



## Shoebox Delivery Diary 2019

Each year Shoeboxes are delivered to Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine. We send a small team to one of those locations to help give your shoeboxes out and to report back what they have seen. This year it was Iasi, Romania.

### Day 1

We arrived in Iasi the night before after a very early start from Luton – home of cheap flights. This is where Link to Hope has its largest project the Future Changed and we are happy to be meeting so many of our project managers that have been involved with Link to Hope from the very beginning.

It's -3 degrees and with a disrupted night's sleep, it's time to meet our project manager Pavel, who we first met 15 years ago. First stop is the **Link to Hope sponsored project Future Changed** and the **Little Rainbows Kindergarten**. The standard of the kindergarten is exceptional. Unfortunately, this is a rarity and our kindergarten is one of the only lifelines in the area for local families. Based in Dallas Shanty Town, the houses generally consist of one or two rooms with little or no facilities and are ramshackled and draughty.



Our Shoebox Delivery Team consists of Gill, Diana, Lisa, Maria, Rob (Furniture), Jasmine, Rob (Devon) and Liz who instantly started interacting with the children who are delighted to have new playmates. Jasmine finds herself under a blanket with 12 children telling a story with Anna their teacher interpreting. These children's home lives are extremely difficult but for a few hours a day these children have a safe and nurturing environment with teachers who adore them, a warm place that they can comfortably play in with their slippers and food provided.



We then went to visit some of the children in their homes in Dallas Shanty Town. We meet a very shy 8 year old, David, who goes to the **Future Changed Homework Club** and was wearing a prized **Fortnite jumper**. He lives at home with his parents in 1 room. They have no electricity or running water and they use a wood stove to keep warm, cook, heat up water to bathe etc. David's mother starts to apologise for not being able to say thank you in English, his father embarrassingly welcomes us into his home and thanks us for coming to see them and

for our generosity. Many fathers do not recognise their children. However despite the obvious hardship in this family, this father is very present. David is lucky to have both parents and they have worked very hard to make this cramped room homely.

The next home is up a steep muddy incline. With dogs barking at us as they attempt to protect their home while being chained up, we are introduced to a family who have no legal paperwork for the house they are trying to build on their Grandfathers land, but they've lived here a long time and Link to Hope have supported them with building materials. The entrance to the house is so muddy so the obvious thing to do is take our shoes off, the family are mortified but we do so anyway. There is washing hanging outside every house we visit, in -3 so it is a wonder how any of these clothes will dry.



Dallas Shanty Town is gradually changing. Instead of every house being a shack, some houses that have been built recently are very good. However this invariably has been built from money where family members risk leaving their home, to find work abroad, and slowly send money back to buy building materials in stages. It takes years and they make slow progress, but progress nonetheless. Time to move on.



We go on to meet Valentin the project leader who now works in the isolated outlying villages around Iasi. Valentin introduces us to a reformed character who used to terrorise the village with his drinking and carrying around a large knife. Now he is completely changed and **is running a homework club from his house**. We walk into a crowded room with a wood stove in the corner of the room, another Romanian staple. The children sit in rows at tables with a shy lady (his wife) supervising colouring in and playing with a few basic toys. A meal is ready for the children – salami and bread. The team brings in the shoeboxes and we hand them out. There are some wonderful gifts in the shoeboxes and the children's eyes are wide as they go through their boxes. Alcoholism and domestic violence are very high in these isolated villages and these children have a rough existence with very little to take them away from their lives. The shoeboxes were that moment of joy when they were in a safe space just enjoying being children and eagerly looking at all the wonderful gifts that were in the shoeboxes.

## Day 2

Another village school 'Scoala Primara Ciocirlesti' – where we meet another class of children who we know that, behind the smiles, have lived through experiences that we can't identify with but we feel the weight of. **We met Stefan, a foster child** who has come from the big class to sit with his little sister as she receives her box. He spends all of his time making sure that she can open the box and that she understands what's inside.



In the older class we meet a **10 year old girl** – unfortunately she is defined by the significant burns on her face and the fact that she has one hand. The teacher tells us that this child is one of the kindest in the class. Every day, without fail she offers her friends and teachers a bite of her sandwich and shares everything with her friends. She opens her box and finds a pack of sweets, right on cue, she offers one to us.

Most of the children are keen to re-seal their boxes and keep everything safe. Jasmine always puts a tote

bag in the boxes by her group – otherwise it can be really difficult for the kids to put things neatly back and keep the boxes from overflowing.

Chrissy takes us to what is described as the **'road of widows'**. Women start to come out of their homes to greet us, some are expecting us. Its freezing and we're worried about them waiting in the cold.



**On the road, we meet Zenovia.** She used to work with a homeless cooperative. She talks about the time when the Communists took their land and said that they could continue living there in exchange for working where they placed her. The lack of choice being a normal part of life for these women. **We move on to an Aunt and Niece who live opposite each other.** The Aunt proudly shows us the ramp that she built in front of her house, to make it easier when getting water from the well and getting back into her home. Her niece talks about life with her son

who she supports. He is alcoholic and unfortunately out of work, he is also violent towards her and she prays that he will get help.

Time to visit another school **'Scoala Gimnazial Bodesti'** – we're introduced to the headteacher Mrs Silvia who clutching her grandson with pride shows us around the school. She estimates **20% of the children in her school are from what she calls a 'normal' family** – she means **two parents and aside from the common struggles that this community faces no other major issues. This means 80% of the children in her school come from difficult homes**, many living with one parent (often mothers) or have been put with a foster family. Due to the enormous hardship and depravation faced by many in this area, parents often fall victim to alcoholism, making their own wine or schnapps at home as employment opportunities are very hard to come by. Mrs Silvia talks about her school and village being at the 'end of the earth' and thanks us for visiting her and for Link to Hope continuing to support her.



We head to **Santa Maria Childrens Hospital**, one of the largest Childrens Hospitals in Romania, we brace ourselves with the news that we're going to the Oncology Ward. We have to wear protective clothes before we go onto the ward to prevent infection. Each small room has 3-4 beds with a child and a parent in it so ending up with 6-8 people in a room at any time. There are no privacy curtain and they are cramped and hot but they are at least being treated. Families are grateful, some kids full of enthusiasm with beaming smiles, others understandably mute and subdued. Parents are grateful for a moment

of relief from the worry for their children.

### Day 3

Today we meet **Claudiu** who we have known since he lived on the **Farm of Hope** as a young man. Born to difficult circumstances, at 8 he was placed in an orphanage. On turning 18 he had to leave and found himself sleeping rough at a railway station. He was found and taken to the Farm of Hope which Link to Hope supports. He has since worked his way out of poverty, built a house, got married and even held a 'mayors office position'. Claudiu takes us to visit a **lady in her 80s**. Her son helps as much as he can. She struggles to see as she



has cataracts. More pressing than that, she is desperate for wood as her supply is almost depleted and this is the middle of the winter. This is the sort of situation that was raised last year and led to Link to Hope increasing the donation per shoebox by £1. **NB Money has now been sent to buy wood for this lady along with hundreds of other families who would have been cold or hungry this winter time because they couldn't afford to buy wood or food.**

We next meet a disabled man in his house and give him a shoebox. He has a lovely smile and is very jolly but looking around there is a notable lack of a bathroom or running water. He is reliant on a friend coming and help him to wash and help him with his needs.



We head to another village called Negresti. We are split into two groups and go house to house giving out shoeboxes to a village that has never received them before. Although our leader has been working for a long time in the village our first reception was icy as the lady did not understand why strangers would be trying to give her a gift. However as the afternoon wore on people became friendlier and friendlier and were delighted that someone was thinking of them. One little boy in particular spotted us from inside his house and ran at the window and glued himself to it ' Cadeau, cadeau (present, present) he kept saying. We were invited in and he loved everything that was in his box.

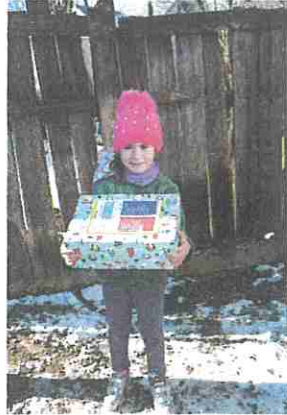
**On to the women and childrens refuge which is dedicated to women who have fled domestic abuse, set back in a quieter road, although the backlit sign gives it away, even we can make out what it says in Romanian! The security seems tight enough which is encouraging. Damaris (Pavels daughter) meets us. We carry the boxes in and she introduces us to the team, interprets and is an all-round star. The refuge centre currently houses 16 mothers and 33 children. It was lovely to meet these women with their children. The kids sat together colouring in and even when the boxes came out, they continued to colour, impeccably behaved. We encourage them to open them and then the noise levels go up, you can't help but smile when a big group of kids enjoy finding whats inside their box.**



## Day 4

Its our last full day. **Paval is taking us North East to Harlau – time to meet the Mayor. It is Saint Nicholas Day, in Romania, the tradition is for children to polish their boots and leave them out – if they've been good, they get a present, if not, they get a lump of coal in their boots – it makes our delivery that extra bit special which feels good.**

The Mayor is coming with us and we go to the village he wants to help. We visit many homes in the village,. No running water, no sink, an outdoor toilet, an outside well, piles of wood in yards, washing hanging in the freezing cold, families living in one room etc.



**We moved on to what our local team called 'The Jungle'.** Down a steep hill (almost valley-like) we find a semi-secluded community on the very outskirts of the village. We meet many grateful families, a man who turns out to be 95 who shows us ID to prove his age and his 'much younger' wife in her late 70's!! One thing became clear and that is they knew the Mayor. In fact the Jungle had no electricity until last year but this Mayor worked very hard making sure that they were connected which has transformed their lives. This village is now in a much better position that it was. What is notable is that the Mayor chose to improve the lives of the most marginalised in his village before others. We are very glad to be there to give shoeboxes out to them on your behalf.



**Diary written by Jasmine Plowright and Lisa Hector with contributions from Gill & Diane Seller, Rob Wills, Rob Newman, Liz Rider and Maria Scard.**

### **Update on The Container Family**

Many of you are aware of the families that were found last Christmas as Shoeboxes were being delivered. A four month old baby called Star had just died of the cold as the Shoebox team arrived. The shed they had been living in was freezing, dirty and dangerous. Otto and his team organised the funeral and sorted out the police and ambulance and then appealed to Link to Hope for help. You were amazing and two containers were bought for the families to move into. It has been a long and hard year for Otto and his team fighting against prejudice from many people in authority who did not want to help him in placing the containers or supporting him in trying to help these families. Eventually they were located and the next step was more permanent accommodation. A house was found and before Christmas the families moved in. Here is an update from Otto in his own words on what he found this year when he came to give them Shoeboxes in very different circumstances.