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

Volunteers exchange hearts for orphans' art

Nonprofit, headed locally by a Troy woman, travels to Ukraine to introduce painting to kids.

TROY -- American children finger-paint in preschool. A set of watercolors or paint-by-numbers kit can be bought at any dollar store.

But the chance to paint a picture opened the hearts of hundreds of orphans in Ukraine, many of whom had never painted, when five Metro Detroiters visited them in May.

They're volunteers with Ukrainian Children's Aid & Relief Effort, a nonprofit group with chapters in Detroit and Chicago that routinely delivers humanitarian aid to Ukrainian orphanages and provides older orphans with scholarships.

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

Three Chicago chapter volunteers and three UCARE scholarship recipients joined Petrusha 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.

A typical trip involves delivering necessities like clothing and shoes, interviewing orphans and staff to assess future needs and teaching teenage orphans about the dangers of AIDS.

But on this trip, UCARE launched its "Hearts for Art" program. Volunteers gave orphans partially completed heart-shaped pillows. The orphans stuffed them with Fiberfill -- 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," Petrusha said. "I didn't expect such a strong reaction from the children. Their smiles were contagious."

The orphans painted images of 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 -- a blue field over a yellow field.

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

UCARE volunteers, most of whom live in Troy, Sterling Heights and Warren, are sifting through the paintings and will select approximately 50 to be framed and sold at gallery shows around the country this fall.

Notepaper and cards will also be made from some of the paintings. The showings will serve to draw attention to the orphans' plight, while profits will be used to purchase more orphanage supplies that will be distributed on a future trip. "Our goal is to raise more funds here and purchase supplies in Ukraine," Petrusha said. "That avoids dealing with customs. It also puts money into the Ukrainian economy."

Petrusha said UCARE typically raises approximately \$20,000 before every trip, and purchasing supplies in Ukraine is easier than trying to bring truckloads across the border. Delays and theft at customs offices are common, she said.

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 the additional time spent with the orphans, said Detroit chapter Treasurer Olga Liskiivskyi of Lathrup Village.

"We have a direct and positive impact on these children," Liskiivskyi said. "My father was an orphan, and it's always been an undercurrent in his life. The kindness of strangers is what made his life livable."

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.