

March 13, 2007

TRIP TO ZESTAPHONI

Day 3 Diary from Lila Tocci

We leave Tbilisi early for the drive west to Zestaphoni. Heading out during rush hour we pass cars spewing grey exhaust as they vie for position at each stop. The highway funnels down to one lane in each direction. On either side tidy plots of farmland planted with fruit trees or vineyards stretch away toward house, village, and the hills beyond. Often a lone figure toils at the edge of freshly turned soil. Could he be plowing by hand? Neat stacks of pruned canes at the end of each row of vines are fuel.

Along the highway we pass an old woman pushing a wheelbarrow, a man herding cows, another sheep and a man walking with a shovel. Behind Jersey barriers in the median, a mule grazes. A large billboard advertises the birthplace of Stalin, Uncle Joe Stalin. Some remember him as the man who brought good times when everyone worked, everyone ate, all were educated. Few recall the Gulags.

The plain gives way to hills as the road winds through a village where women wave loaves of bread for sale, but we must continue. Lunch is at a wayside restaurant beside a rushing stream several cabins with tables each one with a woodstove. We fight off the chill with coffee, tea, red wine and hearty Georgian fare. After a quick inspection of their on-site smokehouse we are back on the road to Zestaphoni.

An hour later we pull up outside a tired Soviet building to visit the Center for Children with Disabilities. Inside, and after the stir of initial greeting, we find seats in the tiny room. A pianist strikes a chord and the children perform and all applaud. There is singing. There are recitations, some given eloquently, and others with intense difficulty. The older girls dance in elaborate costume. There are more recitation than dancing and singing in a grand finale of exuberance that welcomes us onto the crowded floor.



Group of children living at the Zestaphoni Home for Disabled Children



Again, I feel a juxtaposition of joy and pain, capacity and limitation, poverty and great generosity of spirit.

Across the street occupational and physical therapists work one on one. Most of the children receiving help are victims of cerebral palsy. The great hulks of Soviet factories once refined heavy metals, and now leave many contaminants in the soil and water causing an unusually high percentage of children to have birth defects. The children use toys and tools made in the World Vision Adaptive Equipment workshop, the cost of shipping means specialized tables, chairs, desks, must be made locally.



Lila Tocci with disabled child



A deaf child working with a World Vision staffer



Some children can't get to the Center and are helped at home by para-therapists, women who have been trained to follow each child's development plan in order to help each one function at his or her highest capacity. We took a trip down a muddy potholed road to visit two home-bound children.

We visited a boy who hadn't been able to stand. We saw him stand with the aid of a leaning board while he worked with the therapist on manual dexterity, color recognition, and other parts of his educational plan. Other people crowded the room, two younger siblings, the grandmother, a friend invited by the mom. Neighborhood girls saw the cars and came to see too.



Visiting the home of a boy who hadn't been able to stand, now he can, thanks to this program



The whole family (and friends) wanted to visit with us

The next student we visited was a young boy living with his mother. When we arrived he was staring over the railing of the house, appreciating the vehicles. Inside we were greeted by the loud peep peeping of newly hatched chicks whose cardboard cage occupied prime real estate next to the woodstove. In a cash poor economy, eggs make good barter. Here the therapist played a lotto game. But before long the youngster's attention was definitely on us, especially on John's camera and his own image recorded there.



Home visit with the family of a child with cerebral palsy

Nutsi Odisharia, Program Manager, Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances Program, explained the history, economics, societal stigmas, social policies, World Vision involvement and her employment here. She left a much higher salary with the Millennium Project.

Visiting over, we began our long trip back to Tbilisi. The day grayed, the sky dimmed as we approached the city lights and the warm hospitality of an American couple who worked and volunteered in Georgia. The contrasts again, wood floors gleamed, a fire crackled on the hearth, the cleanliness, the order, speaking our language with no interpreter, but of course we talked about Georgia, its problems and its future, and of course we toasted with Georgian wine.