

Case Studies of some of the children benefiting from the centre:

**Lilian** is 10 and was a very timid child during his first visit to the Phoenix Centre. He stayed in his small wheelchair and did not make any effort to play or talk with the Centre's staff or other children. When he did leave his chair, he could only crawl on his hands and knees to move from place to place. Lilian also had difficulty grasping with his hands and feeding himself. He has grown so much in only a short period of time.

Lilian has daily physical therapy sessions with Phoenix Centre staff and has seen dramatic improvement in his well-being. Today, Lilian can be seen walking with the assistance of a staff member, whereas before, such a task would have been impossible. He sings and recites poems with an infectious smile and a mischievous twinkle in his eye. If he offers you a handshake, he will likely challenge you to a fierce arm-wrestling match, which he will surely win! Though Lilian favours using one hand instead of both, there is no doubt that he will become more comfortable as he is challenged to do more in his regular physical therapy sessions. He jokes and plays with the members of the Phoenix Centre with an air of confidence that was not found in the shy, timid little boy only six months ago.



**Natasha**, 17, came to the Phoenix Centre with her hands permanently affixed together and her head hung low. She did not interact with other people and if she did it was through strained and halting speech, and even then, it was never more than a few words. She struggled to sit up by herself and participate with teachers, assistants, and other children. Yet within 6 months at the centre, the difference we see in Natasha today is amazing.

Through daily physical activity with the Phoenix Centre team she claps along to songs, motions to people and objects, and can even grasp small items and move them with limited difficulty. When she enters the room, Natasha will immediately light it up with her big smile and offer a welcome. She now sits up and carries on conversations with people, and though her speech can be slightly difficult to understand, it is clear that she can make her needs known as well as convey her thoughts and opinions to others. The most amazing change in Natasha is the development of a clever and playful personality. She will tell jokes and tease, and has quickly become an avid Checkers player! When a visitor comes to the Centre, she will gladly challenge them to a quick match and will probably beat them within a few moves. If not for the interactions with staff and visitors and the one-on-one physical care she receives at the Centre, it would be hard to see the Natasha we know and love today. She is a wonderful, joy-filled presence, and it has been a true pleasure to see her grow over the past few months.



**Oleg**, 15, arrived at the Phoenix Centre already with an established personality. He is a showman and a very talented singer with a desire to entertain. However, Oleg was all but confined to his specialized wheelchair. He had never taken a step on his own and was ultimately resigned to staying in his chair due to his physical limitations.

Today, with a helping hand and sturdy shoulder, Oleg can take independent steps and even climb stairs. He has a commanding laugh that will echo throughout the halls of the Phoenix Centre and an encyclopaedic knowledge of all Moldovan folk songs. During every Phoenix Centre celebration, Oleg will be the first to volunteer a song or poem. The physical therapy sessions have encouraged Oleg to exercise his arms more and strengthen his legs. At the same time, he is writing and learning to use computers. Though it will be a difficult journey with a lot of tiring physical activity, Oleg will do so with a song in his heart and a smile on his face.



**Vadim** is a 16 year old boy with Down Syndrome. He can't talk and couldn't dress or wash himself when he arrived at the centre. Now Vadim has become the older brother to all the other children in wheelchairs; as he can help them and does not leave the centre until everyone is wheeled outside.

Vadim never had any education, but he loves to draw, so the centre has encouraged him to start learning to draw letters as well as pictures. In a matter of months he has learnt the letters, and so hopefully he will be able to now learn how to write.

His passion is drawing, tennis, dancing and lately at 'spring fest' the teachers found an interest for playing guitar too.

When visitors arrive at the centre, Vadim will run over to take their coats, but also to try to get them to play a game of tennis. He would love to stay at the centre and not go home at all.



Finally, it would be remiss of us not to say a big thank you to BT, CWU Ireland, CWU UK and all those individuals who help raised funds to support this project.

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SPECIAL REPORT



A DREAM COME TRUE!

On the 4th September 2014 the CWUHA trustees took a momentous decision that would change the lives of hundreds of disabled and disadvantaged children in Moldova. Working with the charity 'Mad Aid' and their partners 'Moldova Aid' we agreed to convert an old school building, which closed in 1995 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, into an Activity Centre for disabled children.



The project was the brain child of Victoria Dunford, the founder of MAD-Aid who was born in Moldova and now lives with her husband John on the Isle of Wright.

The Main Aims of the project was:

- To set up an Activity Centre for Children with Disabilities in the North of Moldova
- To provide specific assistance for children up to 5 years of age
- To open a facilities centre for teenagers, in order to allow them to live independent lives
- To establish a rehabilitation centre for all age groups
- To create employment in the local community
- To offer a 'centre point' for wheelchair distribution

Their work in Moldova, highlighted the fact that children with disabilities don't have any social inclusion, very little or no education, and no available treatment.



The first step was to identify a suitable and strong building that could be adapted and refurbished to European Standards. After many trips and hard negotiating the Mayor of Riscani City offered them a building that had been disused for 2 decades. MAD-Aid signed a contract with Riscani Council on 15th November 2013 for the 49-year rent-free lease of the building. Although the structure of the building was very strong, the building itself required a substantial amount of refurbishment and reconstruction. So Victoria set herself the difficult challenge on having the centre ready to open by September 2015. Many of us felt this would be an impossible target... Oh, we of little faith!

But in order to do this, they needed was funding and support! Victoria contacted a number of potential partners, including CWUHA.

As the CWUHA's aims and objectives are closely aligned to Mad-Aids, it was a perfect fit for us to choose this as the ambitious project we had been looking for to mark our 20th anniversary. At our AGM in 2014 we proposed that we should go into partnership with Mad-Aid to refurbish one wing of the complex in

Riscani. The partnership was formally agreed in December 2014 and work was able to begin.

You might well wonder why Victoria, in conjunction with Mad Aid and Moldovan Aid felt it necessary to take on such a massive challenge. Victoria says "When I was young, I believed Moldova had no children with disabilities. They were there, but they were invisible. Because mobility aids are almost non-existent, children with mobility problems cannot access education unless their parents can afford to pay for private tuition in their home. These isolated children become isolated adults, trapped at home, alone for long periods and lacking the support they need. The ultimate aim in assisting children with impairments is to facilitate their inclusion in education and society in general".

Victoria's commitment was second to none and she personally project-managed the refurbishment; with support from local staff and partners. Contractors, wherever possible, were selected via a formal tendering process, which is unheard-of in Moldova. But it was important to us that all work was carried out to British/EU standards, especially in relation to access and equipment, as we wanted to meet the needs of all disabled people. In May and September of 2015, CWUHA convoy drivers delivered tons of equipment and building materials such as radiators, sinks, toilets, washing machines, showers, computers, printers, furniture, electrical supplies, beds, massage tables, fridges and other electrical items, and CWU Ireland purchased and helped install sensory equipment.

The biggest challenge was completing

the work to time, as well as generating an understanding on the importance of retaining accessibility standards for the ramp and bathroom and kitchen installations - because as previously mentioned, disability is not something Moldovans are used to - so in order to ensure the correct angle and length of the ramp, we had to have a few arguments along the way. As the building was constructed in 1985 under Soviet Union rule it had many steep steps. The building inspectors told us that what we "wanted" (bearing in mind they had no concept of its being necessary) was impossible, so the only way was to build the ramp at the back of the building. However, this would have meant that the children would only have access via the back door, or that we create a steep ramp at the front door, which would not be functional. In the end we sought advice, and with the architects help, we built a ramp that is 37 meters long, with a 3-6 degree angle.

Despite all of these challenges, the building, now named 'The Phoenix Centre', opened on time on the 19th September in the presence of the Moldovan Prime Minister, the British



Ambassador Phil Batson, Andy Kerr CWU Deputy General Secretary, Tom Keeney BT Director, Pascal Connolly, President CWU Ireland and CWUHA convoy drivers who were in Moldova delivering aid to orphanages, hospitals, vulnerable families and to the centre.

During the opening ceremony the children also played their part and our first wheelchair recipient celebrated his birthday by cutting the ribbon.

The name 'Phoenix' was chosen by CWUHA in memory of Mel Holmes - a lady who always wanted to go and deliver a smile to the children of Moldova, but unfortunately her health wouldn't allow it. She is no longer with us, but the Phoenix Centre will always hold her memory.

The centre opened its doors to children, who started coming daily to from the 22nd September. The centre is open 6 days a week, Monday to Saturday from 8 am till 5 pm.

Now the centre is up and running we can bring these previously isolated children together to help give them strength and confidence to understand that they are not alone. We can also provide treatment and offer social and educational inclusion for children with disabilities, as well as developing and identifying their potential and giving much-needed respite for their parents and carers, and bring employment and infrastructure to the local community. The centre aims to set a standard for further centres which can be replicated throughout Moldova. By training and investing in the staff of the Phoenix centre, they will be able to provide training for others.

At the moment some children attend every day, 5 days a week, and others attend 2-4 days a week. These children are already learning the art of interaction through poetry and laughter. The parents have told staff that they refuse to stay home and become quite upset on the days when they are not able to come to the centre. The idea of the centre is not just about providing social inclusion, but importantly to develop children's potential. For example, to offer extra computer training for those that are interested, or for those that express artistic interest provide extra tuition in that subject too. At the moment it is too early to identify individual interests, but in the meantime, they will be tutored in subjects giving them life skills.

Additionally, approx. 24 times a year there will be a 10-day Early Intervention Programme for up to 20 children. This means we will be able to help more than 400 children with disabilities each year. The aim of the programme is to assess children's needs early in their lives and to support their parents to care for them safely and appropriately for type of impairment.

With some government funding the centre is also able to distribute wheelchairs, which are delivered from the UK. The centre intends to start running training courses teaching the hospital staff on how best to use the specialised equipment and teach the parents and carers of disabled people how to push/drive a wheelchair safely.

The Centre also offers much needed employment and specialised training to an area of high unemployment. It currently employs 16 members of staff, some full time and some part time. A further 3 staff members will be employed in the early intervention centre. The training for the Early Intervention programme has been financed by Child Aid.

As the concept of approaching children with disabilities as an equal part of society without any discrimination is extremely new, the centre is aiming to provide as many relevant training opportunities as possible to invest in staff development.

The Phoenix Centre started with what seemed a small naive idea, "To help Disabled Children" by building something for them. Although, conception to completion happened in such a short space of time, the journey was a challenging one and extremely hard work.

Changing the lives of so many families and providing employment in this remote community is something that everybody involved in the project is extremely proud of, and here are just a few examples of some of the children who have benefited.....

