

By Sherry Crisp



Special needs educator and RCE volunteer Lydia Flynn of Chevy Chase helps screen a 5-year-old boy with Downs Syndrome in Romania.

Inset: Physical therapist and RCE volunteer Marti Carroll of Chevy Chase with Teo, a student with muscular dystrophy, at the Sunshine School in Romania.

PHOTOS COURTESY MARTI CARROLL AND LYDIA FLYNN

a home, a school and hope

Two Chevy Chase women change the fate of disabled Romanian orphans

Seven years ago, when Chevy Chase resident Marti Carroll returned home after her first tour of Romanian orphanages, she opened her door, looked around and wondered what she could sell. “My two bikes went fast,” she says. “Then I sold a family diamond.”

Carroll, clinical supervisor of physical therapy services at National Rehabilita-

tion Hospital in Washington, has been giving ever since. She recently returned from her 15th trip to Romania as a volunteer, where she provides physical therapy to disabled orphans and training for their therapists.

Lydia Flynn, also of Chevy Chase, makes just as many trips to Romania to assess student needs, train teachers and

help expand special education programs. “Once you see these orphans, you can’t turn your back,” she says. “It makes you look at your material life differently.” Recently retired, Flynn was principal of the James E. Duckworth School for children with special needs in Prince George’s County.

“Marti went to Romania before I did,”

the givers

she recalls, “I was so moved by her video showing rows and rows of babies in cribs. I remember saying, ‘Your sound isn’t working, Marti,’ and she said, ‘There is no sound; the babies have all stopped crying.’”

Carroll and Flynn live two blocks apart, yet met by chance at their church—Fourth Presbyterian in Bethesda—in 1999 after a presentation by Romanian Christian Enterprises (RCE), a nonprofit dedicated to caring for the poor and disabled. The speaker described efforts to rescue disabled orphans found in dismal facilities in Romania after the fall of Ceausescu and communism in 1989. “Poor parents had actually given their children to the state, because they couldn’t stay home with them and [the children] weren’t allowed to attend school if they had a special-needs diagnosis,” says Carroll.

“These children were labeled ‘irrecoverable’—it was stamped on their files. Can you imagine that? It broke my heart,” Flynn says.

Guided by their faith, Carroll and Flynn offered their skills to RCE on the spot. As volunteer consultants, they have

spent the past seven years as the point people in planning and program development for two new facilities in Arad, Romania. The first was Darius House, a recuperative group home for abandoned children with special needs, which opened in 2000. The second, Sunshine School, Arad’s first special education school and one of few in the country, opened in 2004. The Fourth Presbyterian Church congregation provided major funding for both facilities.

Taking vacation time and administrative leave, Carroll, 44, who is single, and Flynn, 57, married with two grown sons, travel to Romania twice a year to help RCE’s Romanian staffers. Carroll, for instance, teaches lay therapists to stretch a child’s spastic muscles, building strength for standing and walking; Flynn does cognitive testing of children with a wide range of disabilities. During the start-up years at Sunshine School, while she was still principal at Duckworth, her teachers also “took their vacation time to come over and train kindergarten teachers from Romanian churches,” says Flynn.

Once Darius House opened, success came quickly. Unlike the orphanages where water was limited to minimize diaper changes, here children had access to water whenever they were thirsty. They also began to eat whole foods. “I remember how a 6-year-old ate his first banana—the way he pushed it around and around in his mouth,” says Carroll. “The orphans were fed only a bowl of mush every day, so the muscles in their mouths didn’t develop.”

“By the end of the week they’d come full circle and had the ability to chew!” Flynn says. After four months, the children could eat with utensils, no longer wore diapers and dressed themselves. Now they enjoy normal childhood activities, from attending the circus to playing the violin, and each has an education plan.

In 2004, the current school was built. “It [Sunshine School] was actually designed by Lydia and the Duckworth staff, to meet the physical requirements of special-needs students,” says Mary Ann Bell, RCE’s executive director and only American employee.

At Darius House, in-country adoption



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“The orphans were fed only a bowl of mush every day, so the muscles in their mouths didn’t develop.” —Marti Carroll

is the goal; eight disabled children live there at a time. To date, 11 have been placed. Orphanage officials and RCE volunteers caring for the children select those who might benefit most from the group home (ideally, ages 3 to 6), as space becomes available.

The Sunshine School has 39 students, ages 3 to 15, that come from local families, Darius House, foster care and orphanages. They have a wide range of disabilities, including autism, language delay and mental retardation, and are divided into small classes based on individual needs. Speech and physical therapy are part of the program. “Ten percent of our students leave and go on to regular school—they appeared disabled because of neglect, but they were mislabeled,” says Bell.

“The children themselves are the testimony. Now, when doctors there

diagnose handicaps, they say, ‘Get your child into the Sunshine School!’ There’s a waiting list,” says Flynn.

Flynn has become “Auntie Lydia” to Otilia, a girl born with cerebral palsy who was found crawling on a dirt floor in a foster home, unable to stand or walk at age 3. “But she was so sharp cognitively,” says Flynn. “She learned English in minutes.”

Bell says that Flynn and Carroll bring commitment, professionalism and heart to children who were denied the most basic human rights. Orphanage and government officials frequently visit the school, expressing amazement at the children’s progress, according to Carroll. Recently, the Romanian government began a pilot program offering NGOs with successful experience the opportunity to take charge of the staff and children in some state facilities. The Arad Child Protection Agency award-

ed RCE a contract to manage three cottages for orphans, located across the fence from the Sunshine School and Darius House. “Lydia was pivotal in developing this contract,” says Bell, “working with our team in Romania to make sure it included the best recuperative programs.”

Between their trips, Carroll and Flynn continually mentor Romanian therapists and teachers via digital video links and e-mail. Doctors and staff at National Rehabilitation Hospital also offer their clinical expertise via the Internet. Carroll and Flynn raise money for their efforts through family and friends, and RCE offers a number of ways to assist: a holiday card program, a spring walkathon and annual events at the Romanian Embassy in the District. For information go to RCE’s Web site, www.rcenterprises.org. ■

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