

ETBU Tigers work at camp in Ukraine, not far from Chernobyl disaster

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MARSHALL—Five East Texas Baptist University football players and Head Coach Mark Sartain served a week in Eastern Europe this summer, working at Open Doors Christian Camp just outside Chernigov, Ukraine.

The trip was designed to allow the ETBU Tigers to help renovate a camp dormitory while also interacting with youth at the former Soviet-era Communist youth indoctrination facility.

Former East Texas Baptist University offensive tackle Michael Colvin of Hallsville enjoyed spending time with youth at the Open Doors Christian Camp in Chernigov, Ukraine.

(PHOTO/ETBU)

"It turned out better than I could even have hoped," said Sartain, whose team helped pour concrete flooring on the third level of the old camp dormitory. "You can plan all you want for things such as this, but you never truly know what to expect. But the entire week for us in the Ukraine was a tremendous blessing."

The Ukraine trip marked the second project the Tigers completed through the Advancing Native Missions organization. They served in Croatia in 2008. ETBU players and coaches were set for another overseas trip last summer, but they were detained at Heathrow Airport in London due to visa problems and never were allowed into England to complete the trip.

There were no such problems this trip, Sartain said, although his team spent more than 30 layover hours in airports around the world, including a 12-hour stop in New York City on the return flight home.

But jet lag aside, he said, the group wouldn't have traded the experience for the world.

"Over 20 youth accepted Christ on the fourth night of the camp, and our guys were able to take part in that experience," Sartain said. "These kinds of experiences change your perspective on how God uses people to reach others and reminds you that he is God and what he can do. After a trip like this, you become more sensitive to your own condition as well."

The camp where the Tigers served is located about 45 miles outside Chernobyl, site of the 1986 nuclear power plant disaster.



The Open Doors Christian Camp is located about 45 miles from Chernobyl, site of the 1986 nuclear power plant disaster.

(PHOTO/ETBU)

The old Soviet youth camp was considered heavily contaminated, and for years the Russian government tried to sell the property.

Protestant groups saw the site as a potential Christian youth camp for orphans and disadvantaged children in the region. Ukrainian

churches—with financial assistance from American churches—organized a team of scientists to conduct tests at the site. Extensive examination revealed the area was clean of radioactive waste.

“It was as though God swept all the radiation and contamination away,” Sartain said. Ukrainian Christians purchased the property at a reduced price from the government, and they have been remodeling the site ever since.

The ETBU team mixed and poured concrete on the new 5,000-square-foot third floor of the dormitory. Despite early problems with the language barrier and a power outage, the Tigers completed the work in just three and a half days. The team also took part in worship services at the camp at night.

“The camp is full of mostly street kids—low-income kids who have never before been witness to the gospel,” Sartain said. “We’re talking about kids of ages from 8 to about 17 who have never been in a church service of any kind, who certainly didn’t know how to act during one. It was a little distracting and frustrating at times. But by the end of the week, God had moved in a big way, and we had 20 of those kids accept Christ.”

The week not only changed the lives of the campers, but also the volunteers from ETBU, Sartain said.

“It was just a great experience for these guys and one that has affected them tremendously. Some of them are already talking about finding a way to go back.”