

# Emails from Shelly in the Ukraine



**Shelly Godien** is a prolific writer. I have 14 pages of emails from her that I have squeezed down to 4 pages. Between her work in the villages and the mountains working with HART (Humanitarian Aid Response Teams) Shelly manages to type a few pages. Nadia and Monica are mentioned throughout the emails. Monica is a clown friend of Shelly who spent some months with Shelly in the Ukraine.

Nadia, a Ukrainian, was in Canada last spring. Shobi met her only briefly at a hospital clown workshop in Calgary. Nadia seems to be this angel floating around the program. I have not been able to get a picture of her or even get her last name, but only emails like: "I will talk to Nadia about a photo, but currently she is out in the mountains with a dental team." Or "Nadia is off delivering food hampers." I definitely have the impression she is a wonderful woman doing selfless service and spreading a great deal of love, generosity and joy in the Ukraine. I believe the food hamper program worked through HART is her program. When a clown showed up, she and her family saw the response of her people and appreciated the need for clowns and humor in her country. This story is as much about her as it is about Shelly.

## ***But first . . . A little background on the Ukraine***

This is a country with proud strong agrarian people and a history of fighting for independence. They have also been through some of the most devastating events in modern history.

In 1932-33 Stalin went after the Ukraine as an example of 'harmful' nationalism. He engineered a famine against the farmers that killed as many as 7 million Ukrainians and later destroyed over 250 of the countries churches. During the purges of the intelligentsia of 1937-39, millions more Ukrainians were either executed or sent to Soviet labor camps. WWII brought further devastation and death, with 6 million perishing in the fighting between the Red Army and the German forces. It's estimated that during the first half of the 20th century, war, famine and purges cost the lives of over half the male and a quarter of the female population of Ukraine.

Then with Glasnost and Perestroika came the fall of Communism in 1991 and the promise of freedom from Russian domination. However, living through the transition from failed socialism to struggling capitalism has been disorienting and painful for Ukraine

as well as other former Soviet Republics. Sadly, the untold story Westerners do not see is the tremendous everyday hardship experienced by millions of people in Eastern Europe. The social network system in these countries collapsed leaving runaway inflation, astronomical unemployment and alcoholism, organized crime, violence, escalating food costs and political corruption.

The most vulnerable segments of the population, the very young and the very old, had to bear the brunt of this hardship as programs for these groups were heavily supported by the government. Orphanages lost all their support.

It is into this vortex of despair and hopelessness that HART has committed its energy and resources. HART provides critically needed aid such as food, clothing and medical care to orphanages, street children, invalids, hospitals, the elderly, those in prisons and the desperately poor. It also serves and equips National Christian leaders and ministries and facilitates the education, training, equipping of and financial support for indigenous Christian leaders and ministries. In a country like Ukraine, where hope is a rare commodity, HART's mandate - with love and compassion, is to restore faith in a brighter future, bridging the gap between despair and hope - one person, one family, one community at a time.

## ***. . . . .Enter the Clowns***

Who else can accomplish so much with our *hoping* humor as a clown? Well how about teaching clowning? As a clown you can make a person laugh for a day, but if you teach a person to clown they will laugh for the rest of their lives and infect their community with this good will! That is exactly what Shelly Godien is up to in the little villages of the Ukraine. She now has her own program but works through the HART network.

Shelly Godien is a teacher with a background specializing in children with autism. She took a leave from her job to go to the Ukraine for a year and now has returned for another year to work her clown program. Shelly is *Lite Brite* the clown in Calgary. In Ukrainian it is translated into "Svetlachoc" ("Fire Fly") When Shelly went to the Ukraine the first time she was a "First of May Clown." Being open to the needs of the community, she soon found herself being more and more involved with clowning

The following are composites of Shelly's emails. Hopefully I kept, in my editing, the quality of her love for her work and the Ukraine.

**Ministry through Laughter** is now Shelly's program. See [www.ministrythroughlaughter.com](http://www.ministrythroughlaughter.com) for more information.

"The Ministry through Laughter provides resources and equips others to carry on this work. Over 40 people involved in ministries have been equipped to use clowning as a way to reach out and love the children in Ukraine.

"When we do programs we do not limit ourselves to gospel skits, but the people I train are part of ministry teams. Although our work is within the ministries, we include everyone in our ministry. Personally I find that it is a way to simply share God's love with others. Many of the children we go to visit simply need to be loved. It is always a great joy to see the smiles on their faces and to hear their laughter.

### **Equipping the People with Humor**

"There has been lots of interest and enthusiasm to learn clowning even though the concept of clowning is so very new to many. Clowns here are associated with the circus and doing more acrobatics. (definitely not my thing - I can't even do a somersault). Community Clowning was a new concept for most of these people and they were super eager to learn and to step out and try it! One lady came up to me afterwards and said she was excited about trying clowning and has already made plans for several places that would incorporate clowns in the summer.

"Equipping others has become my focus. It is more to teach others than just entertaining. Creating clowns helps the community in so many ways: It is a way for people to have a positive impact on others, sharing joy and love with one another. We can teach people how to spread humor in their lives and in their communities."

Shelly works within the communities to create different activities. Sometimes she is with Monica and Nadia but she also gets the people in the community involved. And her intention is to teach enough of the Ukrainians to clown so they, too, can set up these activities. Following are some of their activities.

"Each community visit is diverse, depending on the setting. Sometimes there may be 100-300 children; then the format is usually more of a "show" where everyone can participate through songs and watching some fun clown antics. Other times we may have as few as 10 children, which allows for more one-to-one interactions. The programs vary from doing skits to having fun with the kids through silly action songs, interacting with them on a more one to one basis with a puppet, and sometimes playing soccer with a boy or two. Now that is a sight to be seen - a big clown bouncing the ball off her head! We do face painting, and games with a parachute. The children are very much a part of and the reason for any of the programs that we do. Even with a larger crowd we try to have some time at the end just to mingle with the kids and at least shake hands with each of them so that it is more personal and meaningful for the children and the clown."

Not all of Shelly's time was spent with clowning or teaching, there were Potatoes! ***The Joy of Simply Serving . . . and Potatoes, Potatoes, Potatoes...or in Ukrainian, Bulba, Bulba, Bulba***

"During the daytime, I've had the honor of helping out in the kitchen and wherever else there was a need. There is something to be said about 'simply serving' and making yourself available. Some of my most memorable times have been over potatoes; whether it be peeling them alongside other ladies in the kitchen or being out in the field digging them.

"Recently, a group of us went out again to the field that has been utilized by the church to grow many potatoes. Yep, it was harvest time! This was a great opportunity for me to work alongside my new-found friends as we picked up and sorted the potatoes. I will never look at potatoes the same way.



*Can you see those silly hats?*

"We use a lot of gestures and laughter to communicate, as my Ukrainian consists of maybe 20 words, and that is being generous. One day I brought my balloons and this day of "potatoes" without sausage, became a day with sausage (Kubasa) hats! [pictured above] At least that is what we ended up calling the tall silly hats I made for my fellow workers. The kubasa hats provided for a nice break, lots of laughs and a few amused looks from the other workers in the field.

Beside showing her fellow workers that even hard physical work can be fun, this kind of simple play has a way of putting everyone on an equal level. A clown's play in these situations is done without status. It is being on an equal basis that endears people to the clown. Then the "real" work of helping the community can be performed.

### **Orphanages / Internot (in Ukrainian)**

"Many children in Ukraine grow up within institutions rather than loving homes. Some of these children do not have parents and are 'true orphans.' Others have parents, but they are alcoholics and/or not able to afford to keep them at home so they grow up as 'social orphans.' As a result of this there are many orphanages just within Lviv and the surrounding villages.



*Shelly "FireFly" gets an enthusiastic greeting*

“Wherever we arrive, we are often greeted before we even get near the building. It is often hard to maneuver ourselves inside due to the huge throng of children. One never quite gets used to this heart-touching welcome. If it is a new place where we have not been and the clown(s) are a surprise, there will be eruptions of squeals, giggles and shouts of "clone (Ukrainian for clown)" clone" clone." And often the children will try to keep us from leaving at the end of our visit. One time at an orphanage, it took us an extra half hour to get in the car and to leave.



### ***“Caring Clowns Delight Orphans by Picking Their Noses!”***

No! The clowns weren't picking their own noses, they've done that already! Let me tell you what really happened.

“We set up a *birthday programs* at one of the orphanages and every two months we have a celebration for those children that have had birthdays. There are over 200 children, so each time there are about 25-30 ‘guests of honor’ birthday children in those two months. There is singing, skits and of course a clown. What is a birthday party without a clown? At the end all of the ‘birthday children’ were gathered on the stage to receive their funky balloon hats and a big red clown nose. At the first Birthday Party, as the children realized that each of them were actually going to receive a nose, a transformation took place on the stage. All of a sudden there was a perfect line of children wearing fixed grins standing in the ready position to pick their noses! Oh the smiles, as they had their picture taken, with the clown, in a matching red nose - this is a big hit!

“We had a *Carnival* at New Life church at Easter. It involved a lot of preparation and time, but everyone willingly, eagerly pitched in. It is always such a blessing to serve alongside this family of people. We had planned for and expected about 100 children, but had over 200 children attend the event. It was a whirlwind of activities for the entire three hours that the children were there. We started with a program, which allowed us to share the true meaning of Easter through clown antics, flannel story, puppetry, worship band and resurrection eggs. Then the children rotated through a variety of activities set up throughout the building; ranging from face painting, parachute games, a candy guessing game, crafts and even a quiz game!

### ***Traveling to the Mountain Villages – Carpathian Mountains***

“We left for a full week of ‘mountain living’ with our van loaded up from floor to ceiling. On the way we made a planned trip to an orphanage. It was an old historical mansion which is typical of many of the buildings in this region. This orphanage/internet houses more than 300 children. One third of these children are ‘true orphans,’ another third have at least one parent but with virtually no contact, the

other third come from home environments typically involving alcoholism and poverty. We had the opportunity to deliver much needed shoes and to do a program for about 100 of the children that reside there.

“The following day we were to stay with a family in Solevata who live at the peak of the village, so it is a long hike up to their house. When we arrived at the bottom of the hill of the village, we took all our needed supplies and the humanitarian aid from the van – six boxes of clothing, several bags of materials for programs, sleeping bags, and personal luggage including our clown stuff. We unloaded everything at the roadside and Boris (Nadia's husband and our driver) drove the van back to Lviv. So there we were with a huge mountain of stuff and not sure how we would get up the huge hill.

“It didn't take long to draw a crowd. Many of the women came to greet Nadia and were very pleased to help. My eyes almost popped out of my head watching some of the ladies, no more than 5 feet tall, hauling the big boxes full of the clothes on their backs, using a blanket as a lever! They even stopped during their trek up the hill to talk to people without putting the box down. I was thankful that we ourselves were not going to have to use this technique to get our bags and boxes up the hill! A wagon was found for all the remaining stuff. Together with half of the children from the village, we walked up to the house.



“The people here generally don't smile much. One of the village men came by on his wagon while we were doing a program with the kids, so I “red nosed” him. This produced a lot of laughter from the other parents that were watching from the side-lines!

### ***Club of Happiness***

“Since we had three days with these children, we decided to become a ‘club.’ The children were given name tags and earned stickers throughout each program day. They decided upon the name ‘Club of Happiness’ which was oh so true! Word spread quickly through the village and although we

started out with about 25 children, new faces were seen each day. We had a longer program with clowns on Saturday as this was the last day of our club. It was a big day! Monica and I tended to forget, when we were planning, that we were only three people and not a team of 6-10.

“After bringing our 'Club of Happiness' to a close and de-clowning and re-packing, it was then time to travel back down the hill. A wagon came for our bags and we were able to walk down the mountain with nothing to carry. There was room on the wagon for Monica to travel down in village style, so off she went riding at the front of the wagon with a ten-year-old boy driving the wagon. According to Monica, the ride ranged from very bumpy roads and a splashing creek to one very smelly and gassy horse!

“We waited for our van for about 3 hours, until we finally realized that it was probably not coming. It was now 9 p.m.. Thanks to the graciousness of one of the families, we were not left stranded. Luba, with her eight children, settled us into her living room. A quick call (yet not easy as it was hard to get a connection) to Lviv revealed that the van had been needed to drive to two other towns to deliver food hampers. Luba quickly extended an invitation for us to stay overnight and we did. They quickly made us some tea, and brought in a bed from the other room.

“The next morning Luba was busy making us breakfast when we heard a ruckus outside. All the children came running in shouting, ‘Boris is here!’ We packed up the van and made our way to Halia and Joseph’s in Neshna Vistosky.

“It was a slow drive to our program in neighboring Yabalnew. We stopped at several homes where Nadia had gifts of clothing and shoes for the children. We also stopped often along the way to tell the children that we would be having a program and where it would be. This is the best way to let people know about ‘upcoming events’ as the news spreads quickly.

“We were all gathered inside a large home by mountain standards. We had 30 people all tightly squeezed into one very hot kitchen. There were parents standing in the doorways. Kids were two and three deep sitting on the bed and many on benches. It was a great time.



*Some of the new Ukrainian Clowns*

We did programs for the kids at Neshna Vesotsky the next two days. I know many of these children quite well so it is always a delight to spend time with them.

### ***Kharcov Trip***

“After our routine of laundry and packing we left again for another long train ride to Kharcov. During my last visit there, I had been asked to come back and teach clowning to the missionaries at one of the Bible colleges. Since then the plans had evolved to include teaching clowning to seminary students as well as another session for Sunday school teachers and those involved at orphanages in and around Khracov. Both Monica and I were a little nervous and excited about such a formal setting and with so many participants. [Some of her new clown students are pictured below]

“Monday afternoon we had the honor of going to a halfway house to visit the children there. This particular halfway house is an intake hospital type setting for children that are found abandoned (usually at the train station) or removed from their homes (due to abuse and/or alcoholism). The children stay there and receive needed treatment while a more permanent residence/orphanage is found for them. Due to these circumstances these children were quite hesitant to meet us at first, but they quickly warmed up to us. They enjoyed playing with the clowns. It was so heart-warming to see many of these children laugh and have fun. At the end of our visit we brought out teddy bears. They were so delighted to be able to select a teddy bear that would be their very own to hug, love and squeeze. [Monica and Shelly are at top of picture below]



“At another half-way house there were only seven children and we were playing with a large parachute. At one point we all hid under it and I gave everyone a clown nose. There were lots of giggles from under that parachute. Then we all jumped out from underneath which surprised the adults. Everyone had such a good laugh. However, these children are not used to having many things that they can call their own, so the noses were quickly put away in their pockets where they would be safe.

“There is so much more to share. I do want to share how truly in awe I am of God’s love, and as I type this I am brought to tears (of joy!). It is so wonderful to be able to connect with people here and to ‘build into’ others’ lives as they do for me.”