

## **November 2007 Trip to Georgia**

Kelvin and Gil made a trip to the Saguramo orphanage in November 2007 to begin planning our reconstruction efforts. Despite harsh conditions and the beginnings of an historic political upheaval, the trip was a success.

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### **Days One and Two- November 2/3, 2007**

On Friday, Nov. 2, 2007, Gil and I departed Washington D.C. for Tbilisi, Georgia. The purpose of our trip was to spend a week at an orphanage in Saguramo (a village about 25 km outside of Tbilisi) so we could assess the conditions of the children's home there and prepare a scope of work for needed repairs. We were also scheduled to meet with nine different Georgian contracting companies to solicit bids for Phase 1 of the repairs. I met Gil a few months ago, and when Gil heard about the Divine Child Foundation, he decided he wanted to become involved, made a large contribution to Divine Child, and also offered to lend his expertise in building construction to help with the orphanage repairs. I was also very much looking forward to spending time with the children and getting to know them better. We arrived in Tbilisi the following evening and immediately began planning for our first day at the orphanage.

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### **Day Three- November 4, 2007**

On Sunday morning, we were picked up at the hotel by our driver and translator (Paata and Irma) and went directly to the orphanage. We worked there all day assessing the building conditions. We spent most of the day taking pictures and measurements of the building exterior and exterior. Gil drew up plans of the building on the computer and I asked at least a thousand questions to the orphanage Director about the current conditions. The building is in absolutely terrible condition and needs so much work that it is difficult to know where to start. The children were all great, and lots of new faces have arrived since my previous visit in February. Some of the older kids are gone now (because they reached the age of 17), but there are several new younger children there now. Several of the new children are very young, about 5 to 6 years old, and they are all extremely cute. After we got back to the hotel, we went to Gil's room to discuss plans. We talked until midnight, going over the plans and deciding what we thought would be best to tackle as Phase 1 of the building repairs.

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### **Day Four- November 5, 2007**

We were picked up at 9:00 am Monday morning and stopped at the open-air market, where you can buy just about any type of construction supplies. It is like a huge open air Home Depot. Gil was in heaven and mentioned several times how much he loved places like that. We got to the orphanage about 10:45. Last night, Gil wrote up a scope of work for Phase 1, and today we met with four different contractors. We agreed last night that Phase 1 would be to get the building shell into sound shape. The building is in absolutely terrible shape. One major problem is that some villagers stole most of the lower sections

of the downspouts, so that the downspouts end about 15 feet short of the ground. The roof area is very large, so when it rains, there is a tremendous amount of water that comes out of the downspouts. Now, the water washes down the lower sections of the exterior walls and has done significant damage to the walls and foundations. The building has 17-inch thick walls that are brick with a cement layer over the brick and then a stucco layer over the cement. There are several areas where the water has washed away all the stucco and cement and has done major damage to the brick.

The building has 86 windows, and they all need to be replaced. Almost every window is either broken or missing all together. Yesterday, when it was moderately windy, you could feel the wind blowing through all parts of the building. It was like a wind tunnel inside. The doors are also in terrible shape. Some of the rooms on the lower floor do not even have their floor structure anymore and are completely useless. The building has no showers, no hot water, and no laundry. The kids are all living on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. The 3<sup>rd</sup> floor is not being used and is in very bad shape. The two bathrooms on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor are in awful shape and stink terribly. The only toilets are Turkish toilets, which are basically just holes in the floor with no traps and that is why they stink so bad. There are supposed to be water sprayers to flush the toilets, but they do not work.

The electrical system for the building shorted out recently so they rigged one 14 gauge wire for the entire building. Gil was very upset by this, and decided, "I have to fix this before I leave here!" He has spent a lot of time inspecting the entire electrical system and is trying to figure out how to fix it. I went into the attic yesterday to inspect the roof, which is relatively new corrugated metal. The old roof was corrugated asbestos. When they removed the old roof, they dumped all of it in the attic so the entire attic floor is covered in asbestos roof scraps. It is everywhere. The roof has a few holes but it can be fixed relatively easily. Someone recently installed 10 new gas radiators in some of the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor rooms. They did it by punching holes in the exterior walls to vent the radiators and it looks like they punched the holes with a hammer, so the holes are very ugly and not fixed on the outside. The radiators are being fed by cheap and thin plastic lines that are sloppily run on the outside face of the building. Sometimes thinking about trying to fix up the place is overwhelming to me.

We found out today that the building that the kids were living in last winter, when we first saw them, is being sold by the government because it is no longer being used by the orphanage. I went into it today and it is in devastating shape. I can't imagine anything can be done but to tear it down. I also looked over the building where the kitchen and dining hall is. The roof still has the old asbestos roofing and has several missing or severely damaged areas so it must leak very badly. There are several sinks where the faucets can't be turned off so the water just runs all the time. There is no heat at all in the entire building. The ceiling in the dining hall is coming down because of the leaking roof. They have the gas turned on now (gas was off in Feb.) but are not using the large gas stove because it does not work. They have two very small gas stoves that they use for the cooking. The building does have a very large covered front porch that would be great for the kids to eat outside in nice weather but the ceiling is in terrible shape because of the leaking roof.

The older children left because they were sent away because they were 17. The newer kids are all younger with several 5-8 year old girls. There are also some new younger boys. The boy who studied on the computer so much is still there. We have seen a few disturbing incidents of some of the boys being bullies and beating up the younger boys.

Also, yesterday we saw a really cute 5 year old girl who was playing with a plastic toy phone. We could tell that she loved the toy and was beaming when she showed it to us. This morning I found the phone outside on the ground smashed to bits. Evidently, there is a kid or kids here that take toys away from the other children and purposely destroy them. The cute little boy that was found living alone at the city dump last winter is still here and that same kid who breaks the toys took a toy car away from him yesterday and broke it as well.

The staff at the orphanage does not seem to be very interactive with the children. When we arrived yesterday, it was a beautiful day, but all the kids were inside watching TV. I asked the Director about why the children were not outside playing and he explained to me that it was too cold. He said the children would get sweaty while playing and then come inside where it was cold and then they might get sick. They don't have hot water or showers for the kids to bath themselves so I guess I could understand how that could be a problem, but it seems to me that the kids need to be more active and to have adults teaching and coaching them more often. The kids also throw all of their trash outside the windows so the grounds around the building are disgusting with trash and debris everywhere. There were no trashcans anywhere, inside or outside of the buildings. Gil and I discussed it and I suggested that I call a meeting of all the staff and children. We will tell them all what we are proposing to do to fix up the building but that it will be with some conditions. The conditions will be that the children clean up the grounds and agree to keep the place clean and that they will take care of their home if we fix it up. Tomorrow we are meeting contractors all day again. I asked if it was possible for me to meet each child one at a time and learn their name and a little bit about them and take pictures. They said yes so I will do that later this week. Gil thought it would be good to try and get sponsors for each child. I have taken about 100 pictures so far of the children and the building conditions. I will take many more before I am done.

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### **Day Five- November 6, 2007**

On Tuesday we again spent all day at the orphanage. Gil spent the entire day working on the electrical system while I met with five different contractors. I also spent a lot of time asking questions of the orphanage Director and his wife about the kids. I took more pictures of the kids and interviewed one 9 year old girl. She is having some psychological issues, but carried on a very good conversation with us. She has two sisters and one brother here at the orphanage. Her mother is 26 years old and just gave birth to her 6<sup>th</sup> child last week and is currently staying at the infant house we visited in Feb. Evidently she and her husband had regularly beat this little girl since she was about 1 year old. Even so, the girl said that she really misses her mommy. It is so sad. The Director said that the girl tried to jump out of a 2<sup>nd</sup> floor window yesterday and also tried to hurt herself with a knife at dinner last night. She is so cute but obviously is really suffering. Her dad has left the family to take a job in Turkey. The government is trying to decide now if they are going to take the children away from the mother permanently because they know about the beatings. The Director took her to a mental hospital today to try to get help for her but they refused to help her because they had no budget for orphans. He does not know how to help her. Her two little sisters are also very cute. They are 4 and 5 years old. One of them was the little girl we saw on Sunday with the toy phone.

I found out that the kids that are destroying all the other kids' toys are three brothers who just came to the orphanage about 5 weeks ago. The Director says that they are just awful and one of them was the boy I saw beating up several of the smaller boys. Yesterday I saw him kicking and throwing rocks at another boy. The Director says it is against the law to punish the boys or even to verbally punish them. He is going to the Ministry of Education next week to see if he can take the boys back to their mother. Several of the kids have written letters to the Director saying how much they dislike the three brothers and telling him about all the bad things the boys do. They say that they really want the boys to leave or else they do not want to be there anymore. Irma read the letters to me and the other kids are really afraid of these boys. The Director says the rest of the kids at the orphanage are good kids and can be taught but not these three boys.

We are going back to the orphanage tomorrow so Gil can continue work on the electrical system. I will spend the day helping him and interviewing the other kids. Today I hired four local men to clean up the attic. I bought large heavy-duty bags and respirators and gloves for the workers. I bought 54 bags and hired the workers for today and tomorrow. They said that they need another 120 bags to finish the job tomorrow. I will stop at the open-air market in the morning and buy the extra bags and more respirators so they can finish.

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### **Day Six- November 7, 2007**

Today (Wed.) was another good day, with us stopping by the open-air market on the way to the orphanage to pick up more supplies. It was an adventure roaming around that place in the pouring rain with hundreds of people trying to dodge the huge puddles and mud. I bought 110 more trash bags and Gil bought more electrical supplies. He is having a great time and is absolutely loving his time here even though his neck is really hurting him. At the orphanage, I took many more pictures and talked to more children. I also helped Gil with some of the electrical repairs and met with one more contractor. We left the orphanage relatively early, at about 4:45, so we could stop at the market again for more supplies. Gil wanted to get there as soon as possible because they close at 5:30, but we didn't make it in time because we ran into lots of traffic. Actually, two different traffic jams. One was near Saguramo when about 1000 sheep were blocking the road and the other was because they are having massive protests here against the government and there were thousands of protestors walking in the streets. The people are protesting against the government because the Georgian president has refused to reschedule the presidential elections to next Spring from next Fall as the opposition is demanding. Evidently, most people here have lost their faith in him and want him out of office. I just received a message from the hotel staff saying that, because of the protests, it is not safe to leave the hotel. I hope it will be OK to go out tomorrow. Evidently, the protests got violent today and the government used tear gas, fire hoses, and rubber bullets on the protesters. It's possible that this is the start of another revolution. Tomorrow I have a meeting with the head of the Tbilisi Rotary Club at 12:00, and then a meeting with the US Embassy at 2:00, and then a meeting with the Deputy Minister of Education at 4:00. Paata is going to take Gil to the orphanage so they can continue to work on the electrical system while Irma and I go to the meetings. I will most likely spend most of Friday meeting with the rest of the children.

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## **Day Seven- November 8, 2007**

It was not a very productive day for me today. When I woke up this morning, all of the local TV news stations were off the air including CNN. The president declared a state of emergency last night and took over control of the media. I did not go to the orphanage with Gil today since I had meetings here in Tbilisi with various people. My first meeting was with the president of the local Rotary club in Tbilisi. He was a very nice man and I learned very much from him. He suggested that the responsibility for the orphanages was going to be shifted from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Health. He also suggested that the government may sell the orphanages to private persons and that we should be very careful about spending money on the building until we know what they are going to do. He suggested that I write an official letter to the government asking them what their plans are and that would require them to give me an official answer within 10 days. I also talked to him about us hiring someone to come to the orphanage to provide psychological help and to teach them personal responsibility and respect. He really liked that idea and gave us a name of someone he thought would do a very good job at that. I may meet with that person tomorrow. My next meeting was at the American Embassy and that was essentially a complete waste of time. They had no interest at all in helping us, and basically sent me on my way and said good luck. My last meeting was scheduled for 4:00 at the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education is responsible for all orphanages in Georgia. We waited until 5:00 and the Minister never showed up. After I got back to the hotel, I wrote both letters to the Minister of Education and the Minister of Economy before going to sleep.

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## **Day Eight- November 9, 2007**

On Friday morning (our last day in Georgia) we went to the open air market and Gil gave me a list of things to buy while he went off elsewhere to find other supplies. I was left alone to find stuff on his list and then try to purchase it all with no translator. It was challenging, but I got everything on his list, and found him after about 20 minutes of searching. I wish you could see this place. It is a huge jumble of very small open-air shops with very small aisles running in between with an occasional alley running perpendicular to the isles. The ground is mostly mud and puddles because it has rained for the last 3 days. There are hundreds of men in all of the aisles talking, shopping, and smoking. It is quite the cultural experience. After I found Gil, I followed him around for another hour looking for some specialized fuses for the panel box. We finally found them and then found our way back to the car. We then went to the orphanage and arrived there about 11:00. Gil immediately began assembling parts for the panel box while I recorded all of the purchases for today. Gil and I then reworked my letters to the Ministers a little bit so I could print them out before Gill turned off the power so he could begin his panel box work. After printing out the letters I began interviewing the children and taking their pictures. I worked at that until about 5:30 when we broke for a short meal of fried chicken, fried potatoes, cucumber and tomato salad and bread and pickles.

After eating, I went back to interviewing the children. It was dark by now so we used a small candle to light up our room. It is pretty cold here today with temperatures in the lower 40's and it is not much warmer inside. The kids were all great and very cute. One group of kids I interviewed was four sisters who have been here for six years. They were ages nine, thirteen, thirteen, and sixteen. I also interviewed a brother and sister, age five

and six. The five year old girl was just so cute and precious. Irma looked at me and asked me if it was OK for her to take the little girl home with her. The poor girl had a terrible cough and coughed for the entire interview. She also had a badly stuffed up nose. The kids all said that they liked it here mainly because of the attitude of the Director and the staff. They all seemed to like each other a lot, except for the three bully brothers. The Director told me today that he is taking them to their mother in Tbilisi tomorrow and telling her that they cannot come back. I finished up the interviews at about 6:30. I then took some more pictures of the children. The kids love having their picture taken so much, it is really fun to watch them grab their friends and strike up a pose. The workers finished cleaning up the attic today and they did a very good job. All of the asbestos scraps are gone and all the other debris was cleaned up also. They hauled out over 350 heavy-duty bags of debris. I insisted to the Director that the debris be hauled away to a dump that would take hazardous waste. He was reluctant but finally agreed and the truck came this afternoon and took it all away. I wrote out a receipt and paid the attic workers for their services. It cost \$75.00 total for their labor. I spent another \$75.00 for the bags and for dust masks for the workers.

One of the bids came back today and it was about \$50,000.00. One thing I need to do is apply for tax-free status here in Georgia because they have an 18% tax on all purchases. If I can get tax-free status, then we can do much more for our money. Irma is going to get the paperwork for me to apply for that. She is also going to look into hiring a project manager to oversee the contractor so I do not have to keep coming back here to do that. I then spent the next several hours helping Gil on the electrical work. We worked until 2:15 am and then had to dash back to the hotel because we needed to be packed up and out of the hotel by 3:30 am in order to catch our flight home. We arrived home Saturday evening exhausted because we had been up for 48 hours without any real sleep, but every minute spent in Georgia was well worth it.