

'Dr. Jennifer' to the rescue

Therapist seeks to ease residents' suffering

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Dr. Jennifer Montgomery saw a transformation last month in Romania.

A Bucharest teenager had come to see her – but initially it was a visit shrouded in secrecy. Before dropping by, he considered the move for three days and then made sure his teenaged friends wouldn't find out he was seeing a Canadian therapist.

But after one session with Montgomery, who runs a counseling practice in White Rock, he changed completely.

"He went from being suspicious and nervous to not being able to thank me enough," said Montgomery, who spent August offering therapy to Bucharest residents still suffering from the reign of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.

She found that she touched lives volunteering in Romania.

The teenager lived with a mother who was mentally ill, and struggled to pursue his interests – attending a youth group, for instance – because his mother was against it.

"He needed someone to say that he's a good guy, that he has choices," said Montgomery.

"He needed to be given permission to be his own self."

He was so changed by his experience with Montgomery that he later hugged her in front of his friends.

The boy is just one of several people whose lives Montgomery was able to change through 53 therapy sessions and two seminars in Bucharest, where she spoke to congregants of the Bucharest International Christian Assembly and others.

Two Canadian missionaries from the



Brian Giebelhaus photo

Jennifer Montgomery visited Romania to help the country's people cope with life after dictatorship.

church invited her in May to come to Romania, a country whose people struggle with poverty, abandoned babies, and an AIDS epidemic – all parts of Ceausescu's legacy.

"Even though he was overthrown 17 years ago, it may as well have been yesterday," Montgomery said.

"It is grey everywhere with all the concrete. The people are untrusting and suspicious. They don't smile."

As an experiment, Montgomery would smile at people she passed on the street. Not one passerby returned the gesture.

"I asked my clients why, and they said to smile would be fake," she said.

"They don't even smile in family photos. They said they have no reason to smile, and they don't know who I am."

What Montgomery found was hopelessness – people think about getting through the day, not about the future. Young people, who, even with jobs, can't afford to move out of their parents houses. And she spoke with people about sexual abuse,

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depression, orphans, and what Montgomery calls "spiritual warfare" – trauma over abortions, embezzlement, and questions over religion.

No social system has been established to replace decades of Communist rule under Ceausescu, where "everything belonged to everybody," Montgomery said, and parents were encouraged to have many children.

Roads are in terrible disrepair, and a lack of long-term goals to improve infrastructure is a national malaise.

She was able to help her clients, she said, because she acted as a mirror.

"I saw their pain and their strengths, and they responded to the mirror," she said.

"And they got better."

Her experience proved what she often tells clients: that as humans,

we're more alike than different.

"We all hurt the same. (The clients) embraced the care I extended, and began to hope again.

"Their spirits were lifted, and they soon realized that they did have choices."

Montgomery is grateful to friends who helped fund her trip and hopes to make the trip an annual event.

"It was very hard to leave," she said. "I miss the people already."