

Christopher Lewarne

Capacity building in Romania has been a truly enriching experience. I have been working with Habitat for Humanity, working in a small mountain town near Transylvania called Moinesti. Moinesti was an agricultural hub, its industry primary built around logging and oil. However, when the major oil excavation firms closed down, most of the town was left unemployed. Those jobs that remain pay very little and many have been reduced to homelessness and sub-standard living conditions.

Habitat for Humanity is a human rights group that tries to combat poverty from the ground up. They offer lower mortgage rates to families in return for fixed payments and "sweat-equity." This means that together with volunteers like me and some paid local workers, family members and friends must commit to a certain number of hours that they put into building their own homes and those of their neighbours. It is a remarkable program in a post-communist country like Romania, where the stigma of "volunteerism" carries a heavy and dark Stalinist history of forced work projects. Habitat works to counteract this ethos in Romania through its openness -- people walk by the build sites and see the good work that is being done -- its program -- requiring a high number of hours of family contribution means that the parents often need to request help from friends and neighbours, who then see the benefit of the project and proliferate its virtues -- and its advocacy -- petitioning government agencies.

While my efforts have been primarily focused on construction, I did get a chance to help petition the mayoral office, in a face-to-face meeting with the mayor himself!

With my background in construction and my keen interest in human rights that flourished this year through the IHRP program, I really appreciate the way that the program has allowed me to combine my passions and abilities in this internship. I believe that capacity building is fundamental to the global human rights effort and that ethical obligations obtain between those who need -- and those who can -- help to fulfill human capability, security, and dignity. The opportunity to participate in this internship showed me the human side of this interaction.

The younger girl in the photo is named Deanna. She is in and out of hospitals right now with terrible lung infections due to the dampness and mould in her home. Her father works as a security guard, barely making enough to get by. Before they applied for a Habitat home, the apartment that they lived in was a 200 square foot room in a condemned building with a communal bathroom that constantly flooded two inches of ground water onto the floor. I had the opportunity to work alongside her father Titi, who would invest his labour every day from 9 to 5 on the build site and then go home to sleep for 3 hours before heading to his job as a night watchman, from which he would come right back to the build site. While he was camera-shy, the pride that his eyes bore whenever he spoke about the new home that he was building for his daughter was both inspiring and heart-wrenching.



The older girl, pictured on the site and at the reception, is named Vanessa. Her father, Ioan Antochi, works as a police officer in Moinesti. The salary is unfortunately not enough to carry a mortgage. They currently live in a 12 square meter room in Vanessa's grandmother's house -- an old house made of clay and wood, with neither window nor door that closes properly. Vanessa is withdrawn and quiet. She feels stigmatized when she visits her friends' homes, some of whom even have a second floor. After the Antochis learned that they were approved for a Habitat home, Ioan explained that he could not control his emotions, or his tears, when his daughter exclaimed with joy: "We will have a house with STAIRS!"



Habitat does more than give people a house, it gives them access -- to a community, to participation in social life that restricted by poverty. It gives people dignity, which is fundamental to the expression of human rights.

While I was scheduled to take up a second build project in Ethiopia in July, I broke my leg while still in Eastern Europe. I was referred to a group in Uganda that works with primary school children and advocates for gender equality, called the Kasiisi Project.

Kasiisi students are full of life and eager to learn just about EVERYTHING! Teaching plans I was involved with included English language, use of special laptops that are donated to the program and citizenship, including a component on human rights education. My human rights initiative there was borne of a reading session with some P3 and P4 (relatively equivalent to our grade levels) students in the Kasiisi library. We took up a children's book whose author had compiled testimonies of

children who were victims of war and genocide. The outgrowth of our discussion was a lesson plan for P4 and P5s that engaged the themes of racism and genocide, their common motivation in hatred and their antitheses: acceptance, peace and respect for human dignity. My lectures spanned South African apartheid, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the Holocaust, and issues more close to home. I invited students to share their own experiences with violence and hatred; I was disheartened by how many had stories to tell, and encouraged by their willingness to engage their experiences and learn from them.

While I prepared the lectures on the school's computer and left them there for future reference, I, unfortunately, did not bring copies home. To share a sense of our work, an element that consistently affected students was a testimonial that we studied from a young boy, dying in a German internment camp during the Second World War. The letter was found next to the boy's lifeless body: it was addressed to God. He did not curse his persecutors or call for revenge. Rather he begged God to forgive them, to show them mercy. This boy loved the Nazi soldiers who murdered his family, who tortured him, who took his life. We talked about the intimate connection between our feelings toward each other and our human rights, the ability of hatred to destroy them and the ability of love to restore them. In this connection, we find the ability – perhaps the unique ability of children – to end hatred, to restore dignity and respect one another. The testimonies that we studied, and that I heard, taught us an important lesson about the endurance of the human condition. The way that we treat each other, the respect we hold for our neighbour's rights, and our own, are borne from our relationship with our own humanity. Without that connection, we cannot begin to talk about equality, liberty, freedom to speak or practice our faith.

In Uganda, girls have very special needs and face tremendous discrimination. Kasiisi Project students are treated equally, girls are allowed to attend classes with boys, and many of these issues are discussed earnestly and openly. As an outsider, the starkest contrast is that I take for granted my rights, my ability to learn, my ability to sit next to a girl in grade school, and our shared expectation to be treated equally. In many parts of East Africa, confidence in these assertions is aspirational, vulnerable. At Kasiisi, this is not the case. The smiling children make you feel welcome; they make you feel respected in a way only comes when they feel respected themselves. They challenge you; they challenge each other. No matter how many more hours some of the students walk to class (a clear marker of decreasing prosperity in very rural areas), no matter if they wear shorts or dresses, no matter how often they have the luxury of washing them, they all wear their blue uniforms proudly. The children learn together and teach each other. I know they taught me a great deal. It warms the heart to see development in action.



I have asked one of my contacts there if he can send some examples of lesson plans that I can forward to you, but internet access there is very sparse.

Habitat Romania: <http://www.habitatcomanesti.ro/en/home.html>

The Kasiisi Project: <http://www.kasiisiproject.org/>

Thank you again,

Christopher Lewarne