

A Place of Refuge

MISSIONARIES JANE HYATT AND BARBARA KLAIBER STARTED THE ARK, A PLACE KIEV'S STREET KIDS CAN CALL THEIR OWN.

In the Ukrainian city of Kiev, one out of every 20 residents is a homeless child. During the summer, many of these 129,000 children sleep at night under bridges or on the floors of large public restrooms scattered throughout the park overlooking the Dnipro River.

Others break into abandoned buildings, closed markets and darkened basements to scavenge for food and find a place to rest. During the day, these youngsters fill the streets, begging for more food, picking pockets and searching for discarded warm clothing in preparation for winter.

Once the cold months arrive, when temperatures can stay below -10 degrees for days, the street children of Kiev live underground. Unlike most cities, Kiev supplies its residents with hot water piped through a complex subterranean system of tunnels.

It is in these tunnels that thousands of children create makeshift beds by placing boards on top of the rows of hot water pipes. With food in short supply, countless youth keep their hunger at bay by inhaling model airplane glue from plastic bags.

Homelessness among the children of Kiev has been an ongoing problem since the days of Lenin's rule over Russia in the 1920s. Unfortunately, the independence Ukraine gained from communism in 1991 intensified the situation.

At that time, the nation's economy collapsed, and families whose finances suddenly disappeared put their children out on the streets. Many parents turned to alcohol, making the living

conditions at home unbearable for their children, who consequently left to get away from conflict and abuse.

A BURDEN TO HELP The plight of these children planted seeds of ministry in the hearts of missionaries Jane Hyatt and Barbara Klaiber while they were visiting Kiev on a choir tour. "Every day, as these children came up to us begging, the burden for outreach to them grew greater.

"At first we brought it before the Lord, asking 'God, is this just our emotions or a call from You?' Through both of us individually and corporately praying, the vision for outreach to street children was birthed in our hearts," Barbara explains.

In 1999, that vision, which became "Father's Care," started with a soup kitchen in central Kiev and has grown into a 12-acre children's ranch on the edge of the city. Originally a state-run sanatorium, the eight-building compound, which Jane and Barbara named "The Ark," houses 14 children. Current renovations, which are being funded by individuals and charities, will accommodate an additional 70-90 children.

The Ark provides children refuge that cannot be found elsewhere in Ukraine. "The majority of state-run shelters are either overcrowded or staffed by caregivers who do little to help the children. The largest shelter in Kiev is run by people who do not have a heart for caring," Barbara says.

"Unfortunately, they have their own agendas and problems, so anger and abuse develops and is directed towards the children. Here at The Ark, our kids receive lots of hugs, as well as good food, clean clothes and a warm bed."

SAFE AND SECURE A typical day for children at The Ark begins at 8, with breakfast being served at 8:30. Afterward, staff teachers individually tutor each child to bring their education levels up to the standard for their particular age group. "Having had little or no formal education, [these

children] are eager to learn and learn very quickly,” Jane says.

Following a lunch break and additional tutoring in the afternoon, the children are rewarded with more than three hours of free time. Wooded with huge pine and oak trees, The Ark provides countless settings for outdoor physical activity.

Indoors, the children, who range in age from 9 to 16, have access to games, puzzles and even a PlayStation. At 6 p.m., supper is served, followed by activities—including arts and crafts—supervised by The Ark’s compassionate caregivers.

Later in the evening, everyone gathers for a time of prayer, during which the children are encouraged to pray for one another and their families. It is during this time, Jane noted, that the changes in the lives of these youngsters is most evident.

“Ira, a 14-year-old whom we knew for three years on the streets and [who] is now living at The Ark, was a very wild child filled with anger and rage,” Jane says. “She would come to our soup kitchen and tell us that her alcoholic mother was consistently encouraging her to run away, that she wasn’t wanted or needed.

“When Ira came to live with us a year ago, she was totally rebellious—didn’t want to change or do anything different. We heard her tell stories of her childhood that were unbelievable. For example, she witnessed her grandmother, a practicing witch, cast a spell on a man who later died.

“Over a long time of just loving Ira and reaching out to her with hugs, her spirit finally broke. Since then, I have begun to disciple her and spend special time with her.

“When I was getting ready to leave The Ark to visit America recently, Ira actually hugged me and told me that, unlike the other times when I was gone and she had been rebellious and

ran away, this time she'd be good. Then she whispered in my ear 'I love you' and gave me a big hug."

ONE MIRACLE AFTER ANOTHER The founding of The Ark is as miraculous as the changes in the lives of its children. Barbara recalled that she and Jane were led to the property in 1998 during a time of prayer and morning devotions.

She says: "God spoke to me, saying: 'Go find a place in the woods that can hold 100 to 200 kids. You'll know the place because there was once a disco there.'"

She says for a couple days, she questioned that part of His directive. But after sharing it with Jane, they started a search of various places in Kiev. The two agreed they needed to find, if there were such a place, a farm in the city—with a disco.

So government officials showed them several places. Barbara says, "Once we saw this beautiful, peaceful setting, we knew that this was what we were looking for. Every time the government brought us here to show us more of the facility, it was as if more pieces of the puzzle were coming together concerning the words God had spoken to me."

The fourth time they toured the grounds, they noticed an open door in the kitchen-dining area that had been locked on previous visits. As they entered a large room, they encountered cleaning ladies who asked them to leave and not come back until Friday night when the dance was scheduled.

Barbara says: "At that time, I looked up at the ceiling and, sure enough, hanging over the center of the room was a disco ball. I pointed it out to Jane, and we both knew that we were in the right place."

Since then, renovation of the property has slowly but steadily progressed. "We still have seven buildings that need work," Barbara says. "Even though people look and see everything

we've done and say, 'Wow! You've done so much in such a short time,' both Jane and I realize there's so much more to do," she explains.

"We are trying to raise—hold onto your boots—\$2 million. And that will be over a two-year time period. There's a verse in Revelation that says to 'strengthen the things that remain' [Rev. 3:2]. When the Lord first spoke that to me, I knew that He would give Jane and me the resources to restore this property to reach out to the children of Kiev."

Jane adds, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me because it's His strength and not our own that keeps us going."

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For more information, send correspondence to Father's Care, Box 31, Kiev, Ukraine 04075; or e-mail Jane Hyatt at servant@. If you would like to support this ministry, send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Father's Care, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.