

We are very grateful to Hannah Chappell for this Report on her gap-year visit to our partner-charity in Arad. Thank you Hannah and our very best wishes for your coming years in University

My Visit to Arad, Romania 10th Feb – 10th March 2011

I decided to visit Arad for one month as part of my Gap Year travels. I had previously visited the St John's mission link in Matugga, Uganda where I spent three months and had a great time. Being a member of St John's for 19 years I knew of the mission link with the Friendship Foundation and their Romanian partner charity Pro Prietenia. I knew my gap year would be a perfect opportunity to visit Pro Prietenia to get more of an insight into the work they do and to gain experience of being involved with a charity that tackles different challenges to those of the Revival Centre in Matugga.

It was my first time in Romania so I had no idea what to expect, I knew nothing of the people or the culture. The only thing I could be sure of was that it was going to be very cold!

I left England on the 10th of February 2011 for the City of Arad, in western Romania.

When I reached their home the warmth of Puiu and Dorina's welcome soon overcame the coldness of the weather. I always prefer to stay with families when I visit places away from home and especially when in other countries as I feel its important to live alongside the local people in order to get a real understanding of the place and culture you are in. I feel that staying with Puiu and Dorina enabled me to do this. However, that wasn't the only reason I enjoyed staying with them, their hospitality was amazing and I couldn't have felt more at home. We spent many evenings laughing and joking over dinner and sharing each other's stories and experiences. They have a wonderful home and their loving and caring hospitality comforts anyone who visits them.

Puiu and Dorina live with Puiu's parents, Mica (Mother) and Ticu (Father), who were great to be around. Although they have little English and I have little Romanian we became good friends. Mica always looking out to make sure I had my coat and scarf before leaving the house and had slippers ready for me on my return. Ticu was always keen to show me photos of family and their travels to America and I was delighted to listen to him play a tune or two on his mouth organ. I will miss their company and I will certainly miss Mica's cooking!

I spent most of my time across the road at the Pro Prietenia office. The office is always busy with people constantly coming and going, the door is never closed for long, which brings to mind one of my favourite Bible verses:

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" – Matthew 7:7

Pro Prietenia are great at writing projects. They are often asked by other organisations or local schools to design and write projects for them. Each project is specifically designed around a certain issue and can include workshops, activities and training courses. These projects help raise awareness of issues and support for problems

faced by people in the community. They are great at getting the community involved in volunteering and are really helping people change their attitude towards helping each other.

One of the current projects at the moment is a Domestic Violence campaign. This is run by Ana and it's purpose is to raise awareness and develop an understanding of domestic violence and the impact it can have on it's victims. So far this has included visiting a number of High Schools, mostly ones within Arad, and going into classes to show the students a documentary and talking to them about Pro Prietenia's position concerning domestic violence and the ways in which it is involved in supporting victims of this aggressive crime. We finished these sessions by asking the students to complete a questionnaire designed by Pro Prietenia which will be analysed to get an idea of what young people think about domestic violence. They can use the results to design a project with aims to help victims.

There are a number of individual cases that are supported by Pro Prietenia. These people come to Puiu when they require help beyond their means or if they have an urgent need. Puiu and the team work to provide help where they can. These cases are all people who are struggling greatly in being able to attain everyday necessities. Funding for projects can be applied for by much bigger organizations, but the funding needed to support these individual cases relies solely on the generosity of individuals through their time, support and donations. Although all donations are deeply appreciated and help a great deal, each donation can only provide so much at a time. As many of the needs are ongoing costs such as pampers for young children, food, heating for homes or help with rent Pro Prietenia still faces a huge challenge in being able to provide the necessary support for those who need it.

The Tuesday before I left, was International Women's Day. We spent the morning at a salon where four victims got chance to be pampered; hair, nails, make-up, then back to the office where a small party had been arranged for them; some food, cake and the chance to sit around and relax and laugh. It was great to be part of this activity. Seeing a small group of people who have suffered great oppression in their lives have a day where they don't need to think about it and be treated with the importance and dignity they deserve was fantastic. They had a great time and were very happy with their new looks. It was also very touching to see the looks on the faces of Christina and Ana who have worked with each of these victims, I could tell by the look in their eyes that it was a special moment for them to see people they have seen suffer enjoying themselves and smiling so much.

I was privileged to meet and spend a little time with the 'larger than life' characters of the local youth council. This is a group of teenagers who meet on a weekly basis and with the help of Pro Prietenia organise fund raising events and engage in volunteering in the community. This is a great way to get young people excited about volunteering and fits well with the main vision of 'changing mentality'. This group also act as a support network as some of them are themselves victims of hardship or domestic violence and they have great fun organising social events for themselves and their friends.

Because of his experience and belief in the work he does, Puiu is constantly being called upon by others, whether it be a neighbour who needs help with a problem or the town Mayor wanting him to offer some advice to the local council or other developing

charities. It seems Puiu is looked upon in the local community as someone whose opinions and advice is greatly valued.

Dorina spends a couple of days a week volunteering at another charity not far from Pro Prietenia where they offer Christian counselling and support to those who need it. Dorina and her colleagues use the time when they are not counselling making cards which are sold to raise funds for their work. I was pleased to have the chance to visit these places of work and meet the team there and witness the passion they have for the work they do.

Through one of Puiu's many contacts I spent a few hours at a small centre in Arad which provides facilities for street people and poor families. Here I got chance to spend time playing and doing puzzles with some young children. This centre provides facilities for poor families and street people who are given the chance to use the washing machine, have a meal and shower. The volunteers also provide general support for the people who attend there, such as helping children with their homework and running computer courses.

Pro Prietenia have many contacts in Arad with people and organisations who are also involved in charitable activities, one of which I got chance to be part of. I spent a day handing out clothes which had been donated for the benefit of poor people in the community.

One of the members of the Pro Prietenia team, Aniela, also works a couple of days a week at an orphanage. She asked me if I would like to visit the orphanage and share with the children my experiences of Uganda in order to encourage them to be appreciative of what they have. The children were really friendly and great fun to spend time with. They asked me to return and when asked what activity they wanted to do with me they asked if they could make Easter cards for the Champions in Uganda. I loved spending time with the children and making the cards with them. This was a humbling experience.

I enjoyed experiencing the city of Arad. It's very easy to find your way around which enabled me to spend time just wondering around looking at the impressive buildings and admiring the grand and detailed architecture of the churches and cathedrals.

I got the chance to see a bit more of Romania when Puiu, Dorina and I went to stay in the mountainous area of Moneassa following an invitation from a friend to stay in his hotel there. We had a lovely relaxing weekend walking in the snow covered mountains and experiencing the warm flow of the thermal springs. Puiu and I enjoyed swimming in the pool that was only open to us and we all enjoyed time to have a well earned rest.

I was also very lucky to spend a day in Mishca, a rural village where Dorina's family live. It was great to experience a more traditional style of living but it was also the opportunity to spend time in the company of such a friendly and loving family. They made me feel so very welcome. Being around such close families who live amongst and look after each other always brings a smile to my face and reminds me how important family are.

What impressed me the most about my time in Romania was the Pro Prietenia team. It is a wonderful group of intelligent, experienced and enthusiastic people who use their heads and hearts to bless others through their work. Even when it may seem there are no projects or big activities running they are still working nonstop behind the scenes on a constant stream of paperwork, writing future project proposals and providing ongoing support for the many cases that visit them. This collection of attitudes and personalities provides a great atmosphere in and around the office and it's no wonder so many people turn to them for support. I know it is the people of Romania, especially the team at Pro Prietenia that I will miss the most.

Romania was a new experience for me in so many ways, the culture, the people, the charity work and having BBQ's in the winter snow which was a first! My visit to Romania has had a very positive impact on me and I would definitely like to make a return visit sometime in the future.

Hannah Chappell
27th March 2011



Puiu, Dorina, Mica and Ticu



Me holding a baby from the centre for street people



Me with the children from Maranata orphanage



Ana (from Pro Prietenia) with some of the victim's in the salon on International Women Day



One of the victims happy to be helped by Pro Prietenia into her new One roomed house



Poster we used to advertise Domestic Violence Campaign in schools and students completing the questionnaire



Cristiana from Pro Prietenia) handing milk and bread after school children's project



Me with the Pro Prietenia Team