

Update 4, written Jan. 13, 2016

9 Homes and the hospital - Maybe I shouldn't even try to write an update today because I haven't yet been able to sort out my thoughts or name all my feeling...all I know is that yesterday was amazing. Of all the events that have happened in the past 30 days – for me, yesterday was the most special. Nothing really major happened, yet everything is different now because I got to go inside. I got to go inside their homes and inside their lives. But let me back up a bit...

On the 26th, Tanya K. (leader of the special needs ministry) and the church put on a special program for the special needs kids. Our church has a puppet ministry and they told the Christmas story. Then, Father Frost and his niece 'Snow' showed up. A generous local donor (his son has Down's) gave sufficient funds that every child received a gift. About 90 families came.

It was my first big event and I enjoyed taking it in. My job was to take photos, which I did with pleasure. Tanya K. was a bit disappointed at the low turn out, as she had invited over 150. A few days later she was on the phone again to invite the special needs families back on Jan 6th – Christmas Eve Day.

A group from Germany team up with some Americans and many Ukrainian Christians and spend several days going around Ukraine sharing the Christmas Story and giving out a German version of Samaritan Shoe Boxes. I don't know any more than that. You could tell they were tired when they arrived but they did a great job before moving on to their next stop.

Again I was busy taking photos. A little over 100 families came. Many families could not attend for various reasons – out of town, illness, transportation problems etc. But, wonderfully, the German group left 20 additional gifts. Over the next few days, parents dropped by the church to pick up the gift Tanya was holding for their child. This gave Tanya the opportunity to touch base with them as well as speak into their lives. But, as of Monday, 10 gifts remained...and that brings me to yesterday.

Tanya told me that she planned to deliver the gifts (by foot) over the next week. I asked if I could arrange for transportation and go with her? That sounded great to her so from 1 to 9pm yesterday we drove around town delivering 10 presents.

Tanya knows each family...it wasn't her first time at each house. Most welcomed us with open arms but 2 families remain tentative because we represent the Baptist Church, which is considered a cult by many here.

As the situation allowed, Tanya created the possibility for them to share. Oh my. I've served in Ukraine this many years and still some of their stories shock

me. Real live..happening right now...hard, ugly and overwhelming.

And right there in that difficult place I saw Tanya shine. Gentle, confident, kind, truthful, unhurried, uncomplicated, serious yet joyful...Tanya shared the Good News message. I have not ever seen it done as I watched it done over and over again yesterday.

I thought highly of her before but yesterday my respect for Tanya soared. Inside, my heart was singing and thanking God! Once again He has brought me alongside side an amazing child of His and I get the privilege of working with her.

Our last stop was at the Infection wing of the town hospital. Vera was staying with her 6 yr. old daughter Vitalina who has the flu. The situation is harder for them then most as Vitalina's temp. was difficult to keep under control and her physical problems prevent good coughing and treating her symptoms well.

Surprised that we would come so late, Vera met us near the entrance, we exchanged happy hugs and she gave us an update. Vitlaina was doing a little better. We prayed right there in the hall, gave her Vitalina's gift and left because it was 9pm and visiting hours were over.

I dropped into bed at 10 – very tired and extremely happy. For how fun the day was, for the chance to get inside some lives and for God bringing me here and for the privilege of getting to work with Tanya.

And all those other days in between - Nope I didn't wait up until midnight on the 31st. I just snuggled down deeper between my flannel sheets when the neighbors greeted the New Year with fireworks.

On the 1st a special gift arrived to visit for a few days. We met over 10 years ago when we were both missionaries in Crimea and I've counted Jody as a friend ever since.

On the 2nd, Sveta (our neighbor) and I threw a big party for Jamie's 65th birthday. Complete with about 35 guests during the course of the day, meal, cake, presents and games.

On the 7th we celebrated Christmas. The church service was not quite 3 hours long with 3 sermons, lots of great songs and a skit by the Sunday School kids.

On the 8th, Jamie and I went to the church potluck. I didn't know what to expect but it was fun too. Besides food, there was singing, a chance to get to meet new folks, games and prayer.

Getting to know them – Chocolate chip cookies go over here really well so I decided to make some to give away over the holidays. As I walked into the church

I spotted the lady I wanted to give one of the packages to. So I shot over and handed her my gift. And, about 2 minutes into our conversation I realized that I had given it to the wrong person.

Oh dear...what to do? Well you don't take it back so I continued on like everything was fine and then went on up to the main sanctuary. About an hour later, I came back down stairs for something and there is that lady with my cookies. Standing with her was one of the church guards (Glina -a feisty grandma who has already become a favorite). Glina stopped me and asks, 'You didn't mean to give Sveta these cookies did you?' Caught red handed, I confessed that I had confused her with another.

Now, a few weeks later, I am SO glad I made that mistake because Sveta is such a kind and oh so quiet soul, I don't know that I would have met her another way. Every Sunday since we have exchanged hugs. The magical wonders of chocolate!!

White Christmas – As the calendar turned over, so did our weather. Our coldest temp was 23F but then it warmed up and snow started falling on the 5th. By Christmas (7th) we had a couple fluffy inches. At one point last week we had nearly 8 inches! I realize I am not wow-ing a lot of people but as a kid who grew up in the Willamette Valley (where no school due to snow days could be counted with 1 finger) I am very impressed with the weather here.

I have been blessed to have the best of it all – snowy weather, a warm home and an experienced driver...which is great because the forecast calls for more of the same for next two weeks.

Someone has been praying....

- * I am remembering names! Gosh that is huge for me!
- * Stepping out of my comfort zone and doing things like accepting spontaneous invitations, attending evening events and making the first move to establish a relationship...all kind of weird behavior for me.
- * My health....doing great in this area...despite the flu season

THANK YOU for your prayers!!

Blessings,

June