

Meet some of Alessia's orphaned street kids...

With so many men at war, most homes are headed by women and there aren't many adult men around. As a result, it's easy to find families willing to adopt war orphans who are girls, but much more difficult to find families willing to take in boys. As a result, there are many orphaned boys who are living on the streets. Since the war started, it is illegal to lock basements (which are accessed from the outside) because people need to get to them quickly when planes attack. As a result, these boys typically sneak into basements to sleep. To avoid getting caught, they constantly change where they sleep – rotating among many different basements.

There is one town with many street orphans that Alessia has befriended. They have shown her the various basements they frequent. The basements are dank, dark, and sometimes reek of sewage since pipes often leak. In the winter, the boys sleep on the heating pipes and that keeps them warm. Every one or two weeks, Alessia's team will leave food for these boys. She doesn't know which basement they will be in, so she divides the food up and leaves it in many basements. When they find food, then they run around to all the basements to collect it – like children on an Easter egg hunt!



*At first, as soon as we arrived they ran away quickly, only their sparkling heels visible. I didn't have time to say a word. So, we would leave food, blankets and gifts in different basements. And they told me that when they found food in one basement, they ran to look for it in others, because they understand that I didn't know their basement that day so I put food in several. They sing: "Thank you, Aunt Alessia, it was very tasty." And every time we gain their trust because we come and nobody touches them, nobody takes them to the orphanage, nobody threatens them.*

Only schools with bomb shelters now hold classes in person, and these are too far for many of the war orphans in her program to attend. Her children also don't have access to the technology needed to receive lessons online, so they not only faced the trauma of war and the death of one or both parents, they lost their opportunity for an education. Starting a "school" for her children was therefore a big push this winter. Friends from New Mexico gave money to buy a generator, computers, printers, and other needed equipment for three locations since the children are spread out geographically. They also hired one paid teacher to teach upper level math and science. The rest of the teachers are volunteers from the community.

One day, one of the homeless boys showed up at her school. He was nervous, but his mother, before the war, very much wanted him to study at a school so he took a chance. When he survived school without being taken to an orphanage, he came back the next day with two friends. Now the three boys study at the school, but they come when the other children aren't there because the boys are afraid the other children might tell authorities

about them. They know they will be recognized as street orphans because they smell bad from the sewage pipes and they have no way to take baths. One day Alessia and her husband gave them baths in their basement.

*One time we bathed them in the basement in a bowl. My husband bathed them, they screamed and cursed 🤢 It was cold, but we gave them hot food afterwards. I brought them soup, and porridge and condensed milk with sugar. They rejoiced. But the basement will never be the same. 🙄*

One day she convinced two homeless orphans to stay in her house – 14-year-old Roma and 10-year-old Bohdan. The boys were from Bakhmut, and they were very hungry. Roma ate 3 bowls of soup and then asked for a sandwich! The boys had no clothes except those they were wearing, and those were too bad to try to wash and salvage so Alessia found clothes for them. Roma trusted Alessia right away, but Bohdan was still afraid and constantly threatened to run away.

*Bohdan constantly provokes us. He tests us for sincerity. Bohdan says that he will run away from us. Bohdan climbed the fence today and said: "I will run away." We answered: "Yes, good, good, you will run away, but that will be later, for now stay with us." "Okay," he said, and he returned with us.*

Bodhan tested them several times – leaving to see if they would force him back. But they didn't chase after him so in time he gained confidence. Finally, Alessia told them they could each have a chick and start businesses, and then they lost interest in running away.

*I tell them, "We will make businessmen of you. You will have your own chick! The chicken will grow up, you will collect eggs and sell them, this will be your business." They ask me: "Aunt Alessia, is it true? Will you teach us?" They are very pleased. Bohdan asked me yesterday "Will the egg hatch?" He wants his chick. And for me, this means that he will not run away, at least for now, because he has a dream, a goal, a chick, and he will not run away. He had such a happy face. These are good and smart children. They are so cool! We love them.*

Alessia took in another orphan a year ago who is also called Roma, but he is 15 years old. A year ago, he struggled with a lot of trauma and anger but he eventually settled down. Now he gets frustrated with Bodhan.

*Bohdan is a hurricane. 🤪🤪🤪 15-year-old Roma asked me: "When will Bohdan calm down?" I said, "perhaps in half a year he will calm down a little." Then 15-year-old Roma exclaimed, "There will be such a hurricane in the house for half a year? 🤪" We laughed because 15-year-old Roma was the same a year ago 🤪🤪*

14-year-old Roma (Bodhan's brother) missed a year of school, and, at first, he didn't want to study with the other children because he was ashamed. But he is very smart, especially in math and physics. Soon he was able to solve all the physics problems, and he started charging other children 20 hryvnias (about 50 cents) to solve their homework problems for them. When the school found out, Alessia was called in to be confronted with Roma's misbehavior. She apologized to the school and lectured Roma, but when he wasn't around, she and her other

volunteers just laughed – they were proud of how clever Roma was! They have a soft spot for these orphans because they have been through so much.

Bohdan, the hurricane, is also proving to be extremely smart.

*Little Bohdan is a businessman and wants to know everything. How to do it, why do it, where to take it, to whom to take it, how to feed the geese, how to herd the geese, he says he will plant a vegetable garden and sell cabbage. He thinks so. Such a mindset. He says give me some land and show me how to plant. He himself will plant, water and then sell the produce and buy a phone. He is small, but he thinks like an adult.*

Many of the kids, like Roma, have physical scars from their ordeals.

*Children in Ukraine suffered a lot, it is hard to even imagine what these children had to go through.*

Alessia loves these kids SOOO much, and they are lucky to have her. Thank you for standing by her as she cares for hundreds of war orphans.