

Chernobyl Children's Project and its Projects in Belarus

John and Julie Gater

Holidays in Belarus

Our first holiday at a sanatorium, or holiday camp, in Belarus took place in the summer of 1998. We arranged for 50 children from Zhuravichi Boarding Home and 50 from Garadyets Special School, who had never had the chance of a holiday before, to travel to a holiday camp in a beautiful part of the country. Volunteers flew out to work with the children and make sure they had a great time. Carers from Zhuravichi were able to see that the children were capable of doing much more than they had ever thought possible, and the children had the most memorable experience of their lives.

It was such a success that we have arranged a holiday every summer for children from Zhuravichi, and in recent years they have been accompanied by the children without parents who live at Rechitsa Boarding School.

The children are given the opportunity to paint, draw, cut and paste, make masks, play ball games, have races, watch films and live performances, take part in discos and from time to time to have the one-to-one attention which is just not possible at Zhuravichi.

Many wonderful volunteers – medical students, physiotherapists, teachers, early years workers and many others - have raised their air fares and then given two weeks of hard work. The holidays have been a life- changing experience not just for the children – who think about them all year round – but for some of the volunteers who have changed their career plans as a result of the time they have spent with the Zhuravichi children.

Since 2007 we have been including Belarusian volunteers who are studying to work with children with special needs, and particularly for the children from Rechitsa, many of whom are very communicative, this has been a great success.

In the last five years we have funded sanatorium holidays for many disabled young adults, some from institutions and some holidaying with their mothers.

Training Programme

It was in January 2000 that Jean Holt first visited Belarus. She had been the manager of a Children's Home, a Family Placement Officer, and was experienced in training. By April that year Jean had initiated a training programme in Gomel and we were awarded a three-year grant by the Department for International Development. This was followed for several years by grants from the British Embassy in Minsk. Jean has led or coordinated dozens of week-long training sessions with the support of a team of social work professionals, mostly from Leeds and North Yorkshire.

Directors and staff from orphanages, children's shelters and social centres throughout Gomel Region have benefited from these. This has helped to change the way staff work with the children in the orphanages, and helped to bring about an increase in family placement for children, drastically reducing the number of children needing institutional care.

The Children's Department of the Psychiatric Hospital in Gomel has benefited from training and from visits to the UK. A team of psychiatric and child care professionals has been working with the department since 2007 and is helping to develop better care in the community for children with challenging behaviour.

We have a joint project with an Italian charity 'Forum' running a 'Leaving Care' programme, supporting young people as they move on from an orphanage in Gomel to independence.

One of the most exciting recent developments has been the training of family placement workers from every region in Belarus to set up banks of specially trained temporary foster carers. Their role will be to care for babies and young children and prepare them to return home or move to adoptive families. We hope this will eventually lead to the closure of baby homes.

In 2009 Eric Shedlow, formerly Head of Children's Resources at Leeds City Council, worked with Jean to co-ordinate the training programmes.

Supporting Children with Cancer

We have worked closely with 'Children in Trouble' for many years, inviting children through them, taking them humanitarian aid and helping with their ongoing costs. We often receive an SOS from them to say that the Children's Cancer Hospital is in desperate need of a medicine which is not available in Belarus. There may be a child who needs a bone marrow transplant and cannot have it without this medication. These drugs can be very expensive but we always try to respond if we can, sometimes clubbing together with Chernobyl Children Lifeline to do this jointly.

We provide some support to the poorest families while they are staying in hospital and to some of the orphans. We send gifts at Christmas and recently we have taken wigs for some of the teenage girls.

Children's Hospice Care

In 1998 we first met Anna Gorchakova, the driving force behind the development of palliative care in Belarus. Anna had set up the first Children's Hospice in the country in 1994 and had built up a wonderful team of staff around her. They were supporting about 50 families with children in the last stages of cancer or with chronic disabilities, mostly in and around Minsk.

We decided that we would like to help to set up hospice care in other parts of the country and in 2000 with haematologist Igor Iskrov we established Gomel

Home Hospice Team. We later provided support to set up a small hospice in Vitebsk and other charities have channelled support through us to fund outreach nurses in Mozyr, Zhlobin and Pinsk.

Hospice Care in Gomel was reorganised in 2005 with Irish charities taking on the support of the regional hospice serving the outlying towns and villages while we set up a Palliative Care Team to work in the city.

We have brought a number of hospice nurses and doctors to the UK to spend time with Macmillan nurses and visit hospices in Britain. Francis House in Manchester and Martin House in Yorkshire have been very supportive and palliative care lecturer John Costello has made a number of trips to Belarus to deliver training.

In 2003 the Belarusian Children's Hospice decided that they needed to own their own premises and Sam Lupton, one of our most generous benefactors, donated £8000 towards the purchase of the house which has been turned into a beautiful hospice. The hospice was the main focus of fundraising for the 'Remember Chernobyl' campaign at the time of the 20th Anniversary of Chernobyl and our contribution was to buy a minibus for the hospice in Minsk which was delivered in November 2006.

Vikov Home for Disabled Adults

Many of the most disabled young people who leave Zhuravichi go to Vikov, an institution hidden deep in the forest just outside Rogachev which is home to around 200 adults with learning difficulties or mental health problems. The staff at Vikov have neither the time nor the knowledge to be able to occupy the more disabled and autistic young people. So we have been employing a teacher there since 2004. Ludmilla works throughout the week, and Svetlana, a specialist in working with disabled children, spends Saturdays at Vikov, acting as a consultant. In 2008 we renovated one of the rooms to be used for classes and social activities and we take some of the young people on sanatorium holidays in the summer.

Humanitarian Aid Deliveries

In April 1995 we bought our first ambulance and Mags and Ken Whiting of Glossop agreed to drive it out to Belarus with an Irish convoy. From the day they arrived in Belarus Mags and Ken became committed and crucial members of the charity, going on to drive five more ambulances, lead four convoys and be an important part of all our work.

Our first articulated lorryload of aid went to Belarus in Autumn 1995, after being packed and loaded in our warehouse just outside Glossop. When we lost this warehouse in 1999 the focus of our aid collection moved to Selby in Yorkshire.

Mike Allison took over the organisation of the aid programme, including all the paperwork and planning for the aid trips as well as the intensive physical work

of collecting aid from various parts of the country, storing and sorting it in the warehouse at Selby and organising the loading teams for each trailer. By this stage we were taking four aid deliveries every year of two or three large lorries and a seven-and-a-half ton truck donated to us by KeyMed.

There is a great demand for aid from schools, children's homes, family associations and social services centres. And we are now being given more aid than ever before, much of it brand new and in large quantities from companies such as Ikea and Procter & Gamble. We take palettes of paint, paper and exercise books, cleaning materials and toiletries, nappies and clothes. We also take out a lot of wheelchairs and disability aids and sports and educational equipment.

None of this would be possible without the work of our aid team who provide, voluntarily, not just the impressive physical effort required in the loading of vehicles and making the long journey to Belarus but also, through activities and their own personal donation, much of the considerable funds to meet the ever increasing cost of convoys. Without their dedicated efforts the aid deliveries would have to cease.

We are particularly grateful for the support of David Campey for providing warehouse space for us for over 10 years; Paul Campey for his generosity in maintaining our vehicles; and Ian Lacey of Burton on Trent who has provided and driven his own truck to Belarus on more than a dozen occasions.

Integration of Children with Special Needs

Special School No 5 is a wonderful school in Gomel which we have supported for many years. When the Education Department expressed an interest in trying to integrate more physically disabled children into school we decided that School No 5 would be the best place to start. We brought the head teacher on an educational visit to Britain; persuaded the health department to pay for a neurologist to act as consultant for all the children in the school; put in ramps, disabled toilets, doors and carpets; and sent out a minibus, which was bought for us by the Celebrities Guild of Great Britain. From September 2004 a small class was set up for five children in wheelchairs and they have developed beyond all recognition.

For the first year we funded a classroom assistant until the education department took this over. And we continue to fund the driver and run the minibus. During the summer of 2007 we carried out building work to further improve the access within the school so that more children in wheelchairs could be integrated.

In 2009 a beautiful new school was built in Gomel with full access for children in wheelchairs. During the autumn we took specialist teacher Pamela Thompson from Abraham Moss School in Manchester and her former pupil Peter Keeley to Gomel. Pamela gave training to the staff and Peter was able to tell all those he met how much it had meant to him to be able to attend a

mainstream school. We will continue to work closely with School No 72 to help them to include physically disabled children.

Medical Support for the Children of Belarus

In 2008 we brought 8 year old Alessia Chueva to Alder Hey hospital for a major operation on her back. We are very grateful to surgeons Paul May and Neil Buxton who raised the funds for this and made a profound difference to Alessia's life. The chief surgeon from Gomel Regional Hospital came over to observe the operation. Alessia also had a shunt fitted and was catheterised to protect her kidneys.

Consultant urologist Malcolm Lucas visited Gomel and decided that urodynamic testing equipment was needed to improve the lives of children in the region. With support from KeyMed and Albyn Medical we were able to deliver this equipment in 2008 and provide training in its use.

Paediatricians Marie Owen, Hazel Padfield and Diana Jellinek have visited Belarus and given us valuable advice about how we can most effectively advocate for better medical care for some of the disabled children in the orphanages. And Dr Rosemary Newton has given training in epilepsy care and treatment. This has led to a project involving 20 families in Gomel which will take place throughout 2010 and is aimed at introducing effective rescue medication into Belarus.

We have groups in Aberystwyth, Blantyre, Bromley, Buxton & Longnor, Catterick, Cornwall, Craven, Endon & Stoke, Gloucester & Cheltenham, Glossopdale, Leeds, Liverpool, Lunesdale, Mid Essex, Monk Fryston, Newark & Retford, Rugby, Solihull, South Manchester, Teesdale, Totnes, Vale of Evesham and West Pennines. To find out more about your nearest group, or to help us start a new group, go to our website or ring Julie Gater, our Groups Co-ordinator.

Visit our website: www.chernobyl-children.org.uk. Secure Donations can be made online

We are very grateful to all the individual donors, businesses, local authorities, church and peace groups, our own group co-ordinators and host families, convoy drivers, sanatorium volunteers and professionals who have given so much time, energy and financial support to the children of Belarus. Special Thanks to Olympus KeyMed who have been our most generous supporters for many years – giving financial support, providing us with vehicles, sending medical equipment to Belarus and printing our calendars, cards and newsletters.

National Co-ordinator: Linda Walker 01457 862112 / 863534 07976 653610
Email: ccprojectuk@gmail.com

Aid Co-ordinator:	Mike Allison	01977 684632
Training Co-ordinator:	Jean Holt	01756 702196

National Treasurer: Catherine McElholm 07747 775218
Groups Co-ordinator: Julie Gater 07816 842322
Fund Raising Co-ordinator: Jan Baxter 01636 676545
Assistant Projects Co-ordinator: Beth Saffer 07966 285581

Trustees:

Mike Allison - 01977 684632
John Gater - 01782 535000
Mags Whiting - 01457 865805
Jean Holt - 01756702196

Consultants:

Dr. Marie Owen, Consultant Paediatrician;
Pat Marsh: Respite Care Adviser;
Peter Marks: Pharmacist;
John Costello: Palliative Care Consultant;
Rosemary Newton: Epilepsy Consultant;
Ian Fairlie: Consultant on Radiation in the Environment;
Brian Bennett: Diplomatic Consultant.

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Registered Office: Kinder House, Fitzalan Street, Glossop, Derbyshire SK13
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