

May 14, 2013

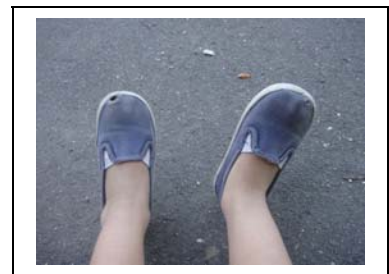
Hello,

First of all, I hope everyone has had a great year and is looking forward to summer!

I am writing to tell you about an experience that I had, seven years ago this same time of year, when I traveled to Romania with three of my Selwyn peers. The four of us went to Romania for a two-week trip with a small non-profit organization, Hearts Across Romania, to volunteer in various orphanages. This trip to Romania in 2006 changed my life more than I ever thought possible.

Fast-forward seven years: I have been a board member on Hearts Across Romania for three years now and traveled to Romania five times. I can talk for hours about the experiences I have had, what I've learned, witnessed, and accomplished. Below are just a few stories from my experiences volunteering in Romania over the years.

The time we delivered a new pair of shoes to every child in the Dacia orphanage. The first pair of *new* shoes these children ever received.



On my first trip to Romania, I met this little boy, Mihai. We visited his orphanage twice on that trip. On our second visit to this orphanage, the kids anxiously awaited our arrival outside. As soon as our van arrived for our visit, Mihai spotted me in the backseat of the car. The car had barely come to a complete stop before he opened the door and jumped into the backseat, hugging me so tightly and not letting go. My face quickly became wet with tears. It was that hug and saying goodbye to Mihai and the kids at the Dacia orphanage, chasing the car and waving goodbye to me as we drove away – it was this moment that I knew deep in my heart this would not be my last time to Romania. I would be back to hug these kids again.



I want to tell you about a conversation I had with Eli, a young man my age who grew up in an orphanage. Eli is sponsored by Hearts. When I came to Romania on my second visit in 2007, Eli said to me: "Sam, you came back." *Yes, I did.* "You don't understand... people never come back. People come and they feel bad for us. But then they go home and they forget about us. You came back." His words have influenced me more than he can ever know. For many of these kids, Hearts Across Romania is the most consistent thing they have known in their lives. These kids move from orphanage to orphanage and are raised by the staff. What they want is a family. And for many of these individuals, Hearts is the closest they have to family.



A letter to students at Selwyn College Preparatory by a Hearts Across Romania volunteer

One of the most difficult places I have visited is an orphanage for individuals who are handicapped. This facility greatly lacks the resources and funds it so desperately needs and deserves. In this home of about 40 patients, all severely handicapped, there are two staff members working at a time, in long 12-hour shifts. The result? These caregivers have time only to provide these individuals with basic needs: food, medicine, and hygiene. Hearts was made aware that they operated with no hot water heater, so we donated a heater and needed medical supplies. Because the staff is so limited, these individuals don't receive the love and attention that they crave and need. On one of my visits, I sat down with a young boy restricted to his bed (as most of these individuals are). When I sat down next to his bed, he initially showed zero response to my presence in the room. I held his hand and talked to him, gesturing and speaking to him as I would to a young child. After quite some time passed by his bedside, he began laughing. As he began laughing, I began crying, both happy and sad tears.



On two of my visits, the team I went with did lots of manual labor in a transitional home. Background: When orphans turn eighteen and are no longer in school, they are forced to pack their bags and began to live life independently, completely on their own. As you can imagine, this is incredibly difficult! This transitional home we work with gives teenage boys a chance at life. They must do chores and meet the high expectations that are set for them, such as going to college, finishing high school, or holding a job. They are encouraged to dream big and work hard to achieve their dreams. Hearts partners with this home and works closely with the boys it houses. Florin, the head of this program, has recently been given a new building where he has room to grow and expand the amazing work and services he provides for these young men. He will need lots of help renovating the rooms!!! Renovating typically includes lots of manual labor – scraping walls, scrubbing floors, painting, laying carpet, installing doors and windows, and some interior decorating! Additionally, you get to work alongside the young men who will be moving into this room... Those of you who like instant gratification and seeing the results of your hard work will find this especially rewarding. In the past, it's been my experience that one week of hard work gives a handful of boys a place to call home. Here's a before and after picture of one of the rooms:



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These children LOVE fruit!!! Each trip to Romania, we bring lots of fresh fruit for the kids. Fruit is a very special treat that these kids rarely receive. Volunteers in the past have described this experience as being comparable to handing out iPods. These smiles are extra contagious!



This last story I will share with you took place two years ago when I visited Romania with my younger sister, Tori. There are two orphanages, Dacia and Rupea, which are in two neighboring villages a few miles away from one another. Dacia is an all-boys and Rupea is all-girls orphanage. The result of this, as you can imagine, is that many siblings are separated. So Hearts planned a big picnic in the beautiful countryside to reunite siblings and have a fun-filled afternoon! These brothers and sisters who have been separated likely lived together at one point – either at home or in a different orphanage. Reuniting these siblings was one of the most amazing, beautiful,

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indescribable interactions I have ever witnessed. The photo to the right is of two sisters (who live together in Rupea) being reunited with their younger brother. The oldest sister, most aware of their life and poor circumstances, was most moved and grateful for this experience of being reunited. Although a language barrier may exist between these children and I, nothing speaks louder than the language of the heart. No words needed to be spoken to understand how grateful these siblings were to be together. Joy and love in its purest form.



Unfortunately, they were not the only children in this situation. Because of the Hearts picnic more beautiful siblings were able to spend the afternoon reunited.



As I've said and what's likely clear from these stories is that my experience in Romania was truly life changing. My first trip to Romania, seven years ago, was a true turning point in my life.

On a different note, I had the great honor to speak at Selwyn during International Week, a couple of months ago. I was THRILLED to hear from a couple of students afterwards who showed interest in traveling to Romania, too. I would love love love to get a group of Selwyn students (although everyone is welcome!!!) to go on a work team trip to Romania. Hearts works closely with our volunteers to plan a trip based on your interests (would you like to work with babies? Kids? Teens? Build/renovate rooms? Etc.). Now that I've shared with you some of my experiences, I'll tell you a few logistics of what it looks like for those interested in traveling to Romania:

Cost: \$1,400 (excluding airfare)

Duration: 2 weeks

Where: In and around Brasov, Romania

Why: Exposure, education, and making a positive difference in the lives of so many!

When: Next summer?

If you are interested in creating and being a part of a "Selwyn team" to Romania I would be the happiest Selwyn alum to share this experience with you and assist in planning Hearts Across Romania's best trip yet! If there's interest, I'd be happy to hold a Q&A session to answer any questions, comments or concerns you may have! I know my parents certainly had many before my first adventure there when I was just sixteen years old.

Thank you all so much for reading!! I hope to hear from you all soon!

Love,
Samantha Matthews