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## **Kids giving help to Bulgarian orphans**

*By Emilie H. Wheeler*

To aid orphans in Bulgaria who desperately need help from the outside, Deborah Dushku Gardner approached their international peers in Logan on Friday.

"The youth are the ones who have a lot of power," Gardner said to a group of students at InTech Collegiate High School where she was presenting about One Heart Bulgaria, a non-profit organization she co-founded a few years ago.

Although Gardner has worked to raise money for multiple needs in Bulgaria's numerous orphanages over the years, right now she is focusing on a teenage orphanage that has broken or missing windows. The local charity she is executive director of needs more than \$7,000 as soon as possible to send to the eastern European country before the nation progresses even farther into its cold, winter season.

Gardner wants the school to commit to raising \$1,000 of those funds.

With this endeavor, she has three helpers: Michael, Alex and Matthew Petersen, who are 16-year-old students at the charter high school. Michael and Matthew were toddlers when adopted by a local family from Romania and Alex was 5 when that same family adopted him from Bulgaria.

Every Christmas season the boys have worked to help orphanages around the world in several countries, said their mother, Janet Petersen. This year, they are asking their classmates to help.

"We want to give back to the countries we came from," said Michael.

Before Gardner's presentation, the Petersens gave their classmates a heads-up of what kind of children they would be helping.

On Friday, Gardner, a former Latter-day Saint missionary to Bulgaria, finished it up with a slideshow and a plea for help from the students she said live in a country full of abundance.

"It's really just a matter of human-kind," she said of why people should help.

Gardner co-founded One Heart Bulgaria in 2003 with a former mission companion. It is operated mainly outside her Providence home, but has a board of directors and employees in Bulgaria who help manage that end of the charity. It is registered in both countries as a non-profit and in three years, has expanded to help fund lives of children in at least 14 orphanages there.

The Petersen boys say they often get questions from friends and peers about their life in eastern Europe and adoption.

"They ask about the orphanages," said Alex, adding that classmates have been supportive of their efforts to help the orphans.

They also ask what kind of memories the boys have of their life there, although Matthew and Michael say they were mainly just told of what their first couple of years were like.

Gardner tried to visualize the lives of children who have not been adopted with pictures from her visits to Bulgaria. Students groaned in sympathy when Gardner shared photos and stories

about filthy living conditions, 15-month-old children who are only picked up to have diapers changed, and experiences of 18-year-old orphans who live on the streets.

Bulgaria, she said, gets very little humanitarian aid compared to other struggling countries, which is part of the reason she's chosen to concentrate her efforts there. It is also difficult to send actual items into the country because of strict taxes.

An individual, Petersen said, can carry up to \$10,000 on them without being taxed when they enter Bulgaria, however. That's part of the reason Gardner is soliciting for monetary donations.

If excess funds are raised, they will go toward other needs, Gardner said. Her first focus is the windows, however.

The boys see their situation in a similar light. While the whole valley can become involved, they're concentrating on their classmates right now.

"Let's just start with our school," Matthew said he and his brothers decided when they heard of Gardner's goal.

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