

# Woman won't rest until every orphan has a clean bed\_110804

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Residents of Moldovan orphanages are getting a chance to learn a trade by making beds thanks to Sweet Sleep, an organization that partners with Houston-based Christian Emergency Relief, International, the overseas outreach of BGCT's Baptist Child & Family Services.

# Woman won't rest until every orphan has a clean bed

**By Craig Bird**

*Baptist Child & Family Services*

HOUSTON—Jen Gash wondered if God brought her halfway around the world—from Nashville, Tenn., to Chisinau, Moldova—just to break her heart.

She reeled from the stench of the unwashed children and their tattered and soiled mattresses. She wept over the empty, young eyes pleading for affection. She staggered to comprehend the vast needs she saw in the government orphanage in Chisinau. She fell asleep each night asking God what he wanted her to do.

And she woke up each morning with the same question on her lips.



Jen Gash and one of the boys from a Moldovan orphanage that inspired her to team with Baptist Child & Family Services to launch Sweet Sleep to provide clean new beds for the children. (Shawn Pierce Photo)

Every day, she sat on the beds with the children, telling them Bible stories,

sharing hugs and smiles.

One afternoon, "I felt another piece of my heart break when I saw a boy named Mihak put a piece of pizza we had bought him under his pillow," she remembered. "I finally began to hear and understand more of my calling in Moldova and really in the world."

That's when she envisioned Sweet Sleep, a grassroots effort to provide "clean, warm beds to sleep in and feel loved and protected in." Her first goal was to provide beds for the orphans of Moldova, but her larger aim is to help "all the orphans in the world."

Sweet Sleep partners with Houston-based Christian Emergency Relief, International, the group that sponsored her trip to Moldova. CERI is the overseas outreach of Baptist Child & Family Services, an agency of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Mihak didn't hide his pizza between just any old torn mattress and dirty pillow.

Beds in Moldovan orphanages are World II remnants. Exhausted frames warp, and brittle springs sag beneath the weight of the two children who usually share them. Many beds don't even have a mattress, and the children use 15-year-old blankets to protect themselves from the harsh springs.

When they're available, the two-inch-thick mattresses are up to 40 years old. They're soiled from the slumber of hundreds of children, many of them bed-wetters, none of them allowed to bathe more than once a week. When the weather allows, the mattresses hang outside to dry, but they're never washed. Sheets and pillowcases are the stuff of dreams.

The night Gash received her vision, CERI Executive Director Steve Davis led a devotional. A woman asked God to give the children "sweet sleep."

And Gash began to cry—but this time not in frustration and pain, but because she felt the clear answer to her prayers.

That night, in her private devotions, Gash felt God bring the phrase back to her, telling her she should help provide safe, clean places for his children in Moldova to sleep.

Soon after returning to Nashville, Gash founded Sweet Sleep and began working to answer God's call.

During her first day home, someone gave her a check for \$30. Two women in her office said their husbands wanted to go to Moldova on the next trip, but they weren't sure they could do anything. One was a carpenter; the other an experienced handyman.

Gash took that as a sign and began to spread the word: Sweet Sleep wanted to provide 600 beds at a cost of \$100 each.

At first, she tried to set up contracts with Moldovan companies to produce the beds. “But God had bigger plans,” she said.

CERI and Sweet Sleep expanded their project. They set up a vocational training program, so that Moldovan Christians could teach the older orphan boys about carpentry and mentor them, all the while building the beds.

CERI provides the tools, and Sweet Sleep provides the materials, mattresses, mattress covers, blankets and pillows.

In August, Gash returned to Moldova.

And despite her own misgivings about being able to put together a team to start the project (“I can't even get anybody to go to Gatlinburg to look at the leaves in fall,” she claims), 19 volunteers had signed up.

They included people she never met, recruited through CERI or through

the Sweet Sleep website to visit the tiny Eastern Europe country. They traveled from Kansas City and San Antonio, as well as from Rome, Italy, and Burma.

And when they were done, they all left vowing to return as soon as possible.

Gash and her volunteers realized their endeavor is about more than a vastly improved place to sleep.



Moldova has 27 government orphanages.

“Most of us take for granted the refuge and comfort we feel when we are safe in our own bed,” Gash pointed out. “Yet for most of these children, a bed is the closest thing they have to a hug. It is when they are their most vulnerable and when they are the most alone with their thoughts.

“God let me sense the need to make certain these children understand they are loved. I do not believe most of them know how beautiful and cared about and loved they are. They have never considered the love of a heavenly Father who will always provide, always love, always be there for them.

“A safe, clean bed is a reminder of this amazing truth for those children who have accepted Christ as Savior (as 12 did from her first group of 16)

and who will grow in their faith as well as for those who will come to know Jesus later as CERI continues to work in Moldova.”

The children need all the reminders of God's love they can get.

Moldova, the size of Maryland, has 27 government orphanages. The one in Chisinau has 700 residents. But the facility is poorly heated in the bitterly cold winters. Food is limited. Children get two shirts, one pair of pants and one pair of socks each year, plus one pair of shoes every-other year. No winter hats, coats or gloves.

At age 18, they are discharged with no help, no job. Ten percent of the young people who are discharged commit suicide within a year. Of the boys, 70 percent wind up in jail or join a gang or the Mafia. Of the girls, 70 percent reportedly are sold or forced into prostitution—half by their own families, friends or acquaintances.

A Christian Moldovan carpenter headed up the Sweet Sleep kick-off project last summer. He is an active member of Jesus Savior Baptist Church in Chisinau, and he continues to supervise the work.

Like all Baptist Child & Family Services programs and partnerships, the bed-building project works toward several goals at once. In addition to building beds, the young apprentices are placed in a situation where they can succeed but have to work.

Arthur is typical. The 16-year-old has “aged out” of the orphanage. Gash signed up a transition sponsor for him and 20 other orphans. The sponsor provides one-half of his monthly living expenses. His salary, \$10 for each bed he builds, pays the other half of his living expenses and provides funds for his savings account. Unknown to him, his sponsor also makes regular deposits into his savings account.

Over time, the number of beds he is asked to build will be scaled back, so

he will need to seek other carpentry work to generate more income. Eventually, he will be completely on his own, and other apprentices will take over the bed-building. When that happens, he will learn about the sponsor-funded savings.

Vicilli is another success story—even though he can't be trained as a carpenter. He has epilepsy, and Moldovan law forbids anyone who suffers seizures from operating power equipment. Beyond that, society in general considers epileptics to be mentally handicapped and incapable of paid labor. But the Sweet Sleep program has hired Vicilli to keep the supplies stocked and do the sanding and staining, jobs that don't require power tools.

“Imagine what that means to him,” Gash challenges. “Here is a boy who chose to live at the orphanage rather than with his parents because they beat him so severely that his scalp is deeply scarred. And now he has Christians loving him in the name of Jesus.”

Then she expands the vision from a single boy to all the youth of the country.

“Imagine these very teens who see such a bleak future today but who will soon have hope because of what God is able to show them and imprint on their hearts as they learn a skill that will one day enable them to provide food and a way of life,” she says.

“Imagine them with a sense of purpose, a sense of accomplishment and a sense of love they will feel for the first time in their lives—which will lead to a hope that will make an eternal difference in their lives.”

Gash, a member of Brentwood Baptist Church in Franklin, Tenn., has raised about half the \$60,000 she needs to reach her first goal of 600 beds for the Moldovan government orphanages.

Now she's working on clearing her calendar so she can spend six weeks in Moldova between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day 2005.

“Moldova and Sweet Sleep is pretty much all God has been doing in my life for the past year and a half,” she acknowledges.

“I have many prayers for these children and for the work God is doing and will continue to do through all of the hands and feet he has activated for Moldova.

“I have prayers for the girls to learn how to sew the bedding, giving them the same opportunities and hope as the bed-building gives the boys.

“As the New Testament says, 'Nothing is impossible.'”

*For more about Sweet Sleep, visit its website at <http://www.sweetsleep.org>.*

*For more about Baptist Child & Family Services, visit <http://bcfs.net>.*

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