



ABOVE: Camp members work on a craft project as part of their experience with the short-term team in Moldova.

Making the Grade in Moldova

by Salomea Jankovic

For me, the hardest thing about the Moldova mission trip was not the culture shock or lack of sleep, but that it was a "first". I'd just graduated high school, and this was my first mission and my first real life experience. We were also the first OCMC team in Moldova, running the first Orthodox Youth Camp in the country. We were building from the ground up.

Throughout the process, we were constantly improvising. Our schedule changed multiple times a day, and as counselors, we had to constantly be on alert, because there was always a new unforeseen task that somebody had to take care of. As a former student, I was used to long hours of careful preparation that would lead to a guaranteed "A". But what our camp really needed was flexibility, people willing to do whatever needed to be done for the kids.

One of the biggest assignments we were given as a team was to teach lessons on Christian virtues to supplement an hour-long lecture that Fr. Sergiu Aga, the Moldovan priest of St. Basil Orthodox

Church in Orhei who helped organize the camp, would give. We were each assigned a partner and given an hour time limit.

My partner and I were assigned to talk about the virtues of faith and courage. I immediately wanted to jump on the lesson plan prior to our team's departure to Moldova, but my partner was overseas, and

it was difficult for us to communicate.

I started treating the lesson plan like it was another big school assignment. My partner, an experienced teacher, used a more intuitive approach and understood the need for flexibility. I was constantly writing new-and-improved lesson plans. In my mind, nothing I brainstormed seemed good enough.

So when we arrived in Moldova, I still felt completely unprepared. We had two days before our lesson, but we also had a brand-new, unpredictable camp that demanded our attention.

The night before our lesson, we finally had a rough outline of what we wanted to do, but we were still unsure of how it would go. I craved certainty that our lesson would be "A" worthy.

"You know what?" I finally said, "I'm going to bed. At this point, we're not going anywhere. It'll be fine." This is what the other team members had been telling me for the past hour while I'd continued to pace and mutter that we

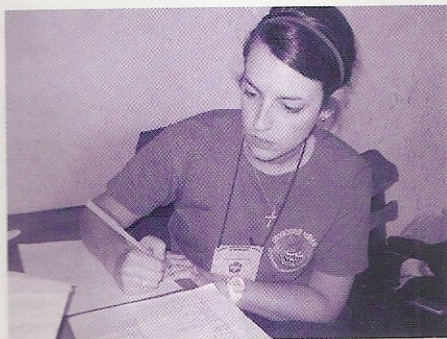
RIGHT: Christina Semon leads the youth camp where participants listen attentively to presentations made by the short-term OCMC team.



weren't ready. I wanted to believe these words, but I honestly couldn't bring myself to let go.

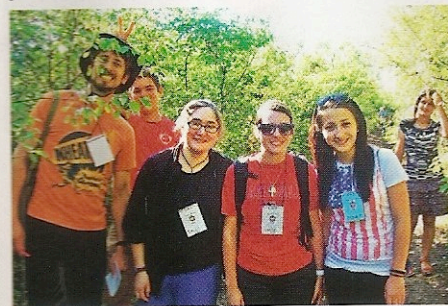
The next morning, I did not say anything, but I carried my notebook around anyway, ready to plan at a moment's notice. Fr. Sergiu gave his talk first thing after breakfast, and we immediately followed with our lessons. I listened to the translator as Fr. Sergiu talked about how important it is in life to have faith, because as humans, we are incapable of doing anything without it.

This was something I'd been hearing throughout years of Sunday school, but for the first time, I realized how correct it was. I was absolutely incapable of giving this lesson by myself. I got a good look at my partner's face. She was calm and ready, but exhausted. I realized that I'd been ignoring the fact that my partner cared about the presentation just as much as I did. Looking around the room, I also saw the kids for whom we were running the camp. Most of them were listening attentively, drinking in Fr. Sergiu's words, unlike any Sunday school class I had ever seen. I was supposed to be teaching them, but I'd barely given them a second thought. Until that moment, I'd been entirely focused on myself.



ABOVE: Team member Leslie Hansard prepares her lesson plan to present to the camp members.

BELOW: Team members and local camp participants go for a hike after the lesson plans and presentations are over.



I paused, sat back, and shut the notebook in which I'd been frantically scribbling. There was only one thing to do.

In the middle of the lecture, I began to pray—not that the presentation would go well, but that I could let it go, that I be given the strength to allow His will to be done, and not mine. I prayed for my partner and for the kids. I tried to stop caring about what these kids would think of me and start caring about how to help them.

Suddenly, it was time for the presentation.

I looked at my partner, whispered for her to introduce it, and quickly sat down. This was my defining moment. We'd had a list of eight things we wanted to go over, including witnesses, discussions, and activities. We got through three. I was rarely in charge.

We ended with an activity where we paired campers up and had them discuss ways to demonstrate faith and courage in their everyday lives. From the beginning, I'd thought this was a stupid idea that we wouldn't have time to do. But it turned out that this was the best way to



ABOVE: OCMC team members teach the lessons that they spent much of their time there working on – to share the love and lessons of the Orthodox Faith.

end the lesson. We got a good idea of what the campers understood, and it gave us the chance to clarify where they had doubts. My partner ran the activity, and I helped. At least one camper came to better understand faith and courage because of what we taught them.

It seems odd that instead of stepping up and taking responsibility, my biggest moment of the trip was when I had faith enough to sit down and let go. But it was exactly what I needed to do.

It was not a perfect presentation. We had a couple of flaws, which we discussed afterward; the critique didn't even bother me. I knew that I could have never taught a successful lesson on my own. My prayers had been answered, and we had said what these children needed to hear. It was a lesson in faith for me, too.

That was when the trip ceased to be a high school drama for me, and became a mission. I began to perform my duties as counselor with the kids in mind, instead of myself. I recognized that I was there to help the kids, not to impress them. The mission was never really about me. I just didn't have the ability to realize that on my own.



Christina Semon and the short-term mission team stop for a photo op during their time together in Moldova.