

Extension Agent Helps Feed The Hunger For Knowledge In Moldova

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LEWISTOWN (Mifflin Co.) — Take a group of people under communist rule for 80 years, give them freedom and democracy, and what do you get? A group of highly motivated people who are fiercely proud of their country and the progress they've made, but extremely lacking in even the simplest free-enterprise concepts.

That's what Andrew Martin, Penn State Farm Management extension agent based in Mifflin County, found in April when he visited the Republic of Moldova, a former USSR republic that gained independence in 1991. Andrew visited Moldova as an agribusiness volunteer for the Citizens Network for Foreign Affairs. The program, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, strives to "improve the lives of small-scale and private farmers and agribusiness entrepreneurs in the former Soviet Union and southern Africa."

Moldova compares in size to Maryland, borders Romania on one side and the Ukraine on the other three, and contains some of the richest soils in the world — chernozem or black soil. The climate resembles the climate in Illinois, and its people look to the United States for knowledge and leadership.

"When the communists left, everyone became a farmer," Andrew explains. "The United States helped privatize the land, to come up with the deed process and criteria for dividing the collective farms into five-acre increments. The United States recommended nondisputable survey points produced by GPS or Global Positioning System."

The country now consists of families trying to survive on five acres each while dealing with a corrupt and bankrupt government. "This is the first generation after communism. They've never had to market products. Under communism, they were followers — you produced your product, grapes, in this case. Now they're required to grow,



Families throughout communities in Moldova share resources, such as tractors. With little available money, car parts are often retrofitted for use as garden tools, such as hoes. Farm Management specialist Andrew Martin, center, taught Moldovians marketing concepts for the ag products they produce.

bottle, label, and sell, and they've never had an example of how to do that. I can teach marketing, and they can repeat it back to me because the communist schooling required obedience and discipline, but they can't apply it. They're very inefficient too. In fact, a word for efficiency doesn't exist in their Romanian-based language."

Andrew introduced some marketing concepts to the class that he taught at the Moldova Agricultural College. He spent the previous week in Chistnau developing a lesson plan. "The World Bank lent money to the country to set up local banks. The banks started small, with only \$5,000 to lend to local farmers for seed and short-term labor during harvesting. The bank's board members are local people. I taught a one-week class in a small village of Mereseni to board members on how to approve a loan, what a banker should look for, when and if a member can borrow, and how to figure cash flow. The loans average \$150 with four



Each family takes its turn shepherding the cows on common land along highways and around ponds. The cows are fed corn stalks in winter.

months to pay. The average family's net worth in Moldova is \$5,000, including the house, land, cow, and chicken."

Andrew applied to become a volunteer for many reasons. "There's a moral obligation to help. It's in America's best interest to help for trading and world stability, and they are intelligent people — a mind is a terrible thing to waste. It was a perfect match — my skills with what the program personnel were looking for. I was drawn to the farmer-to-farmer approach. I've been on two mission trips prior to working for extension. I've always felt a need to help countries economically. It's hard for a person to listen to anything else when they're hungry."

Andrew found the people in Moldova hungry for more than just food. "The people were friendly, hospitable, lean, but healthy because they walk everywhere. Our meals consisted of cucumbers, spiced sausage, olives and sardines. If the family had money, homemade cow cheese, bread made on Saturday for the whole week, and pitchers of wine because the water isn't drinkable. They have no consistently available source of heat and no fertilizer for their crops. They take turns grazing their cows on common ground near a pond or along the road. They feed their cows straw. When they harvest the corn, the kernels feed the chickens, the corn stock becomes fuel for heat, and the corn leaves become handy in the outhouse.

"Most of the people don't want to live like Americans. They see us as very wasteful. They simple want the basics — enough money to put gas in a car for a day trip once a month or to buy a gift when someone gets married, but they can't. The trip has given Andrew new perspective. He said, "I feel blessed to pay taxes now. We get something for our money — roads, schools. They don't. They pay taxes and get nothing."

Moldova continues to face the challenge of growing economically and finding good leadership for its country. When in Mereseni, the mayor told Andrew, "If the majority of people are farmers, and if they can't manage individual farms, how can they manage their country?"

"Emerging economies start with agriculture," Andrew concludes. "That's why I went to Moldova."

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