

## People, Places and Things

# Moldova in the age of innocence

By MARK GILCHRIST  
Special to The News Reporter

When the Peace Corps asked me to spend two years helping people in the Republic of Moldova, I accepted the assignment immediately, as this small, Eastern European country has had a special relationship for nearly two decades with North Carolina and Columbus County.

Southeastern Community College and area residents have hosted about 230 Moldovans in their homes and communities, and I have heard only beautiful things from everyone who had met them.

So, in June, I boarded a plane at JFK Airport with nearly 70 other Peace Corps volunteers from around the U.S., and we flew to Moldova. We lived in several dozen guest homes around the capital in June and July as we learned about Peace Corps policies, about safety and health practices, and about how to speak a little Romanian, the official language of Moldova.

Okay, we learned very little Romanian. In the past five decades, the Peace Corps around the world has developed an intense curriculum for language studies, but in the past four months, I have developed an intense headache over just how complicated languages are.

To make things even more complicated, many people in this country, wedged between the new Europe and the old Russia, speak only Russian or Ukrainian.

So, then, in late July, in a room filled with our new Moldovan partners, and about a dozen reporters and cameramen, we were sworn in as the 30th group of volunteers in 23 years of the Peace Corps in Moldova.

Then we went to the cities and villages that we would call home for the next two years, and I now live in a city named Riscani ("Rish-cahn"). I doubt the Peace Corps planned it this way, but my new hometown reminds me of Columbus County, in size and population, and in that we have a small college, a large lake and river, and we're right on a border (with Romania).

I work with government and non-government groups on projects to improve the economy and my community. Well, I will work with them, as I haven't done much yet, other than help translate a grant application and become the office's unofficial photographer, and I won't for a few months.

The United States has been involved in helping other countries for decades, and has learned a great deal. I suppose that some of the deeds we had done, such as the very successful Berlin Airlift, had us storming impoverished areas with engineers and volunteers building things and giving away things that we thought people needed. This accomplished plenty of good, but also left behind much that would ultimately be neglected by the host countries due to lack of need or interest.

So, U.S. aid organizations, including the Peace Corps, now stress two very important concepts for our projects; First, that the initiative must come from the host people.

Let's say that I see a vacant lot here, and I think it would be a great place for a playground. So, I find some funding, and I talk several local people into helping me build a beautiful playground.

But then, we learn that few people actually wanted a playground right there, and the equipment I installed wasn't what they wanted. So, no one uses the playground, no one cares for it and maintains it, and in a decade, it's broken, run down, and an eyesore.

Second, the project must be sustainable, and this works hand-in-hand with the initiative concept. So, instead of me jumping into a project, I will spend a lot of time talking with people

here, and if I listen to them well enough, they will tell me what they need.

After they build that thing they need – with my help if they want it – they will certainly use it more, and will care for it more.

Some things I might not do? Actually build that thing myself, for example, as there is plenty of qualified labor here. Also, even though I might find grants or donations for such a project, we are careful not to become volunteer ATMs.

Some things I might do? Spread the American perspective, knowledge base and vision. I might guide them on safety measures Americans have developed for equipment, for example. For sustainability, I might help set up a maintenance fund.

I might also be able to infect them with a little of the American Dream, helping them to think big and make bolder moves.

So, we can't just jump into our projects, but in the meantime, I am working on organizing existing programs for youths here. Many international groups have organized youth competitions and programs in science, business, volunteering and computers, and there are plenty of libraries here that can use help entering the 21st century.

If I get working on a project that needs funds, I may set up an online Peace Corps Partnership Program account, which is the only way we volunteers can officially solicit donations from the public. It's like Kickstarter, but we follow federal guidelines to account for the use of every penny donated.

Another Peace Corps program is World Wise Schools, and I would like to team up with a few Columbus County teachers to share a bit of Moldova with their students.

As Peace Corps posts go, Moldova is pretty nice. I live with a host mother to help me integrate with the community, and after two months using an outhouse, I now have an indoor toilet and shower.

I have stores nearby with all the groceries I would need if my host mother didn't feed me so well. It's not life in a grass hut with a three-mile walk to the drinking well, but we do work with poverty every day.

The best I can describe it is that the Soviets worked very hard to break the spirit of the people here, and while they couldn't break it, they certainly fractured it.

Imagine working on a factory floor for decades, and then trying to start your own business – it would be very unusual for you to really believe that you could succeed on your own, and to act like an ambitious entrepreneur.

Success might be possible, but you wouldn't know about advertising and marketing, for example. Under Soviet control, there was no need to advertise, and there were no non-government newspapers. Two decades later, store owners are loathe to promote their businesses.

If you need to hire someone in my city, you tape signs on trees.

The situation was described very well in a movie by British author and actor Tony Hawks.

"For more than half a century, we have been like caged birds," a Moldovan character says. "Now the cage is open, but we don't know how to fly."

That movie is from the book of the same name; "Playing the Moldovans at Tennis". The plot? Hawks bets a friend that he can beat all of the players on the Moldovan soccer team at tennis, and he spends several

weeks here diving into the Moldovan culture and trying to win his bet.

Funny movie, and free on Netflix. Sweetest part is that Hawks grew to love the Moldovans (easy to do) and is donating profits from the movie to build a facility here for children with disabilities.

I have always been treated honestly here. But then, I have found in my travels that poor people can be trusted; it's the ones with money who

will try to take more of it from you. Hitchhiking is an accepted form of transportation here.

The Moldovans I have met seem very innocent. I remember a fellow volunteer

shaking her head, bewildered. She noted how even older teenage boys just don't seem to have the ambition for achievements or even mischief. "They would just sit there and make figures out of Popsicle sticks," she said.

Recreational opportunities are very rare. There isn't much for children to do here other than attend school, work in the family garden, and surf the Internet in one of the best connected countries in the world.

That character in Hawk's movie, a teenage boy, also said; "We will leave Moldova as soon as we can." That is a major concern here, as once they learn to fly, many will fly away. The World Health Organization reported a decrease in the population here of 10-percent from 2002 -2013, attributable, many say, to people leaving the country for higher wages.

Moldova is the poorest country in Europe, and has a high rate of alcohol consumption. The legal age for drinking here is 18, but the BAC limit for driving is .03 percent.

A recent study showed that half of Moldovan men smoke, while women here are far less addicted. Cigarettes are everywhere, costing the equivalent of about 50 cents to a buck a pack, and once disposable incomes increase, so will the rate of tobacco use, history has shown.

This is how I am concerned for the future of Moldova, such a beautiful country of such beautiful people. Imagine coddling a child throughout its teen years and sending it out into the world having never faced adversity. Moldova has a giant, soft, white underbelly in so many ways, and will be a prime target.

Rural Americans have felt similar pressures as they are targeted by junk-food restaurant chains, beer and liquor companies, gambling businesses and drug dealers.

Young Moldovans are already in the snare, with the country being one of the richest sources in the world, per capita, for human trafficking. Lured by promises of high-paying jobs abroad, young men end up in labor camps, and young women are exploited for sex.

Another Soviet hangover, corruption is on everybody's minds here. Every Moldovan I have asked, firmly believes that the government is corrupt, always has been corrupt, and always will be.

Lake Waccamaw Town Manager Harry Foley, who has visited Moldova and has befriended many Moldovans, told me in an email recently that when he was here in 2000, corruption was obvious, even on the streets.

"Cops on every corner stopping our van to extract a 'fee' (bribe)," Foley stated. "Our State Department Liaison explained this was standard practice and the 'fee' had been calculated into the van rental fee."

That situation has im-



## Sen. Smith

Continued from previous page

afford it.

If people had insurance and were able to have regular checkups, problems could be found earlier instead of waiting to go to the emergency room (which is the most expensive care) and find out they had stage 4 colon cancer, for example, which might have been detected earlier otherwise. Preventive care is much cheaper than paying for serious health problems that might have been caught earlier and cured. I'm hopeful some of these issues will come back before us for more discussion

next year.

The guidance and advice I received from my fellow colleagues in the Senate and House during my freshman year is very much appreciated and I look forward to working with each one when we return.

My goal has always been to help the people of Robeson and Columbus counties and that is my focus in the Senate. I feel that I was able to do that and look forward to continuing that effort when we return April 25, 2016 to complete the business of the 2015-2016 session.

## Meteorologist at Teen Science Cafe

October's Open Minds Teen Science Café (OMTSC) features Steve Pfaff, warning coordination meteorologist (WCM) with the National Weather Service in Wilmington who will talk about his experiences as a meteorologist.

Pfaff will also share his interest in severe and tropical meteorology, more specifically the tornado.

He will discuss career options in meteorology, education requirements and instrumentation and tools that meteorologists use. Learn how important this technology is for public safety and preparedness, especially regarding severe weather

patterns.

The program, on Friday, Oct. 16, starts at 5 p.m. at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville, 415 S. Madison Street.

Teens should be picked up at the museum no later than 7 p.m.

The Open Minds Teen Science Cafe monthly programs are free. Snacks will be provided. This nationwide program, whose Whiteville node is currently funded by the Friends of the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville, is starting its fourth year of free STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics) based programs for teens.

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