



LAUGHTER AND LOVE IN BELARUS

Dublin teacher and Rose of Tralee contestant volunteers with Chernobyl Children International

November 10, 2014: In October of this year, a group of contestants from the Dublin Selection of the Rose of Tralee International Festival travelled to Belarus to work as volunteers with Adi Roche's Chernobyl Children International (CCI).

Laura Daly, a primary school teacher at St Thomas' SNS in Jobstown, Tallaght, was part of that group.

"During the October mid-term break I was privileged to volunteer with Adi Roche's Chernobyl Children International (CCI) and visit Vesnova Children's Institution in Belarus. The 170 children at Vesnova – which is situated 170km from Chernobyl, the scene of the world's worst nuclear disaster – welcomed us with open arms and huge smiles.

"Our group consisted of 15 volunteers who spent five days filling the children's days with laughter, attention and care. These children had a deficit in human contact, love, attention and care. Five days seems so short to make any sort of impact but I was proved wrong.

"We spent our time taking the children for walks, playing games, cuddling and in the sensory room for sensory-orientated activities. Because of a lack of staff, these simple things aren't always available to the children, other than when Irish volunteers visit. CCI employs nurses and extra carers but this still isn't enough to facilitate such activities and fulfil basic needs that we take for granted.

“One of the children that I met was Igor, a 14-year-old boy, who was abandoned to an orphanage as a baby and has suffered huge physical impairment all his life. When CCI first found Igor, he lived like an animal, crawling on the floor and being fed on all fours. The only way he knew how to communicate was by biting, scratching and spitting. CCI intervened and gave him a specially-adapted wheelchair which changed his life. Because of CCI’s intervention, Igor found a loving ‘adopted’ family in Castlebar and he has spent the last three Christmas holidays with them. He continues to receive medical care on his visits to Ireland and he has developed into a wonderful, loving, bright and humorous boy.

“The joy that music, face-painting, swings, walks and cuddles bring to these children is not justified by words. Although it is such a sad reality when you reach the institution and witness their lives, you can’t help but feel the warmth, love and happiness that these very special children radiate and share with you.

“When we left Vesnova I was heartbroken, knowing that the joy and love we brought would not return until the next group of Irish volunteers arrived. It was such an overwhelming yet rewarding experience and I am already planning my return next year!”

Speaking about Laura’s trip, voluntary CEO of CCI Adi Roche said, “Laura can be very proud of the good work she and her fellow humanitarian workers have done. She connected with the children in Vesnova and used her teaching experience to build relationships with them. With wonderful volunteers like Laura, I am confident that the future of Ireland is in good hands.”

“As part of CCI’s work on de-institutionalisation in Belarus, we have pioneered a historic Project for an Independent Living Facility for teenage boys and girls. By building two ‘Independent Living Homes’ on the grounds of the institution, children and young adults are freed from incarceration and are given freedom and dignity for the first time in their lives,” the CEO concluded.

In almost 28 years, CCI has delivered €96.5 million in medical and humanitarian aid to the Chernobyl regions of Belarus, Ukraine and Western Russia and almost 25,000 children have been flown to Ireland for rest and recuperation holidays. Since 2001, volunteers and donors from Ireland have invested more than €1.5 million in upgrading the building of Vesnova, which has received Excellence Awards in Belarus for delivering high-quality medical care. It is now a world-class childcare centre from which many of our medical care programmes are directed.

For more information or if you would like to make a donation, visit our website at www.chernobyl-international.com or call us on 021-4558774.

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