

Tiptoeing Out . . .

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By: Michelle Drashman

“So, where is Moldova?”

This was my question to International InitiativesSM consultant, Jean Cullen, within my first week of coming to work at WMU[®] this past April. I learned that Moldova is a country about the size of the state of Maryland, and it sits between Romania and Ukraine. I also learned from Cullen that their number one export isn't the typical “rice, grain, oil” answer. Shockingly, the country's most prominent export is women and girls.

Moldova has the unfortunate distinction of leading Eastern Europe in human trafficking.¹ Since WMU has ministry partners in this country, I contacted International Initiatives trip volunteers to Moldova, seeking a Christian worldview on this country from the eyes of others like me; not a missionary by profession, yet just as curious and passionate to fulfill Christ's call for me to concern myself with the welfare of others.

Following are highlights of questions I asked Belita Howard, who has taken five major missions trips since 1994, her first with International Initiatives in January 2007.

MM: How many total missions trips have you taken? Of those, how many through the WMU/ International Initiatives?

BH: Since 1994 I have been on five major missions trips which include three countries: Chile, Canada, and Moldova, Lynch, Kentucky and Tchula, Mississippi; as well as other church related mini-missions trips. I was also the church and community ministries director for the Robertson County Baptist Association for five years, in which I utilized missions teams for local projects. Moldova was my first International Initiatives trip.

MM: What was your first reaction/thought on traveling overseas?

BH: As an Air Force brat I was accustomed to traveling and had opportunity to live overseas. However as an adult, my first mission trip to Chile began with an attitude that our team was going to help the poor people of Chile. Soon after our arrival, when we divided into smaller teams and became acquainted with the local people and missionaries, we learned quickly that we were there to learn and encourage. These "poor" people were so much richer in Spirit than we could profess, and they certainly were not as "backward" as we had originally thought.

My trip to Moldova last year was my first to a poor European country. I was one member of a three woman team doing strategy planning with a local organization that dealt with human trafficking, as well as AIDS and abortion counseling and prevention programs. Our work was to listen and learn and then discover if a Christian Women's Job Corp[®] (CWJC[®]) could work in their environment. I did not know the women with whom I would be working, and except for a few phone calls in the preparation phase, my contact with them was very limited until we met face to face at the Washington airport. So initially, I was scared to my core due to the subject matter of human trafficking, working with two women I didn't know, navigating the language and cultural differences, and being mentally prepared to be flexible.

¹ <http://www.reflector.com/local/content/news/stories/2007/07/15/0715moldovaceri.html>

MM: What motivated you to take this trip with International Initiatives?

BH: I had never heard of Moldova until I worked with Jean Cullen as an intern at WMU in the summer of 2006. I was in between my first and second year of graduate school and was able to work at WMU writing the first Level 2 training manual for CWJC. It was during that time that I learned about International Initiatives in Moldova and their work with human trafficking. She asked if I would be interested in going to Moldova to utilize my strategy planning education and skills with this team. After reading the books on human trafficking, I fell in love with the idea and was blessed with the opportunity to go and become a small part of the Beginning of Life organization in Moldova.

MM: Did your perspective change once you were there? What stood out?

BH: Yes. Due to necessity, our team bonded immediately. The pastor and director of Beginning of Life served as our guide and translator. We were also blessed with a young college-aged translator who spoke fluent English and was a delight. The people were cautious and reserved but were also quick to help, learn, and ask questions. We observed and asked questions by day and modeled a CWJC for at-risk children and older teens by evening. I had accepted this assignment with only a limited understanding of what we would be doing and was immediately asked to be flexible by changing directions on a project or concept at the last minute and learned to compartmentalize my emotions for the week. I knew it would be hard mentally and perhaps physically, but I don't know if I could have ever prepared myself for the emotional and spiritual challenges that I experienced. That said, my greatest desire is to go back to Moldova. I keep in touch with the Beginning of Life staff, and I sponsor a young woman so that she can get an education and avoid the threat of becoming a victim of human trafficking.

MM: What effect(s) did this experience have on you/your worldview?

BH: My Moldova experiences helped me complete my last semester of graduate school with a focus on human trafficking. I was able to meet people and services involved in human trafficking in my area and my personal opinions of prostitution, child exploitation, and the sex industry has changed from one of apathy to one of involvement. Human trafficking is very real, and it's not just an international problem, but a real problem of the poor and vulnerable and happens even in my own rural, small town. Since returning home, I've had the privilege of speaking in churches about human trafficking and about the wonderful people and hope of Moldova.

MM: What would you share with someone who is considering their first missions trip?

BH: Be prepared to deal with poor sanitation and living conditions, and compartmentalize your emotions for the duration of the trip. Emotionally, they will need to be able to compartmentalize their emotions for the duration of the week. They will be assaulted with images, decisions, and overwhelming experiences that will need to be processed in private and during debriefing with their group. Personally, I am a big cry baby. But there are times when you *can't* cry, even though your heart is breaking. As our team was concluding a week of CWJC classes with young, at-risk girls for human trafficking, I looked around the room and, knowing some of their names and stories, could almost pick out which ones were headed for a life of prostitution and which ones were already emotionally damaged by incest, abuse and life on the streets. If I had had

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daughters, these girls could have been my children or the ones I taught in GA[®]s, or the girls my sons dated.

The missions teams are all taught to be spiritually prepared. Volunteers will need to deal with their missions experiences and compartmentalized emotions after the trip—once the missions high has lessened and they are left with the “what now” questions. As great as preparation is, nothing can ever completely prepare us for the reality of a situation. Experience is a powerful teacher and involvement is a wonderful and hard lesson that leads to spiritual, mental, and emotional growth. An international missions trip is not for everyone, but every Christian should be involved in missions.

You can be a part of the International Initiatives program by taking a mission trip or with your prayerful and financial support. Your gifts to the International Initiatives Fund support the Beginning of Life Ministry and other social issues facing women and children around the world. If you would like to give to someone in need, please contact the WMU Foundation at (205) 408-5508 or visit www.wmufoundation.com.

Your gift may be mailed to:
WMU Foundation
100 Missionary Ridge
Birmingham, AL 35242

¹ <http://www.reflector.com/local/content/news/stories/2007/07/15/0715moldovaceri.html>