

perspectives

...on the Semiahmoo Peninsula

Healing with words

Peninsula counsellor speaks to impoverished Romania

Hannah Sutherland
Black Press

It's grey and dim in Bucharest, Romania.

Nobody smiles in the bleak and dispirited atmosphere, and the people – recovering from the 24-year reign of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu – are hopeless.

In a seemingly quixotic attempt to help, Dr. Jennifer Montgomery left behind a comfortable office on Johnston Road where she works as a clinical counsellor.

Warm yellow walls, stuffed animals poking out from a shelf and a rocking chair in the middle of the welcoming room – her White Rock work space was a complete contrast to her home for one month in impoverished Bucharest.

Even though it's been 18 years since Ceausescu's communist regime, she said it might as well have been yesterday for the people living there.

"It's not like any place I've ever seen before. It's more than just poverty."

But despite her new surroundings, Montgomery was hesitant to leave, and is now anxious to return.

She will be going back July 13 to continue counseling sessions she held with locals last year.

Spending an hour with each client, Montgomery held more than 50 free sessions for people needing someone to talk to.

Not only did she counsel resi-



Brian Giebelhaus photo

Peninsula counsellor Jennifer Montgomery left the comfy confines of the Peninsula for the Romanian city of Budapest, where she spent hours helping the city's dispirited people.

dents during her last visit, but she also worked with humanitarian workers.

Humanitarian teams can become disheartened by the task set out for them in Bucharest. Because their work is emotionally strenuous, Montgomery offered a team-building seminar.

"There's something about reaching out to people who can't get what they need – to me, that just meant so much."

But Montgomery has a new focus for her return this summer. She will be working with Iana Matei, a woman who started a program for women used as sex slaves in the human trafficking business.

Montgomery will spend a lot of time in Matei's shelter for trafficked women.

Her two children will be travel-

ling with her as well, and volunteering for different causes.

Her 14-year-old daughter will work in orphanages and a centre for mothers and their children, while her 15-year-old son is going to work with homeless and street people.

"I truly would want them to experience what it's like in other countries... and get out of the North America bubble," she said. "They're both very excited about it."

The opportunity to counsel in Romania first arose last year when she was invited by a missionary couple who she had done marriage counseling for.

When she was invited back this year, she didn't even hesitate to accept.

"Maybe there's that pull there," Montgomery said, adding her

heritage includes Romanian, Hungarian and Ukrainian.

Her goal when she returns is to break down the stigma that only "crazy" people see a counselor, and encourage more people to talk.

She would also like to work with the middle and upper class.

"Those are the people who will become leaders."

After counseling people in White Rock, a fairly affluent community, Montgomery found little difference in working with Bucharest locals.

"I believe as human beings, we are more alike than we are different. We're alike in our pain, grieving and trauma."

She noticed a change in the people she spoke to as she brought back some hope in their lives.

"(I) mirror back to them the

strengths that I see in them that they've lost sight of themselves."

In order to help people in Romania, Montgomery needs help getting there.

Airfare, room and board and her commitments in White Rock – such as her house and practice – is paid for through donations.

And although Montgomery dislikes raising funds, she does it anyway to fulfill her calling.

"My heart and my passion since I was a kid is helping people. It's just who I am."

She remembers a rewarding moment from last summer after holding a seminar for an organization that works with teen mothers. The workers felt there was so much they needed to do and they couldn't contribute enough.

One woman in her 50s approached her afterwards, tears streaming down her face, and said:

"You don't know how timely this was today."

And although Montgomery didn't know what the woman's situation was or exactly what was meant, with tears in her own eyes, she somehow understood.

Fundraiser

Montgomery is holding a Relief for Romania fundraiser at the Sandpiper Pub, 15595 Marine Dr., Thursday, June 21 at 6 p.m.

For more information e-mail doctorjen@telus.net or phone 604-244-6969.