

Sugar House resident lends helping hand to Ukrainian orphanages

By David Jensen

Nate Shipp, a Sugar House resident, works as a real estate developer in Salt Lake City. However, his first major construction project involved arranging for extensive repair work at an orphanage several time zones away. That was eight years ago shortly after he co-founded Project Reach Out, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to helping improve the lives and living conditions of hundreds of orphans in the Ukraine.



Shipp served an LDS mission in the Ukraine from 1997 to 1999 and part of his service responsibility was to help out in the local communities. He spent most of that service time at the orphanages. He and his missionary companions discovered early on that the facilities were understaffed and many of the children's basic needs were unmet due to a lack of funding. They helped out as much as they could, but it was discouraging because as missionaries, their time and resources were limited.

“Seeing the condition of the buildings and how the kids lived was extremely difficult. The only way we could cope with the situation was deciding that we would go back when we were in a better position to do more for them,” said Shipp.

Two months after returning home, Shipp and one of his former companions, Benj Becker of San Francisco, Calif., began approaching people they knew who might be able to help them with donations of money, resources or expertise. Many of the donors agreed to help on the condition that the men keep it at the grass roots level and that all funding goes to the orphanages. In May 1999, the two founders of Project Reach Out returned to the Ukraine with \$25,000 in their pockets, ready to honor that promise they had made several months earlier.

“Here we were, two 21-year-olds embarking on this project. We didn't know what we were doing. We just knew that we wanted to help the kids.” Shipp said.

During this visit, the men arranged for contractors to replace the roof, plumbing, bathrooms and windows at the Lutsk orphanage. They also purchased food, clothes, coats and pre-paid medical fees. After learning that the orphanage staff washed all of the laundry by hand, they also purchased two industrial-sized washing machines.

As a way of supporting the local economy, Shipp and Becker purchased the materials and hired local contractors to do the work. Several of the construction crews agreed to provide the labor for free.

They returned to the Ukraine each year to visit the kids and make more improvements. The first few trips were devoted to delivering food and clothing and improving the sanitary conditions of the orphanage's kitchens and bathrooms. When economic conditions improved and the

orphanages started receiving more government funding, Shipp and Becker turned their attention to providing more educational and cultural experiences to help prepare the kids for life on their own.

“Generally the kids are finished with their high school education at the age of 15. At that point they are required to leave the orphanage, find work and live on their own,” he said.

Initially, they thought their first trip might be a one-time deal as they were getting busier with their careers and families. However, both of their spouses and extended families got involved and encouraged them to keep going.

“People continue to give, so we continue to do the work,” said Shipp.

Shipp and Becker return to the Ukraine once or twice every year to visit the kids and expedite more repairs and upgrade projects. They currently provide assistance and resources to seven different orphanages.

The two feel like they have made some good progress with the orphanages over the years, but both wish they could do more.

“We’ve done a lot for the buildings and the kids, but we would like to see more of them get adopted,” Shipp said. “We’re not an adoption agency, but I’ve personally helped out with six adoptions of kids from the Ukraine. My little sister is one of them.”

All of the money raised by Project Reach Out members has come from generous individuals who agree to donate as long as the organization remains small and guarantees that all of the money goes to the kids and orphanages. Shipp and Becker have kept that promise and plan to continue their efforts indefinitely.

Project Reach Out is still operated at the grassroots level by the two founding members. They set up a website that explains more about their organization and accomplishments at www.projectreachout.com.