

# Orphan Outreach Ministry

*A mother's heart*

by Susie Lloyd

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction. (James 1:27)

Nazar sits in a crib in a bare room, smiling and laughing. Staffers gather around in amazement. They've never seen the young teen laugh before, though he has been in this orphanage in western Ukraine since he was 5 years old.

Sandie Flannery laughs with him as she shows him a pink toy that plays music. They dance. She hugs and kisses him. Nazar is one of many mentally and physically handicapped orphans across Ukraine who were dropped off by their

families as babies. They are the reason Flannery is here. She is the founder of Orphan Outreach Ministry, which she operates with the support of her parish, Our Lady Queen of Peace Church in Brodheadsville, Pennsylvania.

A retired early-childhood special-education teacher, Flannery is first and foremost a mother. Her love for each orphan is deeply personal, as it is for her own special-needs daughter and the two sons she tragically lost as young adults. She and members of her team visit Ukraine twice a year, bringing equipment, toys, education, and joy. Flannery spoke with *Catholic Digest* about the ministry.

**Q** What brought you all the way to Ukraine and the orphans?

Orphans and volunteers sing and praise God while camping in the Carpathian Mountains.



## Love Your Neighbor

**A**Ten years ago I accompanied a couple to Ukraine as they sought to adopt three children with Down syndrome. At the baby orphanage, I met a Baptist pastor whose church was helping to do some much-needed renovations. He shared with me a little boy, Valko, who had extra digits. When I held him, I started to cry, and he asked if I was scared of him. I explained that I was a teacher of children like this and the mother of a similar child, Jillian, with Mowat-Wilson syndrome. He asked if I would come back and teach his people how to teach the kids. I felt then that I had to come back.

**Q** What do you do for them?

**A**I do whatever I can. My philosophy at the beginning was to make a difference in the life of one child and one caregiver. Like Mother Teresa said, “We cannot all do great things, but we can do small things with great love.”

**Q** How do you help the caregivers?

**A**Ukraine was under the USSR, so a lot of people didn’t have any belief system or value for human life. They locked these kids

as far away as they could from the public eye. These orphanages are typically out in remote villages, down a dirt road, behind a concrete wall. The people in the older orphanages are considered the cast-offs of society. If you are hired to take care of them and you are not given very good wages, you don’t feel very good about what you are doing.

There is no motivation to do anything above and beyond the basic minimum to get paid. I thought that if I could change the caregivers’ hearts and mindset, then their treatment of the children would be different. There is a whole different feeling you get in the baby houses for the kids above age 5. Below age 5 they are cute and fun to be with; cleaning up their urine and bowel movements is not as big of a deal as it is to change the diapers of a 20-year-old. So much of what I’m doing is to educate the caregivers to see the potential the children have.

Some of them had no idea that kids with Down syndrome can grow up to learn to read and write and do math and say more than a couple of words. They are not given any

training in how to handle these kids. Some of the staff imitate what I am doing. They learn strategies for positioning the children to reduce contractures, and so they can be fed more easily and can bear weight on their feet.

**Q** Have you brought other professionals with you to teach the caregivers certain techniques?

**A**Yes, the first conference we held included an occupational therapist, a psychiatrist, and a couple who had adopted several children with Down syndrome. The following year we had a team of 18 people, which included a physical therapist, occupational therapists, therapy students, and an adult girl with Down syndrome. She was a strong advocate, and she spoke. People were shocked.

**Q** What’s a typical day like for you when you are there?

**A**I go around, talk to them, and hug and kiss everybody. The kids crave affection. I take them outside, stimulate them, feed them, sing to them, and talk to them with a translator. If I see a need, I try to fill it. Right now they need a new dryer and dental care. Our

ministry will be sponsoring Mercy Mission Trucks, a team of Ukrainian dentists to attend to their dental needs.

**Q** How did your parish get involved?

**A** After my son Lee died, I didn't go back to Ukraine for about two years. I went into a depression, and Vladimir Putin annexed Crimea. I kept praying and saying, "God, what do you want from me?" I decided to fundraise because I knew I had to do something.

Meanwhile, my pastor and the parish council

were asking me to bring the ministry to the church. I knew I could do more with the support of the church than I could alone. During that time, we became Orphan Outreach Ministry. I started doing presentations, and people started asking about the kids. People started praying for them. We had a fundraiser and raised \$5,500. With that, people wanted to join the ministry.

**Q** Did this ministry help your faith?

**A** The Baptists questioning me about



Little Anton, in need of medical attention, was almost adopted twice. He is available for adoption.

Catholicism pulled me closer to the Church. I had to learn to answer their

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questions! Instead of being a casual Catholic, I became a really active participant. I am still connected with that pastor, but I have my Catholic connections in Ukraine now — the DePaul Society, the Sisters of Mercy, and volunteers. My long-term plan is to get connected to Missio, Pope Francis' initiative to bring awareness to small ministries. We got approval to start that process, but that was right when my other son died. In February 2017 my son Kris was killed crossing the street at work. Every time I lose a child, I drop the ball for a little bit.

**Q** You have been through so much. Does working with the orphan kids help you as well as them?

**A** One of my happiest moments was this past year. A young man named Sasha has cerebral palsy. He was given up by his parents as a preschooler. He was adopted once but given up again at age 7. He has spent his life in that orphanage. He told me he used to be able to sit like a “yoga man,” but now

his legs are like scissors — tight. His arms are all contracted because they get no therapy. But this young man has taught himself to read and write. He found me on Facebook and befriended me. He has no ability to physically do anything for himself, not even sit up. We sent him a power wheelchair. I went over in November 2017, and we set it up for him. It was like watching a child have his first steps.

**Q** How do you manage all these challenges?

**A** When I'm over there, the Holy Spirit fills me with grace and stamina. I could put in an 18-hour day and be as wide awake at the end of the day as I am in the morning because I am so excited to be able to help the kids.

**Q** Do the orphans have families?

**A** Once the families send them there, they are done with them. Very many of them sign off on them. Some don't. Those are like social orphans. They're given a life sentence to

remain in an orphanage. They have parents, but they can't be adopted. The thing that is really sad is that there is a whole group of these kids who started out with normal cognitive abilities but physically deformed bodies. They just lie in cribs, and nothing is done for them.

**Q** Tell me some success stories.

**A** There is a little girl named Olya with microcephaly. She was a twin, and the parents kept the healthy twin. The staff fell in love with her. One of the therapists, Tanya, worked with her very closely and followed up on all the advice I had given her. This little girl really surprised them with the leaps and bounds that she made. The director said, “Please, can you find a family for her?” She was recently adopted by a Ukrainian-American family.

And Nazar — his room is now brightly painted. He is able to sit up in a wheelchair. He's now not just in a crib staring at blank walls. 

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SUSIE LLOYD is the author of *Bless Me, Father, for I Have Kids*. Visit her at [SusieLloyd.com](http://SusieLloyd.com).



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