



## AGENTS OF CHANGE

NEWSLETTER: 016

Winter 2020

### **MORE THANKS THAN WE CAN SAY DURING THE COVID YEAR . . .**

*... and more hope for the future. The charity has been hit hard over the past year, with Covid-19 affecting everything we do in both Romania and the UK. However, our regular supporters have been more than generous. We launched an emergency appeal which raised an amazing £8,000 to help us through some difficult times. The charity has been working in Romania since 1990. Our mission is to help those suffering mental and physical disabilities and psychiatric conditions who live in the remote County of Botosani, Romania. Our programme normally helps make life more bearable for many of the people who live in depressing state institutions where care is minimal. We also support those in the community who often have multiple un-met needs. We concentrate on developing our patients' life skills in an environment of acceptance, kindness, respect, safety, and sharing good food and warmth. We believe we make a real difference to the quality of their lives. We have managed to reduce the overall costs of the charity by 50% in the short term, and have been helped by a private source of income which will help to keep us going while we reshape our operations and fundraising. We continue in the hope that things will change once more. We have adapted to the situation and below you can read how we have coped and changed at Agents of Change! We thank you as we know we could not run at all without your help, prayers and support.*

**Alison Butcher**

## **The Monastery at Stiubeni**

For many years we have enjoyed this beautiful and peaceful Monastery near Podriga, taking many of our beneficiaries to visit and attend the church there. Picnics, walks and football were part of our summer time events. We have always been accepted by the Abbott, experiencing a depth of welcome to all at all times. The Monastery and its ways lay in stark contrast to the beneficiaries lives where they are usually locked in the dark unwholesome institutions in the region. Just the peace and the icons and the incense and holy water make it a time of healing for our patients.

As we have grown closer, Alison approached the Abbott to see if there was something we could do to support many in his community in dire straits. We were exploring this future plan when COVID hit us. Adaptation is key to this charity of change. Now a team of three – the permanent staff from Podriga – go there two full days a week to help out with many urgent tasks. Currently they are making an inventory of the whole Monastery. Larisa who is blind, works in the Church oiling and polishing all the wooden furniture. She also sings there! These tasks are essential and have needed attention for ages. They all love the monastic life and share lunch with the monks,



provided by the Monastery, which is covering the fuel costs for the visits as well as paying the utility bills for Podriga House. Because of Covid-19 the Monastery is unable to host any of their usual volunteers who carry out enormous amounts of work daily, on what is a working farm. We are fortunate that our three staff are in a bubble and permission has been granted for them to travel to this work.

Romania is in almost permanent lock-down, so on other days the staff are at Podriga House. They have grown as much food as possible to give to the most needy. They have also carried out maintenance and repairs and started our new inventory, which is required by Romanian law! They can have no contact with any beneficiaries, and none of the institutions we were involved with are allowed visitors. COVID-19 is rampant throughout them.

Other staff are on half pay, as were the Podriga Team during the summer months. Alison has no idea when she will be able to return to Romania but keeps in close touch by phone and e-mail.



*Mosaics above the main entrance to the Monastery*



*Not one nail was used in the construction of this wooden Chapel which is part of the Monastery at Stiubeni*



*The Monastery at Stiubeni that so many of our beneficiaries love to visit*

## **SAD BUT SPECIAL MEMORIES**

Alison came back from Botosani County in March, when the Covid-19 virus was already on the move. It has impacted some of our wonderful supporters in Romania. We lost one of our dearest medical friends in April 2020.

Mariana Andrioaie was known to us since the early nineties, when Alison met her at a social function. She decided that she would do everything she could

to help our beneficiaries, initially as a specialist medic at the County Hospital in Botosani. She was later to be the overall head of the Outpatients Clinic. She would see Alison with beneficiaries at any time, and her diagnostic skills without equipment was astounding. Any patients she could not help would be referred to her colleagues immediately, and she would phone ahead to ensure that we would be seen straight away. This was without bribes or corruption or deals of any sort — an unusual stance in the medical world of Romania.



*Mariana Andrioaie worked sacrificially for Agents of Change from the early nineties*



*Young beneficiaries decorating the Christmas trees at the Monastery at Stiubeni*

Dr Mariana was always overworked because she cared so much. She could have retired in 2017 but refused because the need for staff was so urgent, with many having left for the lucrative West. She continued working until she was diagnosed with Covid 19, after setting up a triage system to manage patients with the disease. One young patient was from Moldova where there were no suspected cases but he was diagnosed positive. She was found to have contracted the virus some days later and eventually she was transferred to a specialist centre where she died.

It is hard to put into words what she had done for the many folks who otherwise would not have had access to medical care, as well as being a special friend to Alison. The loss of her is enormous to us all. We are also sad to announce the death of Dr Ilie Matei, who died of lung cancer before COVID started. Alison first met him in 1991 when he was the senior anaesthetist for the whole region including Podriga. He quickly became a friend who could be called upon at any time to help. He was also a great coffee provider – sometimes with a little extra nip as he was the anaesthetist for the county hospital and liked us to be comfortable! He never stopped working. He came out to Podriga Hospital and was disturbed into shocked silence at the state of the patients and the buildings. He never went back there. He is deeply missed for his warmth, care and help with our work.

## THE FINAL LORRY LOAD TO PODRIGA HOUSE

Over the years we've benefited from donations of all kinds of goods, with some sold through craft stalls and table sales, others sent to Romania, and anything we couldn't use being donated to other charities. It has been a major logistical task to store and sort the materials and Alison's house has tended to turn into a warehouse. With most of our volunteers getting on in years it has been increasingly difficult to move packing crates around. The charity's Trustees are looking at new directions in fundraising. The result was a major clear out of our storage unit in East London in order to send as much as possible to the Community House in Romania, donate goods to nearby charity shops, and recycle the remainder.

many tons of goods and necessities to us in Romania and in the early years this was all transferred for free. In those days we collected the supplies from a depot in Suceava, 100km from our projects in Podriga. This included food, household furniture, games, arts and crafts materials, clothing, medical aid, wheel-chairs and even the proverbial kitchen sinks. Getting goods through customs could be complicated - we have always resisted resorting to bribes but it was a regular nightmare trying to get our stock out of the authorities' hands as they always wanted "presents", and often kept our supplies back for many days to "negotiate" their transfer. More recently John has had to charge us for the shipping but he always did his best for us, which stretched to taking the supplies all the way to our front door. This led to the strange sight of a huge

John's team carried out 18 deliveries for us over the years – and never an item went missing. His colleague, Donna, gave us thousands of items of new clothing over the years. Anything we didn't use ourselves we delivered to schools, dance clubs and theatres.

It was a race to get the goods delivered before 31st December when the UK exits from the European Union. It was a great relief to hear that they arrived safely at Podriga in late November. COVID-19 has had a huge effect on John's business and we wish him well for the future. We cannot thank him enough for all that he has done.

## THE ART OF FUNDRAISING

Over the years, Agents of Change has tried various ways to raise the necessary funds for our work. One small but significant contribution was through the sale of hand-made Romanian glass kindly donated



*Perfume bottle representing  
Nemtoi*

to his studio in Botosani County. Mr Nemtoi was touched at how this young lad, Silvio, was fascinated to see the glass being blown. It was like watching a ballet as the pieces were turned around and around



*Alison and volunteers sorting the storage under COVID - 19 regulations.*

Zeb Seers played a huge role in this, as she has done since starting as a volunteer nearly 30 years ago whilst she was working as a Nurse Practitioner. Somehow she always found time for us, collecting goods and supplies, working tirelessly in our charity shops and advising on many matters. Zeb has driven countless hire vans as far as Leicestershire, Wiltshire, Essex and across London to collect what we needed for Romania. As our "warehouse manager" she oversaw with Alison the sorting, packing and final delivery to the lorry depot in Harlow. We will miss her input enormously.

For many years we have been supported by John Kolas and his international haulage business, Exclusive Logistics. This UK company has shipped

pantehnicon parked outside our old house in Podriga making our premises look very small.



*John Kolas of Exclusive Logistics with Alison  
discussing the final load for Podriga*



*Vessel representing Nemtoi's  
first son, Stefan*

by a local world renowned craftsman Mr Ioan Nemtoi. Most of these were sold individually through a supporter in Devon, at an average price of £250 per piece given their uniqueness and decorative quality. His support over the years has been invaluable and we have now sold all the pieces! We have had the privilege of seeing his exhibitions in both Bucharest and London.

One day Alison took one of our young beneficiaries



*Perfume bottle representing  
Nemtoi's wife*

in blazing temperatures near the kilns. Mr Nemtoi then gave Silvio a piece of glass art for him to use as he wished. Silvio at the time was living at the institution, Ionaseni, with no personal property. So the charity bought the piece from him and gave him the money to spend, including purchasing the prized possession of his first ever radio. This was the beginning of many visits by us from beneficiaries in the institutions.

## Thank you so much for your support

We know you care about us and show concern about how we are managing. If you would like to leave us a legacy in your will please approach us. In the meantime, we thank you for your donations as we know you give what you can. Despite the challenges we remain optimistic and ever hopeful.

Thank you

**Alison Butcher**  
Founder and CEO



*Bobby, the adoptive father,  
and his growing charges*

Just as ducklings can imprint on a human and view them as their parent, Podriga House has seen its own example of adoption by an unlikely foster father. Bobby our guard dog became rather bored during lockdown and struck up a friendship with one of our cats, allowing her to sleep on his back. When she had a litter of kittens they were found inside his kennel with mama cat and Bobby. They have followed their mother's habit and enjoy sitting on Bobby on the roof of his kennel.



*Nothing goes to waste at Podriga House!*

**SEE OUR WEBSITE: [www.agentsofchange.co.uk](http://www.agentsofchange.co.uk)**  
FOR FURTHER NEWS  
and other ways of donating to us.



**AGENTS OF CHANGE**

**ENABLING PEOPLE THROUGH HEALTH EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

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