

The familiar holiday song of "Over the River and Through the Woods" comes to mind as I recall my Thanksgiving travels. It was at that time that Heartspring staff traveled across the ocean, over the mountains and through the plains to provide training and support to teachers of children with autism and other disabilities in Croatia.

Each of you may have been home having Thanksgiving dinner with your families, but you were also touching the lives of children in a country that has very limited resources for educating children with special needs. You were part of giving doctors, nurses, pedagogues, logopedists and defectologists current information about the early diagnosis of autism. You were instrumental in providing a rich meal of best practices to teachers who were hungry to learn. You were providing encouragement and hope to families. You were improving special education.

How did you do that? By the use of specific donor contributions from individuals who have a vision, we were able to respond when Heartspring received a request to come to Croatia to provide autism training. For 17 days we traveled, toured, trained and presented; not only to programs in Croatia, but also making connections with programs in France, Belgium, Romania, Sweden and Austria. We met with representatives from the Ministry of Education, The Center for Autism, Rehabilitation Centers and the Institution of Cerebral Palsy. We spent time in classrooms, therapy centers, administration offices and homes.

Despite crowded schools and a lack of resources, the teachers in Croatia hunger for professional development. The entire country has only four universities. There are few conferences, workshops or speaker venues for professional staff. There is no access to mentoring and consultation.

One group of teachers attended our presentation at a hospital for doctors, nurses and other medical staff. We talked of early diagnosis as well as shared stories of Heartspring and our students. When the session ended, the teachers waited patiently for their chance to speak to us. Then they asked, "What can we do to get you to come to our school? When can you see our kids, our program, and our methods? How can we get you to show us how you work? Will you come tomorrow?" We went to our host and changed our schedule to spend time with these teachers and their students.

We left many new friends in Croatia. Among them is Vladimir Benkovic, the Director of the Center for Autism in Rijeka. It was his invitation that took us there. Upon our return, Vladimir described his feelings about how exciting it had been to give his teachers the "Hi-tech presentations of the experts of Heartspring." He said, "I had astringents in my throttle, tears in my eyes."

In professional development, our goal is to improve special education. There are many ways we strive to achieve that. Sometimes we get to see the results. Sometimes it feels like it is too big of a job. This time we got to see it in a real and meaningful way. Real children, real teachers, real families are once again changed, and I am one of them.



Because of you

by Evelyn Horton
Director of World Reach

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HEARTSPRING'S Dialogue

The Dialogue is published quarterly by the Heartspring Office of Communications, 8700 East 29th Street North, Wichita, Kansas 67226. For more information about Heartspring, call 1-800-835-1043 or visit www.heartspring.org. Since 1934, Heartspring has provided services to children with disabilities, helping them lead independent lives and be contributing members of their communities. For referrals to Heartspring Pediatric Services, please call 316-634-8710. For referrals to the Heartspring School, please call 1-800-835-1043. For information about donations to Heartspring, please call 316-634-8740.

ON THE COVER

During one of his routine visits to Heartspring, Austin climbs the cargo net as part of his physical therapy.

