

News from Sterling Heights, Warren, Center Line
Wednesday, July 20, 2005



Ukrainian orphans show off pillows they decorated as part of the Ukrainian Children's Aid and Relief Effort's "Hearts for Art" program.

Project gives orphans an art cushion

Warren-area residents' venture has Ukrainian children painting with a creative flourish.

By Ken Marten / Special to the Detroit News

Hearts for Art

WARREN -- American children routinely create art in preschool. With watercolors or paint-by-numbers kits readily available at any dollar store, the joy of finger-painting is within easy reach.

A group of Metro Detroiters brought the same gift of art to hundreds of orphans in Ukraine, many of whom had never painted. The five volunteers are part of Ukrainian Children's Aid and Relief

Effort (UCARE), a nonprofit humanitarian group that routinely delivers aid to Ukrainian orphanages and provides scholarships for older orphans.

"We make at least one distribution trip a year," said Vera Petrusa, UCARE founder and Detroit chapter president. "We also have volunteers who work in summer camps for orphans every year."

Most of the Detroit chapter's 30 members live in Sterling Heights, Warren and Troy, along with thousands of other Ukrainian descendants. They include Warren resident Roma Remeniuk, a graphic artist who has helped design UCARE brochures and T-shirts and organize fund-raisers.

"It's rewarding to put my hard work into a good cause," Remeniuk said. "My heart and soul say 'help out and support the orphans any which way we can.'"

Three Chicago chapter volunteers and three UCARE scholarship recipients joined Petrusa and the other members for the 11-day trip. With two minivans and a freight truck, they visited six of Ukraine's approximately 300 government-run orphanages.

On the most recent trip, UCARE launched its "Hearts for Art" program. Volunteers gave orphans partially completed heart-shaped pillows. The orphans stuffed them with fiber fill -- the volunteers told them it represented their hopes and dreams -- and sewed them shut. In exchange, the orphans created paintings for the volunteers with art supplies donated by an Austrian company.

"When we saw the impact of the hearts, we just melted," said Petrusa. "I didn't expect such a strong reaction from the children. Their smiles were contagious."

The orphans painted houses, rainbows, trees and flowers, ships at sea and butterflies. Younger kids smeared paint on paper while some of the teens painted the Ukrainian flag.

"The kids just loved what they were doing," said UCARE board member Peggy Lynch of Birmingham. "They just opened up like flowers. Many of the children had never painted before. It was amazing to see their reaction to having the freedom to create art."

UCARE volunteers will select about 50 paintings to be framed and sold at gallery shows around the country this fall. The showings will serve to draw attention to the orphans' plight, while profits will be used to purchase more supplies that will be distributed on a future trip. "As a graphic artist, I just looked at all the artwork and it just floored me," said Remeniuk, who helped with the selection process. "So many were really detailed, even those made by the younger orphans. There were almost too many to pick from."

"Our goal is to raise more funds here and purchase supplies in Ukraine," Petrusa said. "That avoids dealing with customs. It also puts money into the Ukrainian economy."

The volunteers spent several nights in the orphanages to gain perspective and to determine future needs. They slept in swayback beds, showered in moldy bathrooms and ate food with questionable nutritional value.

The hardship was worth it, said Olga Liskiwskyi, the Detroit chapter treasurer.

"We have a direct and positive impact on these children," Liskiwskyi said

Ken Marten is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.

UCARE plans to make a Hearts for Art presentation at the Ukrainian Sunflower Festival in Warren, Aug. 12-14. Visit www.ucareinc.org.