

A Home for Stella

Philip Cameron never planned on extending his family, nor had he envisioned creating a refuge for potential sex slaves. Yet his efforts to transform orphans into walking testimonies of God's love are now transforming a country.

Natalie, a beautiful girl of 16, sat outside the orphanage where she had lived since she was 7 years old, wearing a t-shirt that read: "You Can Own Me For \$3,500."

OK, so she wasn't actually wearing the shirt—but she might as well have been. In fact, everything about her screamed the message to predators in the area. She had "aged out" of the government-run orphanage in Moldova and had no place to live and no way to make a living. She had no family, no one who would know or care if she vanished from the country known as "the engine of the sex trafficking machine" in all of Europe.

Natalie sat on that bench with 17 other girls about to be thrown into a world of 70 percent unemployment without the skills to even boil an egg.

Perhaps no one is at greater risk than the orphan girls of Moldova. Often cruel orphanage workers tip off their connections in the sex traffic trade that "Olympic-quality girls" will soon be left at the bus station. These teen girls are easy targets for the charming men they "happen" to meet at the station, with their big black cars and promises of waitress or nanny jobs.

Michael D. Kirby, while serving as the U.S. Ambassador to Moldova, said of girls like Natalie: "Within 24 hours of getting into a car, they are in places like Turkey or Saudi Arabia or Italy. They are beaten, raped and brutalized until they comply with the wishes of their new masters."

Philip Cameron is determined to change the future for these

girls in Moldova. For more than 20 years the Scottish missionary-evangelist has been helping at-risk children throughout Eastern Europe. And yet he never imagined he'd literally be the only hope for shelter and protection to hundreds of teenage girls.

A Spark in the Darkness

Cameron began working with orphans in Moldova shortly after the Iron Curtain fell. While delivering Christmas presents to an orphanage he'd worked with for years, he felt the Holy Spirit nudging him to visit a second one in the city of Hincesti. This orphanage was known for being one of the worst in the small country of 3 million people.

"The first time I walked in, the director asked me, 'Have you ever seen a child freeze to death? Already, 16 have frozen to death here this year and it is not even December.'"

It didn't take long to understand how this happened. Throughout the lengthy winter season the temperature outside remained at least 20 degrees below freezing, and the orphanage's windows were broken, missing panes and punctured with holes. The furnace barely worked, the roof leaked and the lighting consisted of one light bulb on a single cord to illuminate an entire room.

"As quickly as I could raise the funds, we bought coal to get some heat into the building," Cameron recalls. "We did some renovation and provided the kids with food, clothing and vitamins. Each time I went back to this orphanage I got to know the kids, one by one, by name."

Yet one was a special favorite for Cameron. Her name was Stella. She suffered from epilepsy and her right forearm was badly deformed and twisted. When she walked, she dragged one foot behind her. Still, there was a spark about her, a gleam in her eyes that showed the place had not beaten her.

Cameron spent hours talking to Stella, hearing about her life, about the other children, and answering questions about his life and the Lord.

“She was a highlight of every visit,” he says. “She was warm, curious, entertaining and, as strange as it may sound, she was as close a friend as I have ever had.”

During one visit Philip was led by his special friend to the dorm where she slept and kept what few belongings she owned. She reached under the rusty cot, pulled out a little bag and emptied it out onto the tattered blanket that covered her bed.

“This little girl displayed for me two tapestries she had made, each about two feet by two feet,” Cameron says. “I was amazed to see how beautiful they were, knowing that with only one good hand, they must have taken months to make. Using what little Moldovan I could speak, I told her how proud I was of her and how wonderful these works of art were.

“Then she did something that took my breath away: She asked me to choose one. She wanted me to have one. This girl who had nothing, who had labored over these precious tapestries for who knows how long, was giving one to me!”

Months later, Cameron visited again and Stella was gone. “I went around asking one worker after the other about her. I learned that she had ‘aged out,’ which means that, at only 16 years of age, she had gotten too old to be cared for in the orphanage. So they sent her away.”

Trip after trip, Cameron kept asking about Stella and often sent a friend to look for her. Had anyone heard where she went? How was she? What was she doing? Finally, someone had an answer: She had been abused, had run away from a different state institution and had died of AIDS after working on the streets as a prostitute just to survive.

“It has been seven years,” Cameron somberly says, “and in my

nightmares, I still see Stella as she must have been the final hours of her life. Wracked with pain and totally alone with nothing but memories of men who abused and tortured her until there was nothing left.”

Choosing Your Children

The reality of Stella’s death caused Cameron to see the horror that awaited not just Stella, but the majority of kids who are cast out of Moldova’s orphanages at 16. More than that, it moved him to do what their parents and the government had not: He was determined to show the love of a Father whose heart ached for them, and who wanted to shelter them at all costs.

Cameron opened a home called “Stella’s House,” a refuge where girls who are turned out of the government-run orphanages can live in and be part of a Christian family. The home opened in 2006 to 10 girls, and soon all were committed Christians, ready to offer discipleship to any newcomers.

But make no mistake; this is not an orphanage for older girls. It is a home. Cameron and his wife, Chrissie, are “Dad and Mom.” Each of the girls attends school during the day, and at home they learn how to cook and clean, along with developing other life skills to help them live on their own someday. They go to church together, study the Bible and after supper, they play games and sing worship songs.

The year after Stella’s House was opened, Cameron found out about Natalie and the 17 other girls waiting out on that bench. They were about to be prime targets for the very men who killed Stella. But he had room for only three more.

“How do you choose?” he asked, “and turn your back on the other 15? Will they end up like Stella? Or worse?” Cameron determined that before another group of girls aged out, he would have another Stella’s House open.

“Stella’s House was like a dream to me,” says Natalie, who

with two other girls were welcomed into the only real home they have ever known. "All my life I had been told I was nothing, that an orphan is worse than nothing. But I was offered this home to live in where there is food and clothes and people who love me. I'd never had that before."

Natalie, Cameron soon learned, had lived a life no child should ever have to endure. Her mother became blind when she was 4 years old, which led to her grandmother taking care of her for a season. There was barely any food for the family and no bed for Natalie, so when she was 7 her grandmother left her at the orphanage.

"Every Saturday, I would walk to the orphanage gate and wait all day, hoping and praying my mother would come to see me," Natalie recalls. "She never did. Then one day, after years of waiting every Saturday, I learned that my mom had come to the orphanage with her new boyfriend, to bring his children toys and gifts. But she had not even said 'Hello' to me."

Countless other girls share similar stories.

No One Heals Like Him

For most of the girls welcomed into the drastically different environment of Stella's House, the open-arms approach of Cameron and his family is a shock to their system. It can take weeks or months to warm up, and even longer for the girls to actually begin to believe the affirming words continually spoken over them—that they are beautiful, valued, unique, special and wanted.

"It was very hard to understand the word *love*," Galina admits. "My parents left me when I was only a baby and I never saw them again. When God sent Dad [Cameron] and the family in my life, they are the ones who taught me and showed me what real love was by loving me and making me feel loved and special. I could not understand: *Why are they loving me so much? They barely know me.* My own parents didn't even love me so much."

But God sent Dad and his family to show me His greatest love through them.”

God’s adoptive love has also healed them from deep wounds in ways no doctor, counselor or psychologist could. Cameron travels the world recounting the girl’s stories to the church at large, yet his eyes still fill with tears when he talks about how God has transformed their lives almost overnight.

“Most of these kids had never known a father, or what a father was supposed to be,” he says. “One day they all got together, called me into a room, and asked if they could call me ‘Dad.’ As touched as I was by that, it was nothing compared to the joy of seeing them, one by one, come to know their Heavenly Father. They’ve found the one who really is the Father to the fatherless and discovered His love for them. ... They know that they are no longer orphans; they are His!”

All the girls spend many of their weekends returning to the orphanage where they were raised, bringing joy and playing with the kids there, encouraging them in their homework and telling them they are special.

“When I sat on that bench with the other girls, I had no hope, no plan, and no future,” Natalie recalls. “Now I have a future because of Stella’s House.”

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