



March 12, 2007

A TRIP TO THE AIR MARKET, A CUP OF WINE, AND THE STREET KIDS PROGRAM

Day 3 Diary from John Tocci

The World Vision staff are uniformly well educated, passionate and articulate. Some Georgian staff Tamuna Barkalaya and Nutsi (Nootsy) Odisharia have advanced degrees, are partially US educated and speak extremely good English. Others are well spoken but require concentration on our part to understand them. I think of Tony (Sandonato, Tocci Executive Vice President) and his ability to understand people of almost any dialect no matter how thick their accent we could use that ability this week.

We rendezvoused and left this morning at 8:45 am with Vano Grigolashvili, Director for the Food Program, a joint venture with the Union Nation's World Food Program (WPF).



Vano Grigolashvili, Director World Vision Georgia Food for Work Program

Food For Work Program and a Trip to Georgian Wine Country

We drove to a small village in the Kakheti region of eastern Georgia about 2 hours away from Tbilisi. Driving in Georgia is an experience all its own. The lane dividers are “suggested” rather than required. One must pay strict attention at all times! On coming cars, tooting their horns, push the car they’re passing to the right, drift into your lane and force you to your right. Presto, they invent a center passing lane! Speed limits seem to be suggestive as well. The roads are designed to dislodge kidney stones.

We drove past 90 minutes of trash lined roads before our first pit stop. I don’t mean to suggest that they were bad, but the country is so beautiful that it is sad to see plastic bags and trash blown into bushes and fields because there doesn’t appear to be designated dump areas. Anyway, back to our pit stop, we pulled up to a strip of “retailers.” They were all hunkered down waiting for someone, anyone to stop. They were selling candle-like concoctions made from fruit gelatin extracts with nuts inside; cups full of peanuts, almonds, and sunflower seeds; and other assorted dry goods. Anything to make a buck or a Lari, as it is here.



Road side stop at open-air market



Vendors watch us to see what we are interested in; what we might buy Tim Tocci picks up a group of admirers at the market They want to join us for our trip to the vineyards

Back on the “highway” we were headed for wine country. Georgia’s wine is wonderful: big full reds with earthy flavors and great aromas, along with both tart and sweet whites. During the height of the Soviet era the focus was on quantity over quality and much wine was produced quickly and often cut with fruit juice. Russia consumed as much as could be shipped. The Soviet Republics were told what manufacturing and agricultural products to produce. In each case it was a lot of a very few products that were then distributed throughout the massive internal Soviet “markets”. This meant that Georgia produced most of the USSR’s wine and grains. Uzbekistan produced nearly all of the cotton, Armenia produced all the light bulbs. This was efficient (if not boring) and, importantly, ensured total dependence from each republic because they became totally dependent upon the mother state for the requirements of daily living.

The Georgian people are fiercely independent. They are the products of their history, as are we all. They have been invaded from within and without for centuries and have developed an ability to endure despite deep conflict. When the USSR collapsed Georgia flushed external manifestations of Russian influence from its streets and people’s lives, as much as possible. Russian signage is all but gone, replaced with the curved, artistic letters of the Georgian alphabet. Still, the vestiges of communist culture and Russian influence remain. Russia is as much of a menace to Georgian independence as ever. They supported two sections of Georgia that broke away seven or eight years ago and have cut off trade with Georgia in an economic blockade which has caused great distress to these people. OK, enough political commentary, but it is important to understand why there is so much poverty, unemployment and despair here.

The land in Georgia was privatized after the fall of the Soviet Union. “Farmers” were given plots to plant and work but the agricultural “industry” has been very slow to rise on its feet due to a lack of education and a dearth of farm equipment. Most work appears to be done by hand with primitive implements. Another major factor seems to be a lack of personal initiative born of the collective farm system coupled with despair.

When we got to the wine region we saw thousands of acres of fields. But only 20% are cultivated because the cost of fuel and fertilizer exceeds the return from the crops due to the embargo. However, they are still trying to improve the fields by digging irrigation ditches by hand to distribute the water in the canal system that brings water to the fields in general locations although not actually to where it's needed.



Acres of vineyard land await spring work; only 20% of this acreage will be tended

We listened to a couple of speeches and asked questions. Honestly it wasn't very interesting or impressive. One decent backhoe could do the work of the last three years in a month. But the intent of the Food for Work Program is not just to distribute food but connect it with meaningful work.

On the way out of the fields an older vineyard worker flagged down our driver. Yakitty yak between them. I asked what he was saying, he was inviting you to join him and his co workers to bless the fields. OK, cool! But Vano said blessing means drinking and toasting. Ok, Cool! Out came the wine off the back of a jury-rigged motorcycle/work cart. The wine was an amber colored, semi sweet, chilled wine in plastic bottles. They honored us by rinsing out their plastic cups with wine before filling them to the brim for the toast(s). Lila offered a fantastic toast: "Tell them we ask that the sun will shine brightly, the rain will fall gently, the roots would go deep and nourish the vines, that they will yield abundant fruit and the markets would be restored to provide prosperity for the whole town". My recitation doesn't do it justice. They were visibly touched and we bonded at once. They also said that, while they didn't know exactly who we were, that they hoped we could bring help because it was obvious their government had forgotten them. Remember what I said about the culture of dependence as a legacy of the Soviet era? We had a wonderful time and Lila went on to ask them to show us how to prune the vines, another saga.



Farmers motion us to their fields to offer a blessing for prosperity



The blessing is accompanied by a wine toast, from plastic containers The toast, given by Lila Tocci, should encourage a great harvest Lessons on vineyard care follow the toast

We tumbled back into the SUV's and headed back to "civilization" in Tbilisi, the capital city where we stayed, to meet the staff in charge of the child protection program and the Street kid mission.

Street Kids

This is part of the trip I knew was coming but was most challenged by. Due to the deep poverty, economic weakness and Soviet social destabilization of the family, begging by very young children has become prevalent. Even worse, in some cases, families from outlying regions will send children as young as 3 into the city to beg. We saw examples of this in one square where there is much traffic and activity around a retail center where everything from tools to plumbing supplies to toilet paper is in on sale, including children.



Street Child

The program leader for World Vision Georgia's Child Protection and Street Kids programs is Shotah Shubladze. Shotah is a father and man filled with a mission and passion to rescue these kids and solve child abuse and neglect problems. Passion is a word I'm in danger of overusing to describe these World Vision people, but I can't find a better adjective. We engaged with the kids personally. Patty Frey, a woman from Pennsylvania who is accompanying us, was so moved by one 6 year old girl begging from her she started to open her wallet. Wrong. Shotah worked hard to convince Patty that this is exactly the wrong thing to do. But the girl knew she had a "soft one" on the hook. Then another young woman, maybe 20 years old, came around the crowd beginning to form. She had an infant strapped to her chest facing outward. The baby was obviously sedated, rag doll like. It was the 6 year old's mother. She was set up to

use the baby as a begging prop. 90% of the street kids have “families” so to speak. They are sent out like bait to reel in giver/prospects. There is also a street kid mafia with older street kids “employing” younger kids, taking their money in exchange for allowing them to work the crowds in certain areas. As one could imagine, pimping the children out to child predators occurs as well.



Shotah Shubladze, Program Leader for Georgia World Vision Child Protection and Street Kids Programs

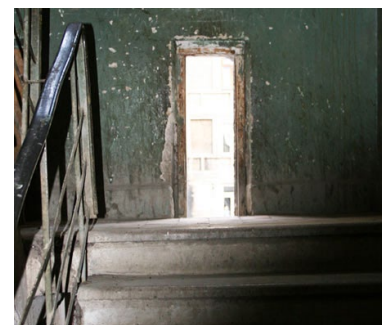
A crowd began to gather with some people chastising the 6 year old but her mother was at the outskirts sending in orders to persist and stay focused on Patty. The girl was kneeling down in simulated prayer to Patty, begging and pleading in three languages at once. No matter where we went she and her remote-controlling mother followed. It wasn't until we got the car door closed (almost on the girl) that the begging stopped.

Just before this event we met up with two World Vision support staff who worked full time in this program. They visit these areas daily, engaging the kids and developing trust and relationships. We met a young boy of about 13 years old who was such a befriended street kid. He had a great smile but his face had 70,000 miles on it. His nickname was CK which is close the Georgian word for prison. Draw your own conclusion.



CK, a Georgian boy being helped through the World Vision Street Kids Program

As a result of the commotion we caused, our visit to the square was cut short. We drove to another location in the city to pick up another befriended street kid who Shotah had arranged for us to accompany “home”. When we arrived in his hangout he was drugged and nearly passed out behind a monument from sniffing glue, a common problem with street kids. He was immobile so we proceeded on to visit his “home” without him. We came to a section of the city with row after row of Soviet-era concrete high rises, in totally dilapidated condition, occupied by tenants and squatters and internally displaced persons, IDPs.



Tbilisi Housing Tbilisi Housing from the inside out

We parked and walked up stairwells that had no doors and past half open elevator shafts. We went past floor after floor of decrepid, decaying concrete stairs, peeled paint and broken windows. We knocked on a door. I still don't know why. There was no lock and next to nothing inside. The temperature outside was in the high thirties but the apartment was unheated. The "family" consisted of a woman and two children, about 3 and 4 years old. They were all in winter coats under blankets on a bed in the one room apartment. A few feet away, on what had been a balcony but had long since been closed in to add more room, as is typical practice, was a woman in her 60's (but who knows for sure) who looked quite sick. The place and situation blew me away. Looking out the window at other faces in row after row of similar buildings I saw children and adults looking back through similar glassless windows. The room we were was anything but unique.



Scenes from the home visit with a Street Kids Program beneficiary's family

The WV staffers brought toys for the kids, balloons, toothbrushes, toilet paper (from the smell, badly needed), and groceries. We stayed, brought cheer to the kids, interviewed the mother and left. I violated Shotah's rule on the way out and discretely gave the mother a 20 Lari bill, about \$15 US. She nearly scratched my hand as she snapped it up, fearing I would change my mind. No person should be allowed to live like this.

We quickly returned to the WV headquarters because we were late to meet Four Peer Leaders of the program, three girls and a boy. They have discovered that the most effective way to make inroads and significant progress with these children is through kids who've made it out, their peers. They teach them first about the dangers of drugs, predators and other health issues. They show them shelters and then slowly, deliberately, the way out. It was hard to believe that the four shining, handsome faces belonged to kids who were so abused and had experienced years of harsh living. One of the boys aspires to be a businessman. He was incredibly animated, articulate and smart. He'd be a good future super for a NY job. Nobody would slip anything by this guy, Giorgi. The three girls were beautiful; one planned to be an attorney, the other two girls were studying English. One dreamed of becoming a singer and the last one was just engaging.



Peer Leaders for the Street Kids Program

Between these two halves of our day, dramatically different, we had spent 10 hours but felt like we had worked 16. We left the WV office at 6 or 6:30pm to return to the rooms and regroup for dinner.

Somehow going out to a nice restaurant for a multi-course dinner with new friends, clean clothes and heat seemed almost decadent after today.