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A V.M.D. Accomplishing Change in Moldova

by Douglas L. Bowman, V77

Moldova. Where in the world is Moldova? Moldova is a small country the size of Maryland tucked between Romania and Ukraine in Eastern Europe with a population of 4.5 million. Moldova was one of the 15 republics of the former Soviet Union (FSU). Currently, almost half of the population is directly employed in agriculture, which is beginning to be redeveloped after the collapse of the FSU, and the country has the dubious distinction of being the poorest country in Europe. Moldova-Basarabia has historically been a crossroads and something of a political football with few periods of independence separated by long eras of occupation by Greeks, Romans, Cossacks, Russians, Turks, Germans, and Soviets.

My wife, Mary, and I chose this time in our lives to join the Peace Corps because we felt a responsibility to be of service to people in a broader realm, and we were looking for the challenge and adventure of living in a different culture while learning a new language. The goals of the Peace Corps, which have remained unchanged for 40 years, matched our current interests: to transfer technical information and processes to host country nationals; to expose people in other countries to Americans and American ideas; and to take information and our impressions about the host country back to America to broaden understandings of the peoples of the world.

On the surface, very little of my veterinary training is applicable to the work that I am doing in the Peace Corps. The things that are applicable include skills developed in learning how to learn, skills in problem solving, and experience in making decisions in the face of uncertainty with imperfect information.

How will we ever know what we have accomplished? Maybe we accomplish nothing more than showing people in Moldova that Americans are not the monsters that the Soviets ascribed to us. Maybe we have the chance to make a change in attitudes about the United States; maybe we help someone grow in problem solving skills; maybe we just show people in Moldova that all Americans don't live in Beverly Hills and act like that. We never know what may come of living and working in

another culture, closely associating with the host country people. Will I be able to implant an idea in a child, or a more appropriate attitude in a worker? As they say in Moldova, *Vom vedea*, "we shall see."

It is funny how we think of ourselves in America as "normal" just the way we are.

Mary and I went to a celebration in a small village and ate a meal with the peasants of the village. We were the first Americans that they had ever seen and the comments were interesting, "The Americans learned our language." "They are people just like us." And the most telling thing was the report of a woman coming the following day to the home we had visited asking to "see the Americans." The Soviets had portrayed Americans as monsters for so long that many people came to believe it was true.

As I write this, a 77-year-old man came into the room where I am working just to say hello, shake my hand, and wish me a Happy New Year. I was the first American he had met, and I was invited to his home for a meal. As we ate, he just kept repeating that he never expected to be eating with an American, much less in his own home!

Living and working in Moldova is full of contrasts and contradictions. Walking down the street, everyone you see is dressed well and looks prosperous, yet no one takes off their fancy clothes at work because there is no heat in many of the work places, or if there is heat,

the temperature may be only 50 degrees. (These fancy clothes may be the only set that they have.) Utilities may be interrupted at any time and usually in a random fashion with no clear explanation for why the electricity was off for three, four or five hours. We currently have water at the spigot twice a week for four hours, unless we don't, which again is a

random event. The state-run electric utility cuts the power to the state-run water company for its failure to pay its electric bill because the state hasn't transferred money to the water company account. Maybe this makes sense to someone?

I came to work here in the field of dairy

production, and currently most of the cows are family cows; each peasant family may have a cow and occasionally two. These cows usually give 10-15 liters of milk per day when there is grass in the communal pasture, which is shared with herds of sheep and goats. In the winter, milk production falls as the cows are fed dry corn stalks, wheat

straw, and some concentrate. My current projects include starting an alfalfa-seeding program for the farmers, designing rations to feed the cows using products on hand, and an artificial insemination project to improve the long-term productivity of the dairy herd in Moldova.

There are just so many possibilities as this young country moves toward a market-based economy while resources are so scarce. The people are wonderfully generous with what they have. Patience in dealing with frustrations combined with a good sense of humor has been the keys to living and working here in Moldova.

The Peace Corps is a good way to spend two years working with some interesting, exceptional people. Go ahead; join the Peace Corps. We dare you to try something different. The Peace Corps is the toughest job you'll ever love!

Since 1961, more than 150,000 Americans have volunteered in more than 130 countries. They all responded to President John F. Kennedy's challenge: how many of them, he asked, would be willing to serve their country and the cause of peace by living and working in the developing world? For more information on the Peace Corps, visit www.peacecorps.gov. Dr. Bowman may be reached via e-mail at airbowman@hotmail.com.



This woman is 73-years-old and is using a wood fired oven to bake "placinta" which is a type of bread stuffed with something like potatoes, cheese, cabbage, or cherries.

"We felt a responsibility to be of service."