

Gretchen Hall's Experiences with Habitat for Humanity in BEIUS, ROMANIA

For a week-plus in September, 2005, we were part of a team that built a duplex home in Beius, Romania. Beius is a market town of 12,000 in western Romania, located in an agricultural region with mountains visible both east and west. It was the site of the first Habitat for Humanity work in Romania and remains the national headquarters for the organization. Single, duplex and apartment dwellings have already been completed, though the need for housing remains acute. Acquiring land is one major and expensive challenge.

Our group of 17 North Americans worked in the village of Miziec, 5 km from Beius. We all stayed with families in Beius and traveled to the building site by van. We had our meals in Beius as well, at the (only) local restaurant. You can picture us getting up in the semi-dark and crawling into work clothes, then off to breakfast at 7:30, and on to the site by about 8:30. It rained a lot in Romania this summer, so the site was muddy with the local clay.

This building site was donated by the village and will ultimately provide space for 26 homes, rather densely built. However, village houses in the area are traditionally close together, so this seems to be culturally OK. About 6 homes on this site had been largely completed; three awaited electrical and water connections (done professionally); in one, our team installed wooden flooring on a rainy day. The homes are small by US standards, but very well built and insulated: one living-dining-kitchen room, 1 bath and 1 or 2 bedrooms. Upstairs loft reached from outside provides storage. At another locale in NE Romania, the homes are modified with a small front porch/entry way (to be completed by the owner) and a viable living space upstairs (again, for owner completion). That location also had more land so homeowners had garden space as well.

So we started with a cured concrete slab. Our first jobs were to prepare all the wooden structures that would be combined for the “skeleton” of the duplex – walls with the window and door units and trusses for the roof. Much measuring, cutting, hammering. We did have the benefit of 3 electric saws for cutting the lumber – everything else was done by hand. Two days and some rain interruptions later, the wood structural units were ready to raise. Obviously we went up with wall units first, assembling each one flat on the slab then raising it cooperatively (yes, just like the pictures you’ve seen of old-fashioned barn raisings). Once the four walls were up, secure and braced, it was time to hoist (again by hand) the trusses and nail them into place.

In all of this work we did have professional leadership! Our wonderful volunteer coordinator, Emil, kept us coming and going in good order – whether to meals or on jobs at the work site. Habitat employs about 5 skilled Romanian workers who took the lead at all the crucial points, such as placing and nailing the roof trusses. They were all wonderful in working with unskilled volunteers and endlessly patient with our questions and mistakes. I learned that a house can absorb a surprising number of mistakes and still turn out well!

The building had heavy wooden composite board on the sides (over the studs), covered by styrofoam insulation that was covered in turn by stucco. Every layer was measured and nailed (or glued) into place by hand, piece by piece. We had small work groups dedicated to each of these tasks. Meanwhile, others were moving supplies (tiles, wood pieces, etc.) by hand or wheelbarrow loads -- no little bobcats on this job to help.

To give a concrete (excuse the pun) example, I'll share the laborious route of the concrete roof tiles. These were salvaged from another Habitat site by a team that loaded them on our one-and-only work truck. (loading meant passing hand to hand down a ladder, stacking on the truck bed). Then at the work site the entire lot was unloaded, again by a "human chain," and stacked awaiting use. When we were ready for the roof, groups brought the tiles by wheelbarrow to the house and passed and stacked them inside (again by human chain). We had one more passing opportunity: taking the tiles one-by-one from the stacks on the floor and handing them up to the installers on the roof. These tiles hitch together by ridges and stay in place because of their weight – no nails or glue needed. Similar use of unskilled people-power happened many times to assemble materials at the right place and time.

By the end of our work week (mid-day Saturday), the duplex was nearly "dried in." Had we not been interrupted by rain, the roof would have been completed. I might add that the two Romanian householders joined us in the building whenever they could. They were clearly proud and indeed possessive (smile) of their homes-taking-shape. They had been chosen from a large group of applicants: about 1 family in 10 is lucky enough to become homeowners. They had to show need for housing as well as income so they could pay the modest 20 year mortgage. In many cases, young families such as these are living with parents under very crowded conditions.

Our gang of volunteers was a friendly, cooperative group – no prima donnas, thank goodness! We ranged in age from 18 to late 60s – the average tending more toward our age. Everyone was willing and ready to work, with skills ranging from experienced to novice. Fortunately, various jobs were available for everyone, so you didn't have to crawl up on the roof if you preferred to stay on the ground – and that was me, on the ground.

When we weren't building or riding back and forth or eating, we had plenty of hot water for bathing and very decent living arrangements, mostly two to a room. Some of the younger set tried out different cafes in the evenings or ventured to the local internet café where they found many teenagers playing video games. One night we all went for dessert at a café founded by Americans who came to Beius to work with the "orphans." Another night we were invited to the home of the man who heads Habitat in Romania. Again, we were offered coffee, sweets and conversation. Another day before dinner we visited two orphanages in the town – one run with state money for about 12 children of varying ages and one run with US private contributions for about 20 preschool children. They formerly sent young children to the US as adoptees. Since international adoption is now prohibited by Romanian law, this orphanage has a full house of children who will likely grow up there together. The "orphans" (in reality, abandoned children) are another whole topic, but I'll say here that both these homes were pleasant and appeared well-run. Many more stories to tell, but not in this installment!

If you're seeking an interesting experience somewhere in the world, try Habitat for Humanity!