

**Manx Links** ....a series in which Cheryl Cousins from the One World Centre talks to local people, who have lived or worked in the developing world, about remarkable people they have met!

Well, we've done it, for another year... Christmas has passed and we can return to the "normality" of life again! But for Avril Dixon of Bride, her planning for Christmas 2007 has already begun!

Avril is the Island's coordinator for Operation Christmas Child, locally known as the "Shoe Box Appeal". I met Avril earlier this month, the day after she had sent out her last consignment of the Islands 3600 plus shoe boxes. These boxes were starting their long journey across the world, from the Isle of Man to Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe. Brightly coloured boxes, wrapped with love from anonymous Manx donators, packed up at the ware house in Douglas and, courtesy of the Manx Co op, loaded onto a wagon returning to England. These boxes, holding a huge variety of small treasures, were on their way to join the 1.1 million plus boxes from the UK; gifts to some of the millions of deprived children of this world.

For many of us, Christmas can seem the last straw that breaks the burdened camel. Why then would anyone want to multiply that burden by some 3000 extra presents?! For Avril, the connections all began through a meeting with Georgina McLaurin a local WI speaker who mentioned a girl called Florica. Florica who lives in Romania, is the same age as Avril's Daughter, Faith, but Florica has a very different life style. She lives in a Romanian institution because she suffers from cerebral palsy. Avril was moved to make contact with her, to write, to send small gifts and finally in 1996 to visit her together with her daughter Faith.

One connection was completed, but another began. Seeing the poverty, and the conditions in "orphanages", Avril started collecting shoe boxes for Romania through her work in St. Paul's Bookshop. After a couple of years the sheer logistics of 600+ boxes coming in during the busy Christmas season led her to join Carol Outlaw's team and continue her work through Operation Christmas Child, a charity that works in 15 different countries in the world, but predominantly in Romania where their work began.

Avril was invited to join a distribution trip to Russia in 2005 to see for herself the completion of the project. Shoe boxes were to be given out on January 7<sup>th</sup>, Russia's old Christmas day, and Avril was able to witness how the network linked the hundreds of Manx children and adults who had searched out these small gifts, knitted the hats, mittens and scarves, and packed their individual boxes, to the children living in situations that are so far from our own levels of "normality". Children in orphanages and schools, children known to church and community leaders, children living abandoned in railway carriages, living underground around water pipes, living beside rubbish dumps, suffering abuse, deprivation and illness.

In the time of Ceaușescu's Romania large families were actively encouraged, to help produce the workforce needed in the factories and fields. Child labour still continues across the world and in the old communist states. Children have the lowest pay, the worst conditions and the fewest rights of the workforce. Working children are at a higher risk of injury, illness, disablement and death because of their increased vulnerability. Most children who work full time do it to help their families... but child labour doesn't pay. They only add 10% to the family's income, yet that fraction can make the difference between living and dying. Every year though 22.000 children worldwide do die, as a result of child labour. These children are deprived of the simple joys of childhood and forced into a life of drudgery

Avril's Russian translator, Enna, represents for her the huge team of committed people working all year round in the "receiving" countries to enable Operation Christmas Child to do much more than "just" give that one box on Christmas day. Operation Christmas child is only part of the work of Samaritan's Purse, a Christian charity that seeks to meet the critical needs of victims of war, poverty, famine, disease and natural disasters. Enna works for Russia Inland. They and the other partner organisations work through respected church and community leaders who take applications for the Christmas boxes. These are matched against the number of boxes available; distributors are accountable for every box. Each year the boxes are sent to children in orphanages and poor communities who have not received a box before, so that sometimes this gift is the only present a child will receive in their entire childhood. Enna's work is hard and ongoing. Often their first link with needy families is through the simple act of giving out a box of treasures to a child. It symbolises trust to people who are embittered by life, having lost trust in humanity.

Avril witnessed the smiles of wonder as children were presented with their boxes. The noise, the excitement, the sheer wow factor! Anya, a six year old placed in an orphanage as her mother had no money for food, immediately pulls on the pink scarf, hat and gloves. For children who have never had access to any toys, the hats and small items of clothing are the things they identify with first... then the coloured line of felt tip pens, note pads, the tentative exploration into the small plastic toys & cars. The identification with soft toys though, that demand love from a child who has never experienced love, comes later. Avril watches the tears of joy in the eyes of parents and staff as they see their children receive the gifts they themselves can not give them. And later, when the noise and excitement has receded she sees the small amazing gesture, Olga offering her a sweet from the only packet of sweets she is likely to ever have,

For Enna and other partner teams this moment of celebration is often the start of a long term programme of outreach. The shoe box can sometimes symbolise the catalyst needed for social fear and stigma to break down e.g. it has been noted that the gift of a shoe box can bring a sense of self worth that helps a child to return to a feeding centre or an educational programme. Parents witness this small gesture of acceptance and love and the

first links in building the chain of communication and trust are established; a chain that could help them to become involved in a self help or income generating schemes. Some volunteers who work for the receiver charities were themselves once children who received a box that helped them to step beyond the deprivation and hopelessness of life they had previously encountered.

Numerous individuals, churches and schools, groups and government departments create their own boxes each year to be sent off the Island.

Although a Christian charity, the shoe boxes are not accompanied with Christian literature unless requested by the country receiving the boxes, these boxes are given unconditionally.

If you would like to know more about the work of Operation Christmas child, or would like to be involved with the team of volunteers who work on the Island, please contact Avril Dixon on 813491 or email her on; [avril@manx.net](mailto:avril@manx.net)... she is already collecting for next year!