

Volunteer at the Brasov Children's Hospital

by Alice Mascarenhas

Jackie Caetano is set to return to Romania this month as a volunteer at the Brasov Children's Hospital. This is the second time she volunteers to work with children through the Firm Foundations Romania having spent time in Brasov back in November 2017. Brasov is a city in the Transylvania region of Romania, surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains and known for its medieval Saxon walls and bastions and towering Gothic-style Black Church. Firm Foundations Romania is a non profit organisation whose mission is to transform the lives of disadvantaged Romanian children and families. The hospital project exists to fill a void in the lives of children that are abandoned at the Brasov Children's Hospital. Whether it is a child who is abandoned or one that is left in the institution to receive care for a time the



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mission is to be the loving hands that these children are missing. Ms Caetano first heard about this project through the internet – and wanting to do something worthwhile, wanting to give of



At the hospital in Brasov.

her time and love, felt this could prove to be the right voluntary organisation for her.

"I am not a mum myself but I felt I had a lot of love to give and I came across this project which meant I could go and help out in making babies and young children feel wanted and loved. Help take care of them for a few hours a day. I was satisfying the need in me to give love whilst at the same time I felt I was doing a lot of good and helping children abandoned from birth or sick to feel loved."

Children are still being abandoned and neglected in Romania due to a many social issues. Firm Foundations Romania began an international volunteer programme to "hold, feed, change and care for these children" in the local Children's Hospital.

"That is exactly what you do," Ms Caetano explains, "we hold these babies and love them. I have a lot of love to give and I wanted to see what the experience was like. Now I want to return because there are many babies and children who need love, care and attention." To get there you pay your own way and pay a registration fee on arrival as a volunteer. The organisation recommends accommodation, have a volunteer apartment, and form a partnership which enables these volunteers to be part of this project.

"I wanted to go somewhere in Europe which is why I chose Romania to work on the baby floor but there are many similar programmes all over the world." In fact the volunteers are from all over the world. Every month they change over 4000 diapers, give them love and show them a carrying attitude which makes a difference. The project has now expanded and there is also an after school programme and other programmes. Her first time was two years ago – and although she admits that before she made the trip the idea of it was daunting – the experience was such that she knew she would want to repeat it.

Volunteers need certain vaccines such as measles and Hepatitis B to protect themselves and the children. This was out of her comfort zone as Romania would probably not have been a place she would have chosen to go. "Yet this was something I really wanted to do." She was there for two weeks, and the project asks volunteers to be there minimum 10 days.

On arrival they are added on to the roster and visit the hospital ward at different times during the day, Monday to Friday. The time you can spend there is limitless and some volunteers stay for a few weeks or a few months and even a year.

Ms Caetano stayed in the town in a studio apartment, and a 20 minute walk from the hospital. The place is beautiful she says, the people are friendly, and they are just like "you and me". "There are about five different floors where the children's wards are based in the hospital. You are there for playtime and you spend your time making their day a better day. Some of the children are abandoned but some are Roma children whose parents may live hours away from the hospital and can't visit all the time."

But the fact is that Children are left at the hospital for many reasons, but most commonly because the family cannot afford to care for the child. Particularly in the Roma community, conditions are incredibly poor and families are large. The hospital has become the holding tank for these abandoned children until they can be placed in a home or centre. She admits it was an experience which was very intense emotionally and physically but one which filled her with great satisfaction and joy.

"You give as much as you receive and you know that you are needed and there is a need because these children need to be loved." Yes, there is the risk of attachment, she adds, especially after two weeks. But the overriding factor is that these children know that they are loved.

"In a way this was something selfish on my part because it was something that I needed. But it is more than that because there is a greater need – greater than mine – to give love to these children. This has got to be one of the best things I have done in my life."

Now, as she heads out to Romania for a second time, Ms Caetano, felt she wanted to share her story and encourage anyone who might want to volunteer. But more than this she wants to raise awareness about these projects exist because there are many children in the world who have a need for love. Clothes, nappies and toy donations are always welcomed she says. As for her she will be taking clothes to distribute.

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