

Romania's HIV-Positive Children Get a Dose of Laughter

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Bringing in the clowns — with their colorful tutus, vibrant makeup, red noses, balloons, floppy shoes, hysterical laughter and childlike joy — was just what the doctor ordered for a group of HIV-positive children in need of a dose of laughter.

Colleen Flannery, chief of the Customer Liaison and Marketing Services Office's Educational Resources Branch, spent 10 days recently trying to improve the lives of abused and neglected children in Romania.

"Clowning was a wonderful way to break through the barriers," Flannery said. "Some orphanages we visited were for children from abusive homes, and adults were not necessarily their favorite people. But funny adults, acting silly and wearing goofy clothes — well, that was a different ball of wax. These kids were a bit wary of us at first, but they were starved for attention, laughter and touch, and flourished as we lavished them with all three."

Inspired by the movie "Patch Adams" — based on the true story of a doctor and clown who believed laughter was an integral part of the healing process — Flannery embarked on a humanitarian clowning adventure to make a difference.

"In December [2008], I learned that Patch Adams' Gesundheit Institute was headquartered in Arlington [Va.] and got on their mailing list," said Flannery of the nonprofit organization dedicated to providing a desirable model for health care. "They were seeking volunteers for humanitarian clowning trips, which included trips to Central America, Italy, Russia and Romania."

The Central America trips conflicted with her work schedule, and she had been to Russia, so she chose Romania.

In just four months, Flannery was able to solicit donations of more than 50 pounds of medical supplies and more than \$3,000 from fellow Census Bureau employees, friends and family — even strangers who learned of the mission through a neighborhood listserv.

Last June, Flannery and her husband, Jerry Caldwell (aka Jazz the clown), took a 13-hour flight to Bucharest, Romania's capital, and made their way to a small commune



Colleen Flannery (CLMSO) works with Sora Maria, mother superior of the Franciscan nuns who care for 20 HIV-positive orphans in a small Romanian commune.



Colleen Flannery clowns around with one of the many neglected, abused and orphaned children in Romania.



"Wildman" Adams, Colleen Flannery and Przemek Grzybowski (a Polish professor) enjoy time with the children.

called Singureni in Giurgiu County, where many people still get their water from wells and live in homes with dirt floors.

In Singureni, Flannery and Jazz paraded into town with 10 others. Their troupe included "Wildman" Adams (Patch's brother), his wife and 4-year-old daughter, and clowns from England, Poland, Italy, Holland and the U.S.

The group pranced and danced and juggled and tumbled with the children — ranging in age from several months to their mid-20s. They also clowned at government-run homes for the elderly, abused and orphaned.

"The kids we worked with are outside the state system. They are smart, well dressed, and for the most part, healthy," Flannery said. "But some of the older kids were rescued from those horrible orphanages where they were tied to their beds and only cared for when staff, food or medicine was available."

Flannery said with many charities, you might not know how your contributions will help. Not in this case.

"I had the rare opportunity to actually see and touch the kids. I could see how our contributions actually impacted their lives," she said. "I left asking myself, 'How can I continue to foster these kids? How will they pay for their medications, and how will they stay healthy?'"

At least for 10 short days in 2009, their lives were made brighter by the sound of giggles and ringing, thanks to a troupe of clowns who brought hope and joy from around the world.