

Belarus 2017 Update

by Margaret Campbell

I returned to Belarus in April. After 12 years of working with Canadian Aid for Chernobyl (CAC), I had many projects to follow up on and many friends to visit.

Last fall, I learned of a household that really needed running water. This home has 7 people in it, a mother, her 2 grown sons, 2 adult young women that were children at the Chuasy Orphanage and their 2 daughters. CAC hired well diggers from Minsk (3 hours away) to do the work. While the toddlers enjoyed eating Erie Street United Church's (ESUC's) Monster cookies, the well was dug. The girls had never seen cookies before – I had to show them how to eat them! The children were quite excited. Their house is basically a square divided into quarters: 3 areas are bedrooms and the last is an empty room. The floors were wood plank. We will have to build a counter and buy a sink and taps to accommodate running water. We'll also build lower cabinets so they have a storage area. I do not think their walls will support upper cabinets. Fresh water was pumping by late afternoon. The quality control test was the workmen drinking the water! After 15 minutes, a workman said his stomach felt fine so the water must be good!



I attended 2 parties that CAC organized. The first party was a birthday party for the children at the Orphanage. It included wrapped gifts, cake and pop, entertainment and ended with fireworks. Last year there was a little boy who hugged his gift all night long and showed us the socks he had received. He said they were his first pair of new socks. I'll never forget that. The second party was for families with special needs children. In Belarus, families with special needs children are often shunned and our support has allowed them to feel better about their situations and to socialize with each other. We played games, had treats and each child received a birthday present. The games involved Canadians and we danced and played with the children. This group also gives us information if there are situations that require help. We have delivered many wheelchairs and other products that have improved lives.

A lot of time is spent delivering food parcels and boxes to families. I asked to deliver to 2 specific villages as I had ordered boxes for specific people from these villages. I got my wish and we loaded our truck and were out the door. We got on the highway and within minutes our truck broke down. A fan belt broke. I laughed as this is typical of our work here. Igor, our driver, pulled off the road, got out his tools and replaced the belt himself. We were back on the road within 15 minutes. On another day, we got stuck on a dirt road and had to find a tractor to pull us out. There are always surprises!



On our first visit in 2005, David and I discovered a family of 4 girls that needed assistance. Each year we would send food boxes and clothing. And we also visited them as many times as we could. We got to know the 2 youngest girls very well. The girls have since grown up and 3 of them have children of their own. Last year I visited the mom's home and all 4 girls were there at the same time. Today I only found Sasha at home. I left food boxes for the others with Sasha and was disappointed that I had missed Marina, the youngest. This was our last stop for the day and as we headed back to town, we passed a horse and wagon on the road. I looked and the driver of the wagon was Marina. I told our driver to **"follow that horse!"**. I caught up to Marina in a dairy barn. We both had tears. We did manage to kiss without our clothes touching as she was wearing barn work clothes. This was the best part of my trip.



Last year we found an elderly lady living by herself in a small town. Social assistance tried to move her from her home and she refused to leave. This decision cost her any further support from social services.



We came back to find her this year and brought a cane, a comfortable chair and special boxes packed for her. She remembered us and we had some smiles. She is 81 and told us she would die in 3 days and not to leave anything. By the end of our time with her, she said she would wait for us next year.

Each trip connects me to more people.

Each trip makes me more grateful for my life in Canada.

Each trip makes me appreciate the many people that support my work in Belarus.

Together, we make a difference.

Margaret