

CHERNOBYL CHILDREN'S PROJECT (UK)

ПОДДЕРЖКА ДЕТЯМ БЕЛАРУСИ

Messages from Host Families

The Dornan family, Solihull, hosted Summer 2010

While out with a friend one evening she told me about the Chernobyl project she was involved with. I was intrigued the idea of caring for two young children who had left their family, homeland and everything familiar to them to come to England for a holiday. These children have little or no English, did not necessarily know the children they were coming with and would have limited contact with their mum/dad.



Our daughter would have reservations going away for a weekend let alone four weeks.

My curiosity about the Chernobyl Project got the better of me and in discussion with my family we agreed to pursue an application. The necessary checks and interviews were complete and it was now almost time to receive our guests. Prior to their arrival we prepared the bedroom, my daughter made name plates to go on the outside of their bedroom door, she sorted out the toys from the loft and moved her precious wooden dolls house, with figures into the bedroom as she thought playing with the house would help them adjust to being away from their home. We received initial paperwork about the girls we would have to stay, which included a

photograph of each child. It now became very real and the photographs of the girls at my daughter's request were framed and placed on the side with our family portraits.

Friends and family were very kind by collecting clothes we could let the girls have, when the children arrive we were told they usually only have the clothes they stand up in.

It was now time and we went off very excitedly to meet the girls. They both had a small bag with them filled with presents for us, glassware, tea-towels and vodka. While the girls lived in the same area of Belarus they had not met each other previously, they were both nine years old.

On the first evening we arranged for the interpreter to come to our house to share with us the contents of letters both girls had, giving us invaluable details about the girls likes, dislikes and family. One of the girls shared photographs with us of her family which we found very helpful.

Both girls settled very well, and phoned their family on two occasions during the fortnight, they were happy to just hear their loved one's voice and did not prolong over the calls.

Bath time was memorable; they loved the water with lots of bubbles, sometimes wearing their swimming costumes and goggles to add to the fun. They were determined to stay in the bath as long as they could.

The girls took an active part in all the activities on offer by the group; they enjoyed a trip to Drayton Manor, a fire station, swimming and most exciting for them the sea side. Despite little sleep due to talking once in bed they were always keen in the morning to check their daily schedule to see what the day would bring.

Both girls loved to put on their party clothes and eat family meals; the trampoline in the garden was a source of great fun for them. They loved to tease Larry our dog who joined in with their games. The dolls house featured every day and yes our daughter was right the girls spent hours on end playing with the house and role playing family life.

It is hard work and yes it was sad, when the time came for the girls to move on. However for us it is rewarding to know that we have helped two children affected by a disaster long before they were born to experience the things we take for granted, breathing fresh air, playing outside, eating fresh food and receiving medical treatment.

So go on give it a go!

The Kerridge family, Bishops Offley, hosted numerous years

It was a dreary Saturday in August when I was driving to St Luke's Church in Endon to meet our three Belarusian teenagers who were to spend a fortnight with our family. In spite of the fact that this was the sixth group of teenagers (in remission of cancer), that we were welcoming and hosting, there was a slight knot in my stomach: would the girls enjoy being with us, would they get on, would we understand each other? I need not have worried. Lola (16), Yulia (18) and Natasha (19) were great. Lola spoke English really well, the others less so, but we managed very well.



The girls had been invited to spend a recuperative holiday in the UK through the national organisation Chernobyl Children's Project. This organisation is composed of local groups. The Endon and Stoke group was set up 18 years ago by John and Julie Gater. Over the years the group has hosted hundreds of children. They are supported by a dedicated group of local people who do an enormous amount of fundraising, not only to invite children (and for the very young ones their mums), but also to support projects in Belarus to make life of victims of the 1986 nuclear disaster more comfortable. This may be in a material way, by building family type houses for the disabled or training of carers, hospice workers etc. Unfortunately the consequences of the 1986 nuclear disaster are ongoing. The percentages of children that develop cancer, birth defects or related illnesses are still way higher than in non-affected areas. It has been proven that just four weeks of uncontaminated air and food (and plain fun) improves the impaired immune systems of these kids. Not only do the children benefit physically, the psychological benefits are tremendous. Cancer is still a taboo subject in Belarus and many families keep very quiet about it, in spite of the fact that the treatments are often long

and painful and take place in the cancer hospital in Minsk, a long way from home for some. So, the opportunity to spend time with other survivors is often the first time the children can share their experiences.

The Endon and Stoke group invites teenagers in the summer and mothers and young children in spring. The groups are accompanied by an interpreter, and sometimes a doctor. As a group we take the teenagers on trips to Llandudno, which is often the first time they see the sea. Alton Towers and even a trip to London was also on the programme (thanks to generous donors). On days that there were no group activities, we took the girls to Gladstone Pottery Museum, for walks through the beautiful English countryside and many other local places of interest.

After having spent two weeks with families, the group of seventeen teenagers (accompanied by two interpreters and a



doctor) moved on to spend the second half in Cicely Haughton School in Wetley Rock. Again a team of local people helped to make their stay there as comfortable as possible: there was a music/dance night, a sports day. Some people helped with the practical side of things, like washing, cooking and driving.

Last Friday the farewell party was held in the Hope Centre. The teens had prepared a fantastic show for us with Belarusian folk dancing, singing, games. Not only had the teenagers come together as a group and made friends, they looked different: they looked so much healthier from having spent time in the fresh air, the new experiences and last but not least they were delighted to have met so many people who had made them feel welcome. This meant we also had to say “goodbye” for now at least to “our” girls: Lola, Yulia and Natasha, this was not easy for either the girls or for us. But . . . most teens have access to internet these days and I am still in touch with quite a few that were hosted in previous years. The two weeks spent together in our family were busy, and intense, but also incredibly rewarding. It was a privilege to be part of these girls’ holiday in the UK.

The Stephens family, Solihull, hosted three years including 2018



This year has been our third year as a host family for the Chernobyl Children’s Project (CCP) in Solihull. We are a family of four with two teenage children and have thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated the experience for a variety of reasons.

Making a difference to the lives of young people who have been through the trauma of cancer

You can make a difference to the lives of the young people you host, not just by feeding them well, taking care of them and showing them a good time, but also by welcoming them into your family. By building relationships and helping them make new friends in a different environment you can

watch them develop over the two weeks they are with you.

The first year we hosted, one of the boys was from rural Belarus and had missed a good deal of schooling due to being in hospital. He spoke Belarussian but very little Russian which was the language spoken by most of the other children. Although he said very little to begin with, he loved going out and spending time with us all as a family. He slowly came out of his shell and gained in confidence within the wider group. Last year we hosted a 15 year old boy who clearly had very poor eye-sight. The look on his face when he received his free pair of glasses and could see clearly is an image imprinted on our minds.

We hadn’t fully appreciated how attached we would all become to the children we have hosted but by the end of their stay with us, it is always difficult to say goodbye. Luckily, our daughter is still in touch with them through social media and it is lovely to receive updates.

Learning about a different culture, languages and way of life (and raising awareness of the difficulties people face beyond our borders)

Learning languages, discovering different cultures and travelling is something that interests us all as a family. Belarus, however, was a country we had to look up in the atlas. We weren’t familiar with the Belarussian language or that in all schools in Belarus they actually speak in Russian. Hosting for the first time in 2015 possibly encouraged Hannah, our daughter, to consequently take up Russian at university. We have learnt so much about the Chernobyl disaster of 26th April 1986 and first-hand about its effect on the people in Belarus. Getting to know the children we have hosted, who have all come from different backgrounds, has given us a new perspective on difficulties facing people in other countries.

Working together with a local group of like-minded people

Going along to the local group meetings and hearing about the wonderful activity schedule arranged by other volunteers, helped prepare us for the arrival of the group of teenagers. The local coordinator even came into the school I was working at to deliver an assembly to the children on the work of CCP. The support from our local group has been great. We have made some good friends and have enjoyed fundraising together to enable the holidays to take place each year. Our fundraising activities have included coffee mornings, ladies' lunches, skittles evenings, meals out at local restaurants and taking part in local fun runs. As a family, we feel very supported by the local group and feel that there are always people you can turn to when hosting the children for two weeks in the summer.

Becoming aware of the generosity of people in the local community

The generosity and sensitivity of local businesses to the work of the charity and the individual children we have hosted is something we have really appreciated as a host family. Local dentists, opticians and business centres who are approached by the local coordinator give of their time each year. As a host family, we looked for activities to entertain the children and approached our local gym, horse-riding centres and sports car show rooms who were very supportive. It was heart-warming to realise that there is so much generosity within our local community which we wouldn't have come across without being a host family for the Chernobyl Children's Project.

