow that fell out during the night. Some kids were sweeping

walkways others were having fun sliding on their feet! Then someone yelled: breakfast is ready, and everyone ran towards the dining hall. By the time I went to use the wash room the kids were gone. Only the nanny was in their quarters, finishing straitening up. I went to turn on the water and ...nothing came out. I tried another faucet- no water again. The nanny noticed that I am in the wash room and came in to apologize and tell me that the pipes froze and there is no running water. To wash up today the water had to be brought in from the well and then heated, and she poured me some from the bucket into a small dish with a spout. She told me that this is normal occurrence during the winter months in some buildings, but they get by.

After I got ready for the day, I was picked up by the Anna Ivanovna, the head caretaker, who took me for breakfast. We had sweet rice, tea, and bread with butter. I have been eating here the same food as the kids, only I have been given slightly bigger portions. Then she took me to school. There we talked with the English teacher of elementary school, I asked her what she could use for school and met the kids. I was then taken to every class grades 1-4 and was introduced to every teacher and student, many of which are from the village. They got to ask me questions about America and in one class the kids told me all the English words they already know. From grade one they learn Ukrainian as the first language and English and Russian as second. I was also taken to a village heritage museum, located in the upper grades school. I can tell of the high pride of this people from the stories and the pictures.

Then I went to living room of group # 6, there I hang out for a while, chatting for a while with one of the caregivers and one of the nurses and we talked about life here and there. For some reason I felt colder and colder as time went on. Both women already had hats and scarves on, and one had a jacket on also. I ended up putting my jacket on also. After a while I excused myself and went to my room. There was a radiator on the way - it was cold to the touch.

After lunch I got a call from Sean and the kids, it was nice to talk to them, I miss them all.

The kids in group #6 invited me to watch them practice their performance for St. Nicolas day. In this country they celebrate St. Nicolas day (Santa) on Dec 17, this Friday, New Years, and Christmas, which is celebrated on January 7th. For St Nicolas day all of the groups are doing some sort of a skit or a dance. They all wanted me to stay till after the celebration, but I have to leave on Thursday in order to be at my next destination on Friday. So they invited me to their rehearsal, that way I will at least see some of it.

Kristina wrote the skit, and the actors in it are Vladic and Pasha. In it they are both old ladies, Pasha's role is an 81 yr old women who thinks if she flips her passport upside down so the numbers look 18- she can enter a beauty contest for ladies 18 and under. While waiting at the bus stop Vladic's character shoves up and is asking why Pasha is dressed the way he is and tries to convince the "beauty" that the plan will not work. The kids in the

group are very creative, they dressed up both guys in girl's clothing with stuffed bras and boots with hills. The skit is pretty funny too.

After the skit we went to town to get warm hats for Vladic and Pasha, last night they told me their ears freeze in the hats they have now. And sure enough, the hats are pretty thin. It is south of the country, but the winter is still colder than in Phila area. It is very good that I can stay here this long with the kids and adults. As I get to know them and they get to know me, they are finally showing me what they need. During the practice I noticed pants on the boys' beds that they took off to get into their costumes. These are the only clothes I have seen them in since I got here. Both pants were pretty thin, worn out, with holes that are usually covered by sweaters, and a zipper on Vladic's pants are broken. I asked Vladic where is the rest o his clothes and he pulled out a large bag from under his bed. It had a few sweaters, 1 or 2 summer outfits, a shirt, and gym pants. So I asked the caregiver if these 2 boys have clothes anywhere else. She said "no. In the last 2 years the only cloth that was given out- has been humanitarian aid, and for some reason it comes in sizes for small kids, or big ones, but not much in medium sizes".

The 3 boxes of clothes I sent were like a drop in the ocean, they barely made a splash. I recognize some of what I sent on kids, a jacket there or pants here, but most of them still live in just one outfit for school and one for after school. On the way to the store I asked Vladic and Kristina: " I have asked you on the phone before: What do you need? Why do you tell me you are fine, when you have

barely anything to wear?" Christina answered for all of them: "We are embarrassed to ask". The boys just nodded.

On the way home we got cookies and candies for the group. While we waited for supper, we had tea and some of the goodies in my room, and chatted getting to know each other. After supper I shared snacks with the group, some kids are still too shy/embarrassed to take things from me. It's now about 9pm, I checked on the kids, there are 10 of them on the floor in front of the movie, all wrapped in blankets, some already asleep. There is still no water in the pipes but the heat is back on.

Day 7 - Dec 14, 2010 (Tuesday)

I woke up about 5:30 and did some work on the computer in my room. At about 7 I heard the kids waking up and getting ready for the day. 30 min later it was all quiet, so I figured I'll check if there is water to wash up with...still not in the pipes, but there was water left for me in the bucket. In the living room all the kids and the caregiver were doing morning stretching exercises. Kristina, group captain, was leading. I joined in, some kids were still in PJ's and half asleep. I have noticed, many got twinkles in their eye and started smiling when they saw me stretching with them.

Soon it was breakfast. As we were eating the lights went out. I was told that something is being repaired today and electricity will be out for several hours. The next stop was a dorm room into which the kids (group #6) living right now in back of nurses office are supposed to move in to.

Over the last few years group #6 had to be moved several times due to various reasons. At present they have the tiniest quarters for their size group in space per person. There is only room for 10 beds, smaller than twin size, for 13 kids. Some of the smaller girls have to share. There is no room for night stands that they used before to keep clothes in. At present 3 kids have clothes in nightstands, the rest keep their belongings in boxes and bags under their beds, and some on the shelves in the washroom. There is a wardrobe where the uniforms for school are kept. Heat is off in this building for a half a day almost every day. Consider the fact that the only way washed clothes will dry is if you bring it in after hanging it on the line outside, frozen stiff. Then put on the radiator to thaw and finish drying. That makes laundry rather difficult. And of course my favorite, pipes freeze for most of the winter in this building. You realize this is the Medical building servicing 110 kids? At present the isolator houses 13 kids and there is no water!

So back to the repairs: the idea was that few rooms will be taken away from another group, and 3 side rooms: wash room, an entry room, a hallway, and a room in the back will get repaired. I do not know how long those rooms have not been occupied, but I can tell you, they are in sad, sad shape. The Ceiling is crumbling in a few rooms because the roof is leaking and there is no money in the budget for roof sheeting. I am not sure what the plan was before I got here, the kids and their caregiver were telling me that probably the roof will not get repaired and will leak again in the spring. The 2 nannies, 2 caregivers, and the kids who are old enough to do add

jobs in the village were going to chip in for floor paint for the washroom. Even with that plan they were not sure how much longer it will take for them to be able to move into this more spacious and warmer rooms. So, I went in to look...and left deciding that I will order the materials needed for repairs and pay for it in the store with the money I will still need to find somewhere later. That way the kids could move in into their new quarters right after the Christmas holidays. They can all work on fixing it up during the winter break. I was thanked a million times by various staff and kids, and was promised pictures.

The Head Caregiver and I went to the bank and store so I could figure out my budget. We found out that the bank is closed due to the power outage, but the stores are open. That is because the stores only take cash, have windows to let light in, and everyone wears jackets and hats keep warm inside. We put in an inquiry on the price of all needed:

- Snow shovels since at present there are only 2 for the whole orphanage.
- Light bulbs –economical, with 1 yr warranty. If they are to burn out or they will be replaced for free. The cheap ones burn out every 2 days in some cases.
- Kerosene lamp's glass covers for the nights when the light are out (ideally electric rechargeable lamps should be used- but the local store had no access to that- it's on my list to get for later)
- Some plates- there is just not enough for all the kids

- Spoons - there are only enough spoons for 1/2 of the kids- so they have to eat in 2 shifts
- Forks- there are almost none- so kids eat with spoons, forks are reserved for staff.
- Pillows – I do not know how old those are. Lets just say I still have 2 pillows from Ukraine, they are now 20 yrs old and have more down in them than the pillow kids have here. *Most of the pillows are 3/4 deflated from their original size !*(but that is last on my list, and probably will have to wait for later)

After that we had an appointment at 10:30 at the school's craft and arts room. It is normally locked so the kids do not go in and break thing, viewings are only by appointment, and 2 high school girls are trained in being the guides. Once again, I am amazed at the talent, pride, hard workings of the people of this village. The guides did great job showing and explaining everything to me, and I took lots of pictures.

When the tour was over electricity was still out, so no bank yet. I went to my room to work on the computer, but before I even got settled in Vladic came in telling me that he had a cancelled class and brought a friend to introduce to me. We listened to music and talked until they had to go back to school, which is when the electricity came on, and the head caregiver came to get me for an assembly. It is a book day, and the librarian had something special prepared. Older grades had a contest on book knowledge and creativity. Representatives from 3 different classes were judged in

categories of knowledge, Ukrainian proverbs, different literature books, ability in wrapping a book in a paper to preserve it while using it, and a creative number. For the last part one group did a skit, one told a poem, and one danced a national dance. The kids from grades 1-4 were the audience, and while groups were setting up their performance numbers they were given awards and coloring books for categories like reading the most books.

When I first walked in, seeing how I was already introduced on the previous day to all of the elementary grades, the kids were waving to me and smiling. I was taken to the judges table and was surprised to find that I was a guest judge. I did not do much judging. It was all in Ukrainian, and my Ukrainian is not as good as my Russian. So, I took lots of pictures during the contest. Head Caregiver asked my opinion on creative parts. I felt very welcomed. Now remember the electricity was out for several hours just before the assembly- that means no heat in that building. It was very cold inside that building and all the kids were fully dressed for the outside weather. I have no winter boots, or proper warm pants, so once again I was frozen.

Not much for the next few hours: a walk to the bank- since the bank was closed earlier there was a long line, I had to wait close to an hour. Apparently bank is also where you pay your utility bills, and with only one teller it takes a while. At some point someone walked in and seeing the long line asked if today was the day they were giving out free money. I also stopped at the store and got Christina a fashionable hat she was so admiring yesterday, but it

was a lot more money than boy's hats (\$15 vs. \$3.25). So, she told me her old hat is just fine. Then I found the kids from group # 6 rehearsing again, this time in a club- on stage. When they were done I took Vladic, Pasha, and Christina back to the store (I have been walking quite a bit here- my legs are past soreness). We picked out pants for Vladic and Pasha. Kristina told me that her school pants are very thin and she is always cold in school. We looked but they did not have her size. And then she started looking for that beautiful hat she liked so much...but it was gone. The sales person played along and told us:"it was purchased". I did my best to not to give away the secret by smiling, but it was hard -I am not a very good actress.

While there we also got a pair of wool socks for each of the kids in the group. Then we went to one more small store- they had more shoes. I found out that Christina has no sneakers (I confirmed it with a caregiver)and has been borrowing someone else's for gym. Vladic' s gym shoes are falling apart, and Pasha 's shoes he has on- are not his either. As the kids were trying on shoes, the sales person asked me if I was Marina, she said she guessed who I was by the description someone had given her of me. I thought it was amusing – but I guess in small village news travels fast. We left with 3 new pairs of shoes and 3 were happy kids. The old clothes were in bags, as well as 2 loaves of bread and some candy for the evening treat for the group. The plan is to eat it with a jar of peach preserves, gifted to me on Sunday.

On the way to my room we stopped to give Nikita a hat we got for him, he left his in a shower house, and has been without it since Thursday. I do not know why he just does not ask someone to open the door for him. I told him to do that few days before, but decided that he would appreciate a new warm hat, which he did. He put it on right away, and shyly smiled at me.

In my room the kids got ready to pose for pictures with their new belonging. But first I got my camera ready...casually turning on the record button. I told Kristina that I will be missing her b-day this winter and wanted to give her a present earlier. I handed her a bag, when she opened it...she jumped up, ran to me and have me a hug and a kiss. The boys were sitting there stupefied. In a bit Vladic said: "I was wondering why the sales person was smiling with a strange smile when she told us the hat was gone?" After pictures, Kristina offered to give me a massage on my back and shoulders. What she lack in skill she made up for with enthusiasm. Then I gave Kristina a back, shoulders, and ears massage. She was just melting at that. The boys asked for one also. They both loved it. The Head Care giver came in to get me just as we were finishing up, on the way to the dining hall she told me that I am totally spoiling the children. I apologized, but she said: "No, no it's a good thing".

After supper I gave out socks to the kids in the group. The main caregiver for the group, Svetlana Ivanovna, was at the end of her shift, and was not going to be back before I left on Thursday. It was my last chance to talk with her. I had many talks with her before, she is a very loving woman who loves kids and has none on

her own. She is a Christian, what they call here a "believer". At the end of our conversation I mentioned that during lunch, when kids were away, I came into their entry way area where the shoes are kept and attached a shoelace to each boot that was missing one (I got them on same trip as the hat). I was wondering if anyone has noticed that shoes now had laces on them. So she made a serious face went to the room where the kids were. She told the kids: "Why are you watching TV? Do you have everything ready for school? I will be checking your shoes. Are they all properly laced?" Of course there was a lot of "you must be kidding!" and "we have no shoe laces to tie!" So she says: "Everyone, show me your boots right now!" Some kids came over right away- the ones whose boots zipped, or had laces in previously. Two boys ran to get their shoes and when they saw shoe laces quickly started lacing them- they did not even question where the laces came from. Some kids started to wonder: "But wait a second, I thought these boots did not have shoelaces?" One girl, Marina, started to walk from one pair of shoes to another examining and comparing them. The caregiver said: "Of course you have shoe laces, what do you think they fell out of the sky?" I said: "Santa came and delivered them?" Vladic was the first one to catch on, he answered: "I don't think it was Santa, I think it was Marina?" And then caregiver told them: "are you not going to say thank you?"- Most of the kids were still confused or were only paying attention to tying their shoes, so they could get back to watching TV. They had to be told in plain Ukrainian what happened and where the shoe laces came from.

It was 8:30 when I finally remembered about the planned snack. I asked Kristina, Vladic and Pasha to help me get the snack from my room, and that is when I realized, I forgot to ask kitchen staff for a can opener. Pasha said: "No problem, we do not need a can opener to open a jar of preserves!" I was a bit puzzled- it is sealed, not the twist kind, but canned! Pasha explained:" We have done it many times before: you need to hit the lid in the center with your elbow, and then finish the job with your teeth." And he followed that speech by a demonstration. I looked with unbelief and shock, as in 30 sec Pasha managed to open the jar, while being cheered on by the other two. This time the kids, about 13 of them- some from group #6, some from other groups were not shy at all, finally. They kept asking for seconds...and 3rds...and 4th...and...The preserves were great on slices of bread and within about 30 min both loaves of bread and a large portion of peaches were gone. Then everyone, in a new tradition of the group, settled in with blankets in front of the TV.

I later asked the Head Caregiver if getting them a DVD player was really such a good gift- it might have completely ruined their routine. But she said that it is a great present, because now the care givers can motivate kids by threatening to take TV time away!

As in the past few nights Vladic, Pasha, and this time an 8yr old, Pashas brother, Rikki (short for Ricardo) came to my room and asked to play electronic games on my ipod and computer. We took turns playing different games, at some point I told Vladic about a

conversation I had with one of my kids on the phone few night before.

I was talking to Angel, my 9 yr old daughter, when the following topic came up. I told her:" The things I miss most about not being home are hugs. At home every night I get a good night hug and a kiss from my kids, but here I have not got any yet!" Angel was shocked:" Why do they not give you good night hugs???" " Maybe they do not know I like them" was my answer. It did not take her any time at all to come up with this wisdom:" Well, you just need to tell them".

When it was time for boys to leave, Vladic asked me if I wanted a good night hug. I smiled and happily accepted, the other 2 were not far behind. They happily gave me good night hugs also!

Day 8- Dec 15, 20 (Wednesday)

I was up at 3am- just could not sleep. So I did some writing till about 7am, that is the time the kids are supposed to be getting up, and then decided to check on the kids. As I walked in to the boys bedroom, which is actually a wide hallway, I realized that there should be 5 boys sleeping in 5 beds, but 2 of the beds were not touched during the night- only pillows were gone. I thought: "wow, they must have fallen asleep in front of TV, and no one told them to move. I went to the "TV room"- no kids there. I went back to the hallway- "boy's bedroom". After looking closer realized that there are 2 boys in one bed, 2 in the other, and one in 3rd- leaving 2 beds empty.

Puzzled I asked them: "Why, when they have enough beds do you prefer to squeeze into such a small beds by twos? " The answer was simple enough:" It's too cold to sleep alone, we have done it for years, and are used to it". Still puzzled I asked:" Why would you not put on some warm cloth to sleep in?" With shock that I would even suggest such a thing someone answered: "Warm clothes are for outside, we cannot wear it to bed!" I tried to explain:" I mean PJ's-special warm outfit to sleep in?" "Oh, we do not have that!" OK, that was in interesting discovery that could only be revealed in a present situation. Would you have ever assumed that in a freezing climate in the winter, where heat is often not working, the children would not have warm clothing for sleeping? I turned to Stepa, the only boy sleeping alone in his bed, and asked:" Aren't you cold?"- He smiled and said: "I am next to the radiator!!!"

Today the prices were supposed to come in for things I wanted to order for the orphanage. After breakfast I went to take care of actually placing the order and paying for it. I had some \$\$ that I needed to change to local currency and I also needed to take some money out of the bank through my debit card. When I got to the bank I had to wait a while again, this time the banker (did I mention that there only one woman working that bank?) was working as typist on a computer as a paid service for someone. I was first in line when she finished that task, and there were several people behind me. The banker asked the woman behind me if she is there to make a withdrawal or check balance, because if she needed

money she would have to come back tomorrow. The bank ran out of cash! Probably thanks to me- I most likely broke their records of amount drawn in a single week. I think it gave quite a boost to the village economy all the way around while helping the orphans, with all of your help! After the initial shock of that news, I asked if they had \$\$ and run out of Hryvnias? The banker said- yes, they had \$\$, so I took that out and went to the store to complete the transaction. I confirmed the order, downsized it a bit, and spoke to the owner about the cash situation, she was willing to take \$\$ for the purchase. I tell you, so far I have not had a dull day yet!

At lunch the Head Caregiver confided in me another problem, there was a brief mention of that problem yesterday, and today it was officially brought to my attention. That problem was named Rooslan, a 15 years old boy who continuously runs away. He, once again, has been found by the police and needed to be collected by the orphanage. If he is not picked up by the orphanage in timely manner- the orphanage will have to pay fines, which they do not have money for. However there is no money in the budget for gas to go get him either, but it is cheaper then to pay fines, so all the caregivers are expected to take up a collection in order to pay for the gas to get this child, who most likely will run away again rather soon. Rooslan was brought back to the orphanage cold and hungry last night, with no winter clothes. This time he was gone for about 5 month! The Head Caregiver asked me if I could please do anything with that child. Maybe get him some warm clothes and have a talk with him, to somehow influence him to stay till June. That is when

he will technically finish grade 9, and will no longer be liability to the orphanage. As to actually turning his life around, so that he will not end up in jail in a few years, and dead soon after...she said there is little hope, basically-it will take a miracle.

Rooslan was brought to the living room of group #6 to wait for me. He had an escort assigned to him at all times who is responsible for him not to run away. He had straight light color hair, a bit too long, is about 5 ft tall...and had on jeans and a jacket, and good boots. I was surprised and confused. I thought he had nothing to wear? The caregiver explained that there was some things in storage that he had last year, but he has absolutely nothing to wear to school. He needs dark pants, gym shoes, and maybe a few more things. So after introducing myself to him, and telling him that I would like to get to know him it was arranged for us meet up right after dinner, to go to the stores. My escorts this evening were Vladic, Kristina, Rooslan, and his guard- Jenia (that is a boys name, shot for Eugenie). Our first stop - the clothing store where we picked out black pants. I told Rooslan to try them on, and realized as he took off his jacket that even though it is a warm jacket you can only take it on and off by unzipping it 2/3 of the way and then stepping in and out of it. The sweater he was wearing...let's just say it has seen better days. I picked out a sweater for him while he was in the changing room, and gave it for him to try on also. Pants were too long but good in the waist, so he changed out of those, but the sweater he kept on and asked if he could just keep wearing it. We also picked out hat, gloves and

socks. Rooslan was not shy at all, and had absolutely no problem accepting the fact that a strange woman was buying him things, unlike Vladic and Kristina who were embarrassed to let me know what they needed the first several days. So, I asked: "how is your underwear?"

"I have 2 pairs"

"Are they "underwear" or "rags"?"

"100yrs old!"

"so rags?"

"well, I guess so"

So I had him pick out 2 new pairs. Then we went to another store that had better selection of shoes, and got him school sneakers. I looked for a better jacket, but there was none his size so told him (to give him some incentive to stay in school) that I will send him a jacket from America, but to get it he has to stay in school and wait for it. This evening I had Rooslan pick out snacks for the group at the grocery store. As we headed back Vladic remembered that he needed to stop by the music teacher's house to get some music for the skit they were doing, Rooslan wanted to accompany him, but both his "guard" and Kristina said they do not want to walk with bags and in cold weather any extra length of time. So I took responsibility for Rooslan not to run away, and we split up. That gave me extra time to talk with Rooslan and get to know him a bit more.

It was about 7:30 pm when we returned the school grounds. There are almost no street lights and it was very cold, but there

were still a good number of kids outside. They were sliding on their feet. Sliding is defiantly a learned, fun skill: see what you do is you run and then suddenly stop at an icy or slippery spot and momentum will carry you forward. The roads are not treated for snow removal so the whole street is a playground. As we walked closer and closer towards the building I stayed at, kids just kind of skeet around us. Leaving their past location and following us like we were a magnet. As I got to the top of the steps and turned around I realized that about 10-15 kids joined us during this walk and now were all standing around us and looking at me. It was like in some movie! I was did not know what to do...so I said : "Do you want a cookie? " There were approving nods. I quickly ran inside to get a bag as snacks and gave them out. As the kids got their snacks they smiled and thanked me, and went back to skiing on their feet.

This was my last night here and I brought with me face painting supplies that I still had no chance to use, so that evening about 8:00 I set up a face painting station in the living room and was pleasantly surprised at how much the kids loved the activity. I painted and stenciled probably 30- 40 different designs. They kept coming back for more, I told them that they could not wash it off until they had a picture taken with it, and entrusted Kristina with my camera. She did a great job at photo shooting. At which point many run to wash of their faces, only to come back for "one more pleeeeeease!!!" Some were starting to be concerned that I was getting to tired, and can they use my brushes to do it themselves? I let

them use the stencils. Face painting turned into "tattooing" in their backs and other places where the caregivers will not make them wash it away.

I'd say by 10:30pm I realized I was getting tired. The clue was when I started occasionally speaking English to the kids without realizing it and getting funny looks from them. Many helped me to clean up. As the clean up was done, Vladic asked me if I was going to bed now. I said: "Yes, I am pretty tired". He immediately stretched out his arms to give me a hug! Of course I accepted it with a happy heart! I asked if anyone else would like a good night hug, and immediately a line was formed. I think they all gave me hugs that night, and some even more than once!

It was a long, tiring, satisfying, wonderful day! And tomorrow I am leaving. This week went by very fast.

Day 9- Dec 16, 2010 (Thursday)

Last day here, I am up at 7:00am. Kids ended up watching a movie after face painting and are still in bed. I did not see the nanny, I think she went to get water from the well for morning washing. I decided to wake up the kids myself and took some pictures of the morning routines. I have been here only one week, but it feels like home. I enjoy spending time with all of the kids and getting to know them. I am sad to leave them.

Remember I bought Pasha and Vladic warm pants because the old ones had holes in them? Well those 2 decided that those pants make great school uniforms! The other school pants are very thin

and it is colder to sit in them in school, then it is to run outside in pants that have holes! I was not sure what to do. My dilemma is that I did not want to single out any children...too much. But I got to know those two and it hurts to know that they are cold, while I can potentially do something about it. While still undecided I asked Vladic to give me his jeans so I could mend them when he is in school, time permitting of course.

After breakfast I headed back to the stores for a last minute shopping spree. I wanted to get the kids from the group #6 something individual, not just socks. For Rikki (8yrs) and Kolia (11)- I got sweat pants- to sleep in. For Valeria- special shampoo for oily hair: just for her. For 5 other kids: Karina, Marina, Sveta, Tania, and Stepa- large towels of different colors. I asked Kristina ahead of time if they could use new towels. She said:" Well I guess. Several girls use mine, after am done drying of course". While in the store I was told hair scissors that I ordered came in- that was supposed to be for Kristina, so she could cut other kids hair...more professionally. And of course I could not resist...I took Vladics pants to the store and used them as a measuring guide for getting him and Pasha new pairs- two boys are virtually the same size.

Vladic, Pasha, and Kristina came to my room after school to see when I was leaving, to sigh a bit and tell me how much they will miss me. I told them it is very soon, and I have presents for those kids in their group whom I did not get many as many things as for this 3 kids. So all of the kids were called into the living room and I gave out gift to them one by one, till only 3 kids- my daily

companions were left without something in their hands. Then I said:" well I guess this is it, I did not forget anyone?" Then looked into my bag and "remembered" scissors for Kristina, she happily accepted and posed for a picture. Then I asked again if I got gifts for all and once again ... pulled something from a bag- this time jeans and gave them to Pasha. He face was so happy, but from a corner of my eye I was watching Vladic, who at that point was the only one without a gift. I said:"that is it, I think I got everyone" This time I looked straight at Vladic who nodded his head in agreement, but with a look...sadness, disappointment, but content with this fate...I wish I videotaped it, because I am not a good enough writer to describe it on paper. Then I promptly handed him the bag and said:" Oh yea, almost forgot...I fixed your pants!" He just stood there holding the bag. "Aren't you going to open it?" I asked him. He did, looking very confused. I asked : "Did you really think I forgot about you?" He nodded. I thought this trick I played on him was going to be funny for him, like: "Ha, ha... did you forget about me?" But instead what I learned that after all the time we spent together this week, and all the calls and letters I sent to him prior to this trip, in his heart he still believes that he is not important to be loved and remembered! How sad is that?

I was originally told to be ready at 5pm, but as director told me the car will be ready one hour earlier. I rushed to my room to finish packing, as I was standing by the door to the kids room, stuffing things into my suitcase...this moment will always be imprinted in my memory...Vladic stepped in to my room, he was

just inches away from me...he asked:" may I?" , as he did many times before, when he wanted to come in. I said:" Of course you may". He looked me in straight in the eyes with this sadness in his. Raised his hands and hung on my neck hugging me. I hugged him back for what seemed like an eternity...how can you forget something like that? Things like that change your life forever.

When I finished packing and started to say good bye. Over the course of the next 30 min or so there were many hugs, as kids, some with tears on many faces, asked me not to forget them, to come back again, and soon. At the end of each line ...there was Vladic...I must have given him 10 hugs! Every time it was his turn he would just smile, raise his arm and look at me with a question in his eyes:" One more for me?"

As some kids lugged my suitcases to the car that was waiting at the gate, I realized that I did not say bye to Rooslan,I also had another gift for him. Someone went to get him, when he arrived I gave him a school backpack, I told him it is not for backpacking, but for school- to put his books in. And once again he promised to stay put...and not to smoke anymore. Few more hugs and...kids remembered that I promised something else and never got it for them. Off they ran to the store to meet me there as I got to the car, just to get out shortly. I paid for the purchases: 10 rolls of toilet paper (about \$1) and a set of rackets for table tennis (\$3). ...few more hugs. Vladic was the last one...again. And off I went.

A 3 hour drive to the train station got me there by 8pm. My train was at 10:40pm, but in order to get the director and the driver

back to the orphanage by the expected snowfall it was necessary to get to Odessa earlier. The director helped me to get my suitcases to the second floor where the waiting room was. From there I was on my own. Train platform was on the first floor, and there were only stairs to get your stuff up and down on! In addition it was not heated and the stone floors and walls. That I am sure did a fine job at keeping the place cool in the summer, but did not help any in the winter! I ate my supper; the kitchen staff gave me enough food to feed an army! I jumped up and down to keep warm for a while. (You really need a good winter boots here!)

I decided to call the kids. I talked to Kolia and Sergey, two boys, brothers that we hosted last summer. They still had no clue that I am coming to see them! Then I called Kristina's phone, which was passed around from kid to kid. When I talked to Vladic, he said "Marina, I love you" (in English!), and then asked Pasha if he had something to say, I heard another (English)"I love you", and then a few more from around the room they were in- they were all together watching DVD again! Then my husband called me and I got to talk to my family till I had to board the train.

3 ladies shearing a 4 bunk sleeping "room" with me. All were on different business ventures. It was fun listening to them talk about their lives, about local politics and taxes. One lady asked me if I was traveling from afar. I said:" Yes from Philadelphia, America". She said:" I thought I detected an accent." I thought it was funny, this is what people tell me in America! I told them a bit about my trip, and then we all passed around pictures of our kids. As we were

settling into bed, I apologized ahead of time in case I woke them at 3:30am when I had to get off the train, and goodbye in case I didn't. I fell asleep rather quickly, fully clothed but my shoes, and my jacket under my head for ease of getting ready in the morning.

Day 10- Dec 17, 2010 (Friday)

I was Kirovograd by 4 am. During this trip to manage my suitcases rather well, if I may say so myself!

I settled in at the hotel, took a nap, and then waited for my first visitor...who never came. I called him, but his phone was not working. Maybe he had no money for the transport? Snow started falling...a lot! Then electricity went out. I was told it was due to the snow, there was also no internet, which I expected to have here. I was told that it happens rare. Later we found out that there was a fire nearby, and several stores burned down, and that was the reason for power and internet outage. So I typed till the battery run out of juice.

I have to tell you about my room. I thought I ordered the cheapest, smallest room. But somehow it was medium and a bit more money. There is nothing I could do at a time, but to enjoy it- all the smaller rooms were taken.

Sometime in the afternoon, a desk clerk came to my room and asked me if I they could please move me to another room, because a family with a small child was coming in. The room they ordered had a separate entrance and because of the snow the stairs were slippery. I agreed and started packing my things back into the suit

case. When I got to the room I could not believe my eyes. The room was a suite with a refrigerator, living room with leather couches and armchairs, and a table for 4. In a separate room was the bed. I have never, ever, in my life expected to stay in a room like that! The décor, the lighting, the separate entrance- believe me- it was like in some magazine.

After moving into my new “luxury quarters “ I just could not sit still. I decided to go explore the neighborhood. It was snowing and cold, and here I am walking the winter city in snickers. Vikki, a girl I met during hosting program last summer, called me to tell me that she is done school for the weekend and can she meet me to hang out. I met her at the train station- she only has lived in Kirovograd four months and could not figure out how to get to my hotel. She realized later that her dorms are only few miles from my hotel. Vikki became my guide, we took a minibus to the center to shop and eat. The family that hosted Vikki last summer passed some money through me to get her a present. But first things first, boots for me! We found a pair that worked in a store a small store. I paid for the purchase, put my sneakers in a bag and walked out in my new boots. We did not find what Vikki wanted, the market was already closed and the stores were closing also. It was about 6pm. After eating at some cafe we went to my gorgeous room to have a tea for two and some candies we picked up on the way.

The owner of the hotel has been trained in Paris in hair care and haircuts, so I took that opportunity to get a haircut- now I look

like a local, boot and hair cut! I just need a fashionable hat. It was nice spending time with Vikki. By nine she had to be back at her dorm, it was mandatory, so I walked her to the bus stop and turned in early myself.

Day 11 -Dec 18, 2010 (Saturday)

Today I finally will see Kolia and Sergey. They stayed with us for a month this past summer. During that time I have attached to them so much. Of course the fact that Sergey decided on the third day that my name was "Mama" did not help- I did not ask him to call me that, he just did. Also, my philosophy about kids is different than many others have: for me children are...God's children, on loan to us. Some are born to us, and others come to us other ways. For me it is not just a theory, but a reality. I love Kolia and Sergey the same way, with the same intensity as I love my biological children, and as I love my foster children. I have told Kolia and Sergey, that in my heart they are now mine, and they cannot escape it. No matter what happens in life, no matter if legally we ever be able adopt them- I am theirs and they are mine. And they know it is true. People ask me how many kids I have, and I do not know how to answer them anymore. I start with:" The answer is not as easy as you think. I have birthed 5, but 7 live with me at present; about 12-15 call me "mom"; and in my heart, at present I have ...about 25 or so".

So, back to the happenings: Kolia's Birthday is this Sunday-tomorrow and Sergey's on Thursday. They will be turning 13 and

10. They know that there will be a surprise for their b-day, but not what. I never told them I am coming just in case something went wrong, and I could not meet them. I call them every week, sometimes more than once. So last week, while already here, in Ukraine, I was not sure what to do. I miss talking to them and they will know something is not right if I do not call. At the same time if I call with my Ukrainian phone number, it might give me away. What to do? I took a risk- I called. Right away Kolia said: "Your number, its same company as mine! I can call you back on my friend's phone! How can it be?"

I never lie, but I have decided ahead of time, that in this case I will have to abandon my principal. So I lied.

Me: "Oh, really? I got a new phone. Are you sure you can call me back?"

Kolia:" Yes, I am sure. Do they have phone numbers like this in America?"

Me: "Well, maybe. I am not really sure. It came with a new phone."

He called me every day. On Thursday he told me:" I know what the surprise is" (I thought for sure he figured it out somehow) "Our head caregiver told me that she will be taking us to Kirovograd to "Didro park" where the carousels are." Whew. Me:" Yes, do you like what I arranged for your b-day? There will be someone there to give you your b-day present." Sergey called me every day also. And every tenth word at least 10 times in a conversation he would say:" I miss you" in a very sad voice.

So now it is Saturday, the boys think they are going to "Didro Park", and so they are, but not just with a caregiver! I had to get their presents ready. I got them each in USA a phone that is also an MP3 player and a camera that would work in Ukraine. They both have been asking for that, and only that. I still had to run to the store before they got here. I got them some candies, a gift bag, SIM cards and a cake for their b-day to eat later. I ran "home" to set up the phones as fast I as could. And on the way back stopped at the hotel lobby desk to ask for a favor- I gave a clerk my camera to videotape our reunion. When they arrived at the hotel, I got a call and went to meet them in the lobby...

I thought I prepared myself for this, but when I saw them...I felt weak in my knees. They were sitting in chairs. Kolia was facing me, Sergey was not. As I walked in...it felt like as eternity...he rose with wide eyes, slowly smile spreading on his face. He did not say much, just: "OH...Hi". Sergey turned around and without any delay or any words run to me, moving much faster than his brother. Kolia, definitely in shock followed soon after.

We ordered breakfast to be brought in to the room. While waiting for breakfast, we sat on the couch in my room. I could not put Sergey down he sat on my lap I hugged him tight, he was facing away from me and our cheeks touched, it felt so good to hold him again. He had a tight grip on my arm in front of him and we just sat like that for a while. Kolia sat next to me, he was still in shock. I offered to give him his presents, but he said: "No, not now". I asked if my coming was the best present of all. He nodded and just kept

looking straight ahead, constantly glancing at me and giving me huge grins. It took him, I think, good 4 hours to get over the shock; he would not even eat breakfast. I offered him one of the bananas that I got for them this morning, knowing how much they both love bananas. In the summer, in one day they would have 3-6 of them each, I could not buy enough! "Ah, banana", he said with a smile and a twinkle in his eye," That I will eat!"

I gave them bags with presents, and of course could not resist casually playing with the phone and pushing a button so something in the bag would ring! They loved the presents! Then we went walking in down town of Kirovograd. The care giver who brought the boys knew the city well. Slowly we made out way to the "Didro park" which was closed due to the snow, even the covered exhibits that are open year around. The caregiver said: "Well I promised Didro Park, and here we are. I delivered what I promised, even if it is all closed!" Then we went shopping in the market, got some warm socks for the boys and for me. I also got a fashionable hat, that the boys help me pick out!

We also got some other things, like toy guns with bullets, a must for boys like Kolia and Sergey! We had lunch at a pizza shop "Chilintano", I must say, pizza was good! And so were the salads. After that we went to the bus stop to get me a ticket to travel back to Kiev on the following evening. That is where Vikki met up with us. We must have walked for 5 hours that day, my feet were killing me and my legs were ready to fall off. I said so to the caregiver, she only laughed:" it only been 1/2 a day, you are already tired?" Last

stop before a car would pick us up and take to church and then drop me off at "home", a supermarket so we could get some things to for the orphanage. We got standard items needed in every orphanage: shampoo, toothpaste, laundry powder, soap. The boys, finally started to feel at home with me. They ran around the store loading the cart with cookies, candies, and gum to share with their friends, and of course I let them, totally spoiling them. As we were waiting for the car, such sadness came over me. At first the boys were shy and in shock, then we just ran around town, now we have to sit at church for two hours, and then they leave.(It was arranged, so that they would not have to take the bus back, that care giver's friend would drive them after the church service, we all were going to go to that). I felt that I did not really got to spend any time with them when we could just relax and talk, so I asked the caregiver to please, let me have them for just two 2 more hours in my hotel room, while she went to church with her friend.

She did not give me a definite answer, but we did pull up to the hotel. She told the boys that she will pick them up at seven. So the 3 of them: caregiver, her friend, and Vikki headed to the church, and the 3 of us: Kolia, Sergey and I headed to the hotel. We talked, played with the new toys, shooting toy soldiers with guns with bullets. I showed them how to work the phones and the MP3. Sergey went into the bathroom several times, and every time he entered that room my phone would ring! He went there just to call me! We head great time. For dinner they ate leftover breakfast and then the b-day cake with some tea. There was not enough food for

me, so I decided to just get something later from the closest market. Kolia asked if it is possible, if there still time to go to market together and get a cake for him to take back to the orphanage to have tomorrow, on his actual b-day with his friends. And so we headed to the store together, to get his cake, my dinner,...and some more bullets for the guns. We also got more snack food for them to take back.

We got back close to 7pm, and quickly packed up all of the things for them to take with them and took some more pictures. The next thing we knew it was time for them to go. We grabbed the bags and headed for the door. Last hugs last kisses, goodbyes for now and off they went. I returned to the hotel room, in a bit of time pulled myself together and decided to eat my dinner. Well...it was nowhere to be found. My dinner was stolen! I should mention that for desert I got myself a cone of ice cream. So I called Kolia and told him that they must have my dinner and to be careful of the melting ice cream. He called me few hours later, from the orphanage to tell me that my dinner was found and the ice cream was still good. It was cold in the trunk, and several boys shared it. Sergey also called me from the car at some point to tell me his phone needs charging and he will call me tomorrow.

So out I went again, into a cold winter night. This time I went to the store a bit further from the hotel, I was told by the clerk it had a better selection of things I could get. He was right; it was like being in a modern American or any European supermarket. It had precooked food and salads, lots of fruits and veggies, and many

other things. For about \$10 I got enough to eat for dinner and next day supper, and a container of wine- I knew that in the state I was in I was not going to be able to relax, and a 1/2 glass of wine would do the trick. When I got back and settled in I got to talk to all of my kids at home, and then some kids from Ukraine. Rooslan called me to ask if I could please refill the minutes on his phone so he could call his mother. We had a nice chat, and are becoming good friends.

Day 12- Dec 19, 2010 (Sunday)

I was up at 4am again. Knowing from past experiences that I will not be fall asleep again because of so many things are running through my head. I just got coffee and started working on the blog, then packed.

This is also 3rd day that I am hanging out with Vikki. We were picked up for church. It was interesting for me to be in a Russian speaking, singing, and everything else in Russian service. After church we got back to my room, had a very late breakfast and finished packing. Today I will be taking a midnight bus to Kiev, and will arrive there at about 6am tomorrow. At this hotel I am able to leave my packed luggage in a storage room and just be around the town and later in a hotel lobby, while waiting for a taxi.

After leaving the hotel we called the other kids I wanted to get together with, and tried to figure out a meeting place. While waiting for them we found by chance a "second hand" clothing store, it was humongous, and there were no prices anywhere. We looked around, Vikki picked out few pieces for herself and her brother and I got

PJ's for the girls in Group6 in Odessa region orphanage (I plan to mail them to the kids from Kiev, as well as few other thing). So we got to the register to find out price and I realized that each register had a scale, and a large sign said "115ghr/ kg". The cloth was sold by weight!!! Every day I learn and experience something new.

We dropped of the clothing at the hotel and went to the market to find some gifts for me to take home and a gift for Vikki. We met up with Victor there. Sasha called to tell us that he could not make it, he apparently came to the hotel when we were in church, waited for a while and left. I am not sure what happened to the other 2 kids I wanted to see while in Kirovograd, they knew I was coming, but they have no regular phones, so I could not communicate with them this week. I left a phone-gift I brought for one of the girls with Vikki, to pass to her.

The 3 of us ate at a pizza shop, and then Victor had to leave. So I hung out with Vikki most of the night, we had some leftovers at her dorm room. She shares a room with 3 other girls who go home on the weekends and she ends up having a room to herself. Showers in the dorms are broken and she has to bath in the basin. There is a kitchen on every floor: it has one sink, 2 electric stoves and 2 large counters. Her room is on the fourth, but the refrigerators are on the first floor. No electrical appliances are allowed in the rooms, so there is no possibility of even an electric kettle. TV is in the hallway. The windows had to be taped shot for the winter season, it as to cold and drafty.

This is Vikki's home for the next 2 1/2 years most likely. Including, possibly, over the summer, when the rest of the kids go home. But she is definitely a survivor. She said she got used it, she learned to cook, and care for her cloth- she has to wash it by hand after heating up water- boiler is broken. She is making good choices as to friend she makes, and she helps to cloth her brother who is in the orphanage. I was very impressed to see how well she is handling such a hard situation.

I am finishing this day, by writing to on a bus. It has left Kirovograd at midnight, and I will be in Kiev by 6 am. In just 12 days I slept on airplane, train (twice), and now on a bus.

Day 13- Dec 20, 2010 (Monday)

I arrived in Kiev a bit before 6am, and was picked up in a taxi by my oldest friend, Natasha. We met when we were 6 years old, and for several years were inseparable. I have not seen her in person in 21 years! Only pictures and on Skype. We got to the apartment building where we both grew up. She travels a lot for work, month at a time, but when she is in Ukraine she lives with her parents in same apartment. Both of her parents greeted me warmly. After some tea and a small snack we both crashed for a nap. But it was not long before I was woken up by my phone. It was Kolia, he wanted to tell me that he is up and ready for school now.

My friend, Natalia, had to go into work for a few hours she offered to take into center of Kiev and show me around when her work was done...but who cares about a center where one can

wonder the streets of childhood? So I refused her offer and instead walked for about 3 hours in my old neighborhood. I walked and took pictures of the school I went to, my sisters kindergarten where I had to pick her up every day for a year, a lake that was now frozen-like it is every year and watched some kids sledding down its banks- just like I did long time ago. I recognized many things and had no problems navigating the streets, but many things have changed- old buildings...well, they looked old and some had graffiti on it. There were many new 16 stories apartment buildings, very beautiful and modern. Lake has a brick walkway around it now and stairs, which were helpful when you need to lug your sled up many times. It is a very small lake and 15-20 feet lower then street level. The trees were now taller, I was told that "my" tree- a weeping willow that I planted, I grew the roots on a branch of the tree from the banks of the Dnepr and planted it when I was about 10 years old, has toppled over just last winter during the storm with strong winds. During my walk I got many calls from Kolia and Sergey. They called me every school break from their new phones to tell me things like: "I just had Ukrainian language, next is a History class. What are you doing?...I will cal you during next break!" Every school break!

In the evening I could not get off the phone, all of the kids- from Ukraine were calling me. While talking to one -3 more would call me. They all wanted to talk to me one more time before I left for USA, thinking it as my last day here. They all told me how sad that I am leaving, how boring it is without me, and how much they miss

me, and of course to come back soon. Honestly, there had not been many times in my life when I felt more loved. Kristina called me to ask to have a talk to Pasha, because he acted mean to some other kid. She said his head "got to big" because he got nice things from me. So I asked her "Will I have to somehow raise you, guys from America?" And she said:" yes, please do!"

Day 14- Dec 21, 2010 (Tuesday)

Almost my last day in Ukraine. Tomorrow I am flying home. Time went by so fast. Today I went back to the market not far from here while my friend had to go to work for a few hours. I must have walked for 3 hours around the market shopping and bargaining, almost never paying the original price! Only in the markets like this you can do it. In USA only on yard sales and flea markets, but here at almost every stand. I found few nice things for my kids in US and a few nice things for "my kids" in Ukraine. Around 3pm my friend came to get me and help me with getting all the packages home. She speeded ahead while I stopped at the post office to get some shipping boxes. I will be mailing things I got for kids in Ukraine tomorrow morning from here.

As we were packing the boxes my "neighbor", a woman who was my neighbor for the 8 yrs that I lived in that apartment building, came from work and picked me up to see my old apartment. I spoke to her earlier and asked to arrange it with the family that lives there now. I cannot describe the feeling of walking

thought the place where you grew up, they have fixed the apartment a lot, but few things remained the same, especially the view from the 9th story, from my old balcony. The family was nice enough to let me take pictures so I could show my kids where I lived when I was their age.

About 6:30 Natasha and I headed to the center of Kiev, a neighborhood that is called "Krischatic". Earlier in the day she dropped off some pictures to be developed for me that I wanted to put into shipping boxes and they told her to come back after 6. So she took me to a place I never even imagined in my wildest dreams could exist in Ukraine. It was underground and apparently spanned several blocks under the center with many exits and stores. It looked like...lets just say for a second I thought I was transported to some fancy mall in NY..or the King of Prussia mall! They had everything, the highest quality...and the price to match.

After walking around a bit we came to the photo shop and got the photos. Then Natasha suggested that we go to a place, also, somewhere in those underground labyrinths, where we could get some tea and talk. She took me to a food court where around the perimeter, just like in any food court at the mall, there were little food shops where one could pick from Russian, Ukrainian, Italian, American and a Japanese cuisine. My friend asked me what do I think about sushi. I jumped at the idea. I Love sushi! So we had Japanese food...and tea of course, underground of center of Kiev. Then we got desert in a "papa john" stand. Here "papa john" not

only sells pizza but also salads, an "olive garden" type deserts, and ...beer.

We walked along Khrischatic, once again I wondered if we still were in Kiev. There were lots of stores that had signs in English. My friend explained that lots of foreigners shop here, and so now this is new Kiev. When we got back we had more tea and talked...till 2am. Now it is 3am, as I am writing this to post before I leave the country of my birth. In 24 hrs I will be home. P.S. internet was giving me problems, so I am posting this later.

Day 15- Dec 22, 2010 (Wednesday)

As I write this I am in the air flying home. I was so tired that I closed my eyes to what seemed like few min. And when I opened them realized I was hungry. I waited and waited for a meal to be served, eventually I asked when that would happen. I was told it already did. I must have been totally out of it. I slept through distribution, smell, time of eating and collection of food and hot drinks afterwards and never even knew it! WOW.

On another note: I am in the back of the plane in a row of 3 seats...and it's just me :) I do not feel cramped in, I can stretch out, I can even sleep lying down!!! Not sure if you can hear excitement and how much joy and fun I am having thought my writing. So I will spell it out: I HAD THE, THE BEST TRIP OF MY LIFE...so far. I say so far, because I hope that there will be more trips to come that will top this one, if it is even possible to top it. I believe what made this trip so great, that the words even cannot describe, is that this

trip was not about me, but about God. I have felt his presence with me strongly throughout my journey, more so than ever before in my life. I want to thank you all for your prayers, and want to tell you that He has answered them to the fullest and more.

My friend, Natasha, asked me yesterday if accomplished what I set out to accomplish during this trip. I told her a saying I picked up from one of the care givers in Odessa region orphanage (translation goes something like this): "We can make many plans, and they will all give God a good laugh". I also added that what I set out to do is to be open for God to lead me, and even if not all my bullet points of "To Do" got done, I believe his were. So yes, I have accomplished everything I have set out to accomplish...and so much more".

Once again I want to thank you all for your moral, spiritual and financial support. I thank you for listening to my ramblings.

Marina James.

January 2010- Afterword

In a few weeks since I got back...

- The repairs in new rooms for group # 6 have been completed, and they have moved in. The new rooms are is much warmer, water does not freeze in the pipes, and there is more spacious.

- A day after they moved 3 kids came down with a chicken pox, (Vladic is one of them). So the isolator in Medical center opened up just in time! (5 kids are now sick)
- The ceiling in a wash room in med center has collapsed, due to the leaky roof. And the main door no longer closes properly- this winter has “killed” it
- Rooslan has run away as soon as vacation started,...but he came back on his own- **for the first time ever**, when school started again. I have been keeping in contact with him during the break, he spend the time with his mother, who is very ill, and his extended family. I have talked to his family and they told me that he did not get into any trouble, like he usually does while not in the orphanage (like smoking, drinking, and getting into fights). They are now hopeful of his future.
- I check on the kids regularly, they are doing well, and are always happy to hear from me.

Maybe God is tugging on your heart to join forces with me... I know that together we can make life better for those children. You may contact me by email: marinakjames@yahoo.com

*Marina James
January 14, 2011.*