

# American Adventist Youth Reach Out to Ukrainian Youth

**S**even young people from the Foxboro Seventh-day Adventist Church recently had the opportunity to travel to Ukraine. The group went with the goal of volunteering for a local program in Evpatoria that cares for homeless children, and to attend and speak at youth meetings held by the Evpatoria Seventh-day Adventist Church as an outreach to non-Christian youth in the city.

The idea of going to Ukraine was brought to the Foxboro church in January by our youth pastor, Ben Bilan. Bilan, his wife, Viola, and son, Vlad, moved to the U.S. from Ukraine in 2003. The mission trip opportunity was presented when a pastor from a church in Evpatoria, Ukraine, who knew Bilan asked him to bring a group of American young people to Evpatoria. Members of the team included Kelly Vogler of North Easton, Mass., Kenron and Cliff Washington of Mansfield, Mass., Heather and Sara Coan of Stoughton, Mass., and leaders Ben and Viola Bilan of Foxboro, Mass.

Plans were made to go from March 14-26 and after flight delays, missed connections, and an unplanned stay in Amsterdam, we arrived in Kiev to catch our train to Evpatoria. The train ride was an experience different from any I have ever had before. It was a 15-hour ride to the city where we would be staying, and we spent one night on the train. Because we had missed our train the night before, we were not able to share the same rooms as originally planned.

I was fortunate to share a room with

individuals from our group, but one of the other adults had to share a room with drunken men, and he did not get any sleep that night. The rooms were crowded with two bunk beds on opposite walls and only enough space to stand up between the beds. The rooms had no air conditioning and the small window did not open. Although there was a rule that prohibits smoking on the train, many people were smoking and the conductor did nothing to stop them. Our choices were to have the door to our room open in hopes of cooling the room off, or keep the door closed and have a somewhat smoke free environment. We alternated between both choices.

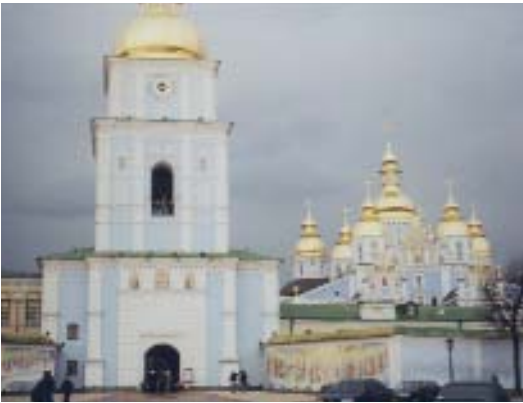
Once we arrived at our destination, we unpacked and showered. It was then we realized what a nice feeling it

was to be clean. That night we attended the youth meetings for the first time, and we loved it. We were introduced to the crowd and welcomed with rounds of applause and deafening cheers. It was confusing for us at first because the meeting was in Russian, but once the translators began doing their job, we were able to understand most of what was being said.

It was impressive to see the youth from the city perform their various styles of music each night. The games we played were also very entertaining. While some games required patience, others required endurance. They ranged from carving an apple to resemble a chess piece using only your teeth, to picking up a plastic cup on the floor with your mouth while balancing on only one foot.

Young people from the Foxboro Adventist church seen here with youth from the Evpatoria Adventist church.





Included in the trip was the opportunity to visit the Michailov Monastery in Kiev.

However, not everything went according to plan. A government agent also attended the meetings each night, and the leaders were told that if the name of God was mentioned, the meetings would be shut down. Therefore, we were not able to hold our small group discussions with the city teens, but instead the leaders focused the meetings on discussing Christian principles.

For example, when we focused on the topic "Conscience," groups were given a situation, such as stealing. Each group was in charge of writing a speech or performing a skit where they would play the conscience trying to convince the person dealing with the situation to do the right thing. Clips were also shown from several movies depicting the char-

acters battling with their consciences. It was a great time for everyone.

It was interesting to observe that, while the meetings were in progress, some of the youth could be seen leaving the meeting. Each time the meetings were held there was always a crowd outside of the door to the building. The youth that left would go out to drink and smoke before coming back in again.

At the end of the meetings, the leaders started a club for the youth and invited the young people to attend the church. Approximately 200 came to that week's service. They are making plans to start a youth church.

**W**hile there, we also had the opportunity to work with homeless children at a program run by Nadya Vasok, and immediately I fell in love with them. Using the craft supplies we brought with us, we worked on several projects with the children. We also ate lunch with them, shared stories about ourselves, and distributed lots of candy to the children.

Although not all of the children were homeless, many of them preferred to live on the street rather than sleep at home with their alcoholic parents.

They ranged in age from four to nineteen. There was a group of six siblings who were there for lunch during the day. They had a home, but their single mother was an alcoholic. We also saw children as young as ten-years-old smoking cigarettes. We discovered that in Ukraine it is legal for children as young as ten-years-old to pur-

chase and smoke cigarettes.

The children loved the fact that we ate lunch at the same tables with them, and some of them started coming to the meetings at night as well. Some of the children came to join us after school. They enjoyed our stories about our lives back in the U.S. and even made some crafts as gifts for us. At the end of the day when it was time to leave, the children always enjoyed walking with us back to our house, but we never found out where they were going after they left us. It seemed as though they just disappeared.

Even though to us life seems hard for people in Ukraine, they were so friendly, hospitable, and always had a smile for us. While at first our language differences kept us all from talking much to each other, by the end of the trip we were all communicating with the limited amount of English the youth learned in school. I now have many friends there.

While our Russian may never be spoken well, we had fun trying to learn new words as well. We all had fun teaching each other new games and trying new and interesting foods. The country is beautiful, especially where we were by the Black Sea.

When the time came to say goodbye, it was hard to believe our trip was over. My favorite part of the trip was meeting all the wonderful people. Although we were around them for only two weeks, we grew close during the time we were there. I wish I could have stayed longer, but for now I will have to settle for e-mailing my friends and hoping for another chance to go back to Ukraine. I hope I will have that chance soon. ☺



*Kelly Vogler, a 15-year-old freshman, is a member of the Foxboro Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is her second mission trip. Her first trip in August 2000 was spent in Romania.*



The pastor's wife, Olena, (left) and her seven-year-old daughter, Katya (far right), seen here with the group from Foxboro church, Ken, Heather, Kelly, Sara, Cliff, and Pastor Ben Bilan.