

My Journey for a Lifetime by Laura Lee

New Adventures

May 20, 2013

As I sit here at terminal D35, Toronto, sipping my Pink Passion fruit Ice Tea, I'm reminded of the time that I was in a similar situation, getting ready to depart for Australia. The difference this time? I'm alone.

Every time I have travelled, it has always been with family, friends or the school. As I walked behind the security gate, away from my parents and phone-addicted sister, I realized that this is actually happening. I am going across the world without anyone I know. Though, I am only truly alone on this short lag of my trip to Halifax, the feeling of venturing out by myself is still present. There is no one to constantly ask me if I have my passport or hound me about keeping my bags with me at all times. It is indeed a scary thought, but I know that I am ready. I am ready to take on new responsibilities and explore the world around me.

Once I land in Halifax, I will be staying with Garry for a night and then leaving to Poland tomorrow. It is very daunting going off to a new and unknown land, but ever so exciting.

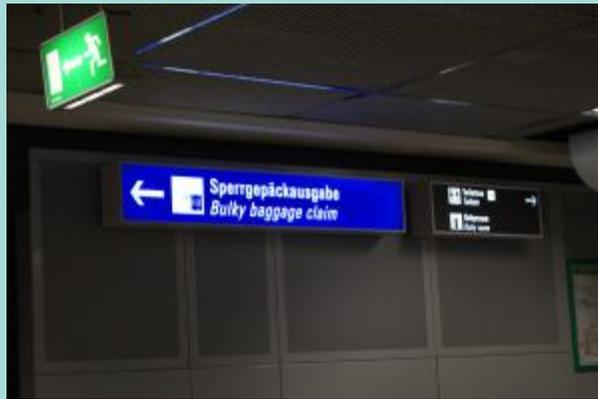
Frankfurt

May 22, 2013

The journey to Frankfurt was as uneventful as travelling goes.

I quickly got to know my new travelling companions, Lori, Ainslie, Emma and another Laura, and our Coalition/Foundation chaperone, Kamila! I spent my time cuddled up in my seat with my Kindle. Once we arrived in Frankfurt, the first thing I noticed was German spelling.

I had originally attempted to pronounce these long German words with English pronunciation, but eventually had to admit defeat.



As we had a few hours to kill in Frankfurt before our bus to Berlin, we stored our bags away and went on a walk around the city. The first thing that hit me about the city was the amount of smoking. The second thing that hit me about Frankfurt was the cars. Frankfurt is made up of Mercedes-Benz's. Everywhere I turned, there was another Mercedes. Though, these Mercedes were not just those sleek black cars that you imagine when you think of a Mercedes. The Mercedes here are not just civilian cars but also construction cars, city buses, egg-shell white taxis and tractor trucks. In fact, I am writing post while sitting in a Mercedes-Benz coach bus enroute to Berlin. Why am I talking about cars so much? I am not entirely sure. I just know that the amount of Mercedes, BMWs and Audis in this city are nearly overwhelming.



Apart from my slightly odd car watching, we also visited an old church, some very interesting architectural areas and a cozy little market place. We walked across the river bridge, finding thousands of locks carefully chained along the length of the bridge. These locks, used to remember people who have passed away, made the bridge feel like it was not just any old bridge that connected either side of a river, but a community of people working together to remember the past as well as stepping forward into the future.



Stepping Into The Past

May 24, 2013

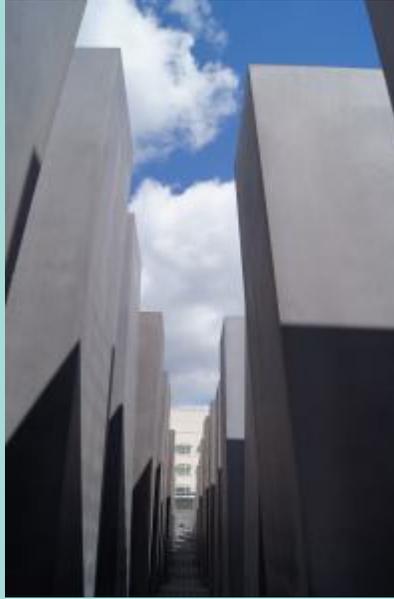
Berlin is a city that is always bustling. When you look outside and see all the modern buildings, the crowds of people and, of course, the abundance of Mercedes and Audis, it is easy to forget how much history has gone into shaping this city.

After breakfast, we all headed over to the Holocaust Memorial. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews was opened in 2004 and is a large area filled with concrete stelaes. From the outside, it just looks like an impressive array of concrete blocks, making a sort of wave pattern. However, the farther in you go, the larger the stelaes become and the more overwhelming it all becomes. These stelaes quickly grow much taller than you, forming a sort of labyrinth.



While navigating this memorial, I was reminded of how great a symbol this was of the Holocaust. At any point in the memorial, you are easily able to see the way out – straight ahead of you. Though, as you keep walking straight, towards the exit, you encounter these “intersections” between the stelaes. Just before you enter each intersection, you are in a brief moment of fear of what lies behind the left and right. You cannot see who, or what, may

intercept your path as you try to find the exit. More than once I found myself accidentally bumping into a little boy running in a different direction or walking directly in front of someone attempting to take a picture.



Each of these stelae were also different from each other. Some tall, some short. Some straight, some slightly angled. This aspect of the memorial reminded me of the erratic unpredictability of the Holocaust. You never knew what kind of stelae you will encounter at the next turn.



After the Holocaust museum, we went to learn about the Berlin Wall. This wall was erected during the Cold War when Germany was split between West (Allies) and East (Soviets). Splitting Germany right down the middle, this wall prevented people crossing over, primarily from East to West. As you walk around the city, you can spot white crosses with names acting as

memorials for those who died trying to cross the wall. At the museum site, we saw a section of the wall that was kept up as a reminder. This wall was slowly crumbling away, but the effect of depicting its expanse was still ever present.



There are still remains of this wall broken up into small sections scattered around the city, on which artists have made canvases out of.

On another note, the rest of the girls and I have found great pleasure in the funny pedestrian walk signals here.



Evidentially, we are not the only ones who find these walkway signs amusing either, as we soon found a shop dedicated solely to walkway sign merchandise. This merchandise ranged from iPhone cases to baby pacifiers and, yes, even walkway sign shaped pasta!

Walking A Marathon In Berlin

May 25, 2013

Sore feet don't even cover how everyone's feet feel. From the toes to the heels, our feet are very sore, but it was well worth it.

Starting bright and early in the morning, we headed off to the German Parliament building and got a very picturesque 360 degree view of Berlin. There is a large part of Berlin that is covered in foliage called Teardrop Park. This park reminded me a lot of Central Park in New York. A bustling city in the centre, but once you step into the green, everything calms down.



We then went to see the Cathedral. From the bottom, the Cathedral look massively tall, but don't let looks fool you, it is in fact very tall. However, we did not take no for an answer and dauntlessly climbed the winding,

narrow and very steep stairs to the top. The climb was definitely worth it in the end as the view of the city was brilliant. There were a lot of angel statues atop the Cathedral though, but have no fear, I didn't forget to keep my eyes on them and NOT BLINK!



After that, we had free time to go shopping and wander the wonderful city of Berlin. Officially known as “the girl who loves cars”, we dropped by a few car dealerships so I could goggle at the nice cars. We also found a very large department store to peruse. We were also able to watch people jump off the tops of buildings for fun, enjoy the smoke filled air and laugh at the German “hot dogs” (which are sausages stuck in a dinner roll). Another form of amusement I have found is looking through bookstores to find the same books that I read, but in German. All in all, the amount of walking we do is completely and totally worth it.

Tomorrow we are taking the early morning train to begin our work..

Adgneszka

May 26, 2013



Name: Adgneszka

Age: 17

Condition: Brain tumor

About: She has been battling her brain tumor for 2 years and spent most of her time in the hospital. She is about to start her final exams and really hopes she will pass. After she is done high school, she wants to study tourism in college. She has a younger 9 year-old brother who loves to be around girls. Her older sister died in a car crash. Before she was diagnosed, she loved to play soccer. She previously had brain surgery to remove her tumor, but they were only able to remove half. She is now on Chemo to try to get rid of the rest of her tumor.

Wish: Nikon D3000 Camera

Other Gifts: Camera bag, bean bag, perfume, make-up

In the morning, we all went over to the foundation's office to wrap up all the presents for the children we will be visiting this week. Putting on some songs, we drive right into the sea of wrapping paper, gifts and very very sticky tape. Most people view having to wrap all those presents as a chore,

but I thoroughly enjoyed myself, constantly challenging myself to find new and better ways to wrap large boxes and oddly shaped items. Finally, after a few hours of wrapping, we were all done.



We then headed back over to the hotel to change and get ready for our first wish! Meeting Adgnieszka at a restaurant in central Warsaw, we were all ecstatic to meet Adgnieszka. Accompanied by her mother, Adgnieszka was a slim 17 year-old girl with a bright smile on her face. Though she only spoke Polish, we were all able to instantly connect. Quickly jumping right into the gifts, Adgnieszka carefully opened all the presents, apologizing profusely for “ruining our very beautiful packaging”. Her mother quietly watching and folding the wrapping paper, like all moms do, was glowing with pride while watching her daughter’s happiness.

Meeting and getting to know Adgnieszka was one of the most empowering things I have done. Seeing such a strong young woman, having fought her brain tumor for 2 years, bright up with such a simple gift of a camera. She was often lost for words, as was I. Myself, being known for being “tech savvy” and into photography, I was instantly thrown into helping teach Adgnieszka how to put her camera together and the basics of how to use it. It was truly amazing to be able to share my love of photography with Adgnieszka. This reminded me of how similar we were even though she

grew up half way around the world in a very different culture. The language barriers between us were broken down through a mutual fascination of her new camera. As great as the food was at the restaurant, the smile I saw on Adgneska was far better. Needless to say, it was a fantastic start to our gift giving!

Magda

May 27, 2013



Name: Magda

Age: 16

Location: Olsztyn

Condition: Brain tumor

About: She has been battling a brain tumor for a while. She is currently on chemo therapy but does not receive it as often as she should due to her blood health. Due to previous chemo treatments, Magda has a hard time hearing and get very frustrated when she cannot hear. Magda lives with her older sister who is 28, her mother, father and dog. When she grows up, Magda wants to be a sports journalist as she loves watching soccer and writing.

Wish: X-box

Other gifts: TV, X-box Kinect, X-box games, red Converse high-tops, movies, perfume

In the morning, the five of us girls headed off for a visit to the Canadian Embassy in Warsaw. Having never visited an Embassy before, it was very cool to be “back in Canada” while still in Poland. After a tour and a meeting and questions session with one of the Embassy representatives, we headed back to the foundation to leave for the rest of our trip (but not before a very lovely duck lunch).

Magda lives in a small town over three hours drive from Warsaw. It took us a little while to locate the small cluster of older apartment buildings but we were eventually successful! We carefully carried all of Magda’s gifts up the narrow stairs to the third floor and were very warmly welcomed into Magda’s home. After gathering around in her living room, we did not waste any time in getting right into the presents. As the television was very hard to hide and was not wrapped, it was the first thing that Magda was able to get excited about. We then handed her the large x-Box to open. I can truly not put into words how I felt when I watched her open the x-Box. It was not just Magda’s brilliant and glowing smile, but it was also the happiness evident in her sister and mother’s eyes as she watched on from nearby. We soon learned that as Magda carries on with her Chemo treatment, her health will continue to deteriorate and the x-Box Kinect will be key in helping her rehabilitation to get her active and playing.

Magda was also over the moon when she opened her new Converse and immediately put them on. After all the gifts were unwrapped, I was also able to give her one of the Hexbugs that I had brought over for the children. We all had a great time watching the Hexbug run around the living room, bumping into various obstacles and occasionally flipping over. Lori had also got up to show Magda some of her step dancing and Ainslie had also sang her a very lovely song.

Unfortunately, we were not able to help Magda set up her x-Box as she has a Chemo appointment tomorrow morning. However, I am positive that she will be playing happily right after her appointment.

Magda made me realize how important having a loving family around you is. No matter how hard times may get, a supportive family is key to powering through and keeping a smile on your face. Even when the light at the end of the tunnel seems to be fading away, your family will always be there to help make it bright again. As I sit here typing this in a very comfortable log hotel room after a very relaxing cup of hot water in the barn, I hope that everyone in the world who is going through a rough time has a loving support group around them.

Ola

May 28, 2013



Name: Ola

Age: 17

Location: Elblag

Condition: Spinal Tumor

About: Ola has been battling her spinal tumor for quite a few years. She had gone into remission a couple of years ago but it recently came back. Ola has made the hard decision that even though her cancer is back, she is not going to undergo treatment again because it is too hard. She lives in an old apartment building in rural Poland. Ola enjoys singing, reading and listening to music. She is currently still in high school and often teaches German at school to others. Ola wants to be a kindergarten teacher in the future.

Wish: Camera (Nikon D3000)

Other Gifts: Camera bag, makeup

A one hour drive from our hotel and we were at Ola's apartment building. We all carried our gifts through the old, dark hallways of her building until we reached her apartment. We were welcomed in by her mother and quickly made our way into her living room. As usual, we jumped right into the presents. As I am the "photographer", I was in charge of helping Olga put together her camera and teaching her the basics of how to use it. It was not long before all the presents were unwrapped and we were having a photo shoot.

Hearing Ola's story is very powerful. Having gone through intensive treatment previously, when her cancer came back, Ola decided that she did not want to undergo Chemo again. She knows the consequences of her decision, but I think we all know that it was the right one for her. As she sat on the couch with a bright smile, slightly shy, we could all see how much beauty radiated from her. It would be a shame to take that beauty and energy away from her by going through the hardships of treatment again. The decision Ola made to stop treatment truly makes her a role model for me. I often find myself pulling at my hair when I have to make "hard" decisions, but the choice that Ola had to make is one that I admire her for. The decision

to stop treatment is one of great responsibility and I would not have had the strength Ola had to make the right decision.

Before we knew it, our time was up and we had to leave. Though, before we left, we made sure we all added this wonderful girl on Facebook to keep in touch!

Natalia

May 28, 2013



Name: Natalia

Age: 14

Location: Wybicko

Condition: Lymphoma

About: Natalia lives with her 12 year-old brother and parents in a quaint little village. She likes to spend her time playing video games and riding her bike.

Wish: Bike

Other gifts: Helmet, bike accessories, perfume

Upon arrive at Natalia's house, we met up with her younger brother and mother outside. Just across the street from her apartment building was a set up of connected mini storage units, where we quickly grabbed Natalia's new bike (as it was delivered right to her due to its size). We then carried the bike and other gifts up the stairs to her apartment, where we met up with Natalia. Present time was next!

We then took Natalia's new bike outside to test out. Natalia eagerly got on and rode up and down the street. Her brother then hastily got his bike out and handed it to me. I love riding bikes and was very happy to get on and ride along side Natalia. As we had still not eaten lunch, Natalia offered to show me a place to eat. And so we were off! I followed Natalia into town as she took me to a place where we could grab a quick lunch. Riding through the little village in Poland was one of the most exciting things I have done.



During present time, Natalia's brother brought over his pet turtle and let me hold it. I am a sucker for animals and was so excited at the opportunity to hold a little turtle. At first the turtle was very still on my hand, but suddenly it started moving and accidentally walked off my hand. Next thing we know, the turtle is curled up in his shell on the ground (luckily it was not a big drop). After apologizing profusely, the family insisted that the turtle was alright and I had nothing to worry about.

However.... *So sorry about dropping your turtle again!*



Kasia

May 28, 2013



Name: Kasia

Age: 16

Location: Tuja

Condition: Cystic Fibrosis

About: Kasia has been fighting Cystic Fibrosis since she was a baby. She lives in a very run down home in a remote area of Poland. Kasia has 2 brothers and 1 sister. She is home schooled as well as goes to regular school, depending on her condition at the time. Her favorite subject at school is computers. The Foundation had visited Kasia a few years before and granted one of her wish for her entire family to visit her grandfather (who lives 300 km away) and for her to meet her grandfather for the first time.

Wish: Laptop

Other gifts: Laptop case, laptop sticker, speakers, mouse, headphones, nail polish, cosmetics

Of all the children we have visited this far, I view Kasia as the most inspiring for myself.

I was shocked even before I met Kasia. When the van turned onto an extremely bumpy back road in farm land, I knew that this girl was going to be different than the other children that we had visited.

Once we did arrive at Kasia's home, deep into the farm land, I was surprised to see a small girl in a kitty sweater to be waiting outside for us. The house she lived in was very run down. There were broken windows, clothes lines that were falling down and graffiti on the small garage-like house just beside it. Upon stepping inside the house, I realized how different Kasia's life is from the other girls we had visited thus far. Her house was just as run down on the inside as on the outside. The rooms downstairs were packed with piles of the family's belongings. The stairs were rickety old wooden stairs that could easily be the cause of many accidents. The upstairs hallways also did not have light and the rooms had no doors, but held curtains instead to give privacy.

Situating ourselves in Kasia room was a bit of challenge. In the end, we were able to fit all five of us girls in there, a few of us sitting on the floor and on the bed. What took up most of the space in Kasia's room was not toys, but medical machines. The machines you expect to see at the bedside in hospitals were placed beside Kasia's bed as well as other contraptions on her window sill and desk. Kasia's puppy also did not want to miss out on any of the fun, but he was a very warmly welcomed guest.

Kasia was rendered speechless when she unwrapped her new laptop. It was not long after that every empty space remaining in her room was filled with all her new gifts! Kasia was on the verge of tears through it all, and so was I. I was also able to give her a pink *Hexbug* and we were all able to play with in, letting it run around on top of the laptop box. There are no words to describe the amount of emotion I felt while I was watching Kasia open all her gifts. The pure happiness and joy that filled the room made me forget about the conditions she was living in.



Ainslie, who has asthma, had started wheezing slightly five minutes into being in Kasia's house, causing her to have to excuse herself briefly. This made me worry about Kasia's health. Having Cystic Fibrosis makes it excruciatingly hard to breathe and if someone with asthma was hit so hard in such a short time in those conditions, I can only imagine what it must be like

for Kasia. I was able to hear Kasia's breaths sitting next to her, hearing how much of a struggle each breath must be for her.

After the presents were all opened, we were able to ask Kasia some questions to get to know her better. Having asked all the other girls we had visited what they wanted to be when they grow up, I wanted to ask the same to Kasia. I was, however, not prepared when Anna told me that she cannot ask Kasia that question as Kasia knows that she will only be living one or two more years. This was when it really hit home for me. All my life, I have been asked what I want to be when I grow up, knowing that a world of possibility is waiting for me. Kasia has grown up in a world where every day is a blessing and she is not sure how many more years she will be gifted. It is hard for me to imagine growing up knowing that your future is limited.

All of us were in awe after we had left to allow Kamila and Anna to finish giving their gifts of clothes to the family. What we did not know was that we had not yet said goodbye to Kasia for good yet. She heard about Lori's dancing and came outside to request to see her step dancing.



Saying goodbye the second time around was even harder. It is so hard to see a girl, my age, go through all the hardships she has had to endure. It was only after we left that I learned that the house they currently live in is a gift for the family. They had moved to this house a few years ago in order to have more space and be able to give everyone privacy in their bedrooms. This truly made me wonder what kind of conditions Kasia's family had lived in before. I had also learned that Kasia is preparing for a double lung and liver transplant. However, her family is not able to currently afford the transplant. They will be asking for money soon and saving up everything they can in hopes that they can keep Kasia with them a little longer. Even though Kasia's family will try hard to find the money to give Kasia the transplant, the chances are slim.

Kasia struggles with every breath that she takes, but in the short time that I was able to know her, she was able to take my breath away.

Crazy Starting To Set In

May 28, 2013

Today has been a crazy but completely exhilarating day!



Waking up in the morning in the “lob cabin” hotel, we were served a full breakfast with more food than we would ever be able to eat.

From there, we quickly hit the road. Though, the “log cabin” owners promised us a surprise before we left. The surprise? OSTRICHES! Kamila had a bit too much fun with these ostriches though. Going right up and intimidating the male, causing a few attempted bites and two territorial defense dances.



It was not long into the car ride before we were side tracked and stopped again. We passed a beautiful lake and had to stop to take some pictures. However, Anna was a bit too eager to get on the dock and admire the lake as her favorite scarf blew into the lake, causing her to go into a frenzy to find a stick and retrieve her beloved scarf. Unfortunately, Anna’s scarf was not rescued, though it did give us some funny photos and videos.



After visiting the three girls we were scheduled to go to today, we headed to an old town to explore and have dinner. This is when the fun really started. Our first mission was to find a bathroom. What started off as a mundane task turned into a full on scavenger hunt of sorts. The bathroom we were finally able to locate though was not your typical bathroom. It was a stand alone building in which you have to pay in order to get in. This caused for some entertaining times trying out different methods to save money, including someone going in when someone goes out, preventing the door from locking... which unfortunately does not work as the person is then unable to get out and we have to put in the money to free the bathroom prisoner.

The fun continued at dinner when we were seated. There was a small leak above Kamila's seat, which lead to the waiters holding an umbrella over her. This stemmed a series of "It's Raining Men" jokes.

The waiters' friendliness did not stop there. Through the dinner, they were constantly teasing us about who ate what and why someone did not eat their starter. Ainslie had also found an interest in one of the waiters. This caused

her to continuously down her glasses of water so he would have to come back to refill her glass. This, however, was not as discrete as she had thought as he teased us later about the ridiculous amount of water our table managed to go through in one sitting. Fear not however, Ainslie was able to get a photo with the waiter before we left.



Naturally, due to all the water everyone drank trying to promote the waiter coming back led to full bladders. And this meant another trip to the bathroom. This time, a different method was tried to save money – going in together. Success!

By this time, we were all very tired and slightly hysterical. I do not think I have laughed so much in one evening. It was truly a great day!

The Puzzling Camp of the Baltic

May 29, 2013

We started off our day today by heading over to a children's hospital. There were little girls and boys clinging onto their parents' arms and legs everywhere, which was extremely cute. It was not long after arriving at the play room that the children came in to play with us. Some of the children's English was very good. Telling us full phrases including: "Hi, my name is Carolina". Though, because the words *please* and *excuse me* are the same in Polish, the children often got those words mixed up in English.



We had brought with us two big boxes of craft supplies for the children and they dove right into it. A little boy especially loved ripping open the boxes and grabbing everything that he could... he got really excited about the glue sticks. We had also surprised them by bringing a new Kinect for their x-Box. Usually I consider myself quite good in setting up electronics, however, trying to set up a Kinect when all the onscreen messages are in Polish is a bit of a challenge. Alas, in the end, we were victorious and the kids had tons of

fun playing with their new Kinect. We also brought with us a plethora of little gifts for the children to have fun with. It was not long before all their hands were full of Lego, notebooks, wind-up toys and Canadian souvenirs.



I had also spotted an unfinished puzzle of a cheetah on one of the back tables. I love a good challenge and set to work immediately on finishing the puzzle. It was not long after that a little girl joined me at the table and helped me work on the puzzle.



We had also all met a 22 year-old girl in the other room with Cystic Fibrosis, who is waiting on a lung transplant. She is the sweetest girl but is unfortunately in a severe condition. She is in need of a special operation, but only someone in the United States can carry out the procedure and, as she cannot afford it, a trainee doctor is set to operate on her.



Before we left the hospital, each of us were able to take a picture one of the kids had drawn. In return, we also drew some pictures for the kids. I gave my picture of an elephant (thanks Ankita!) to the little girl who helped me with the puzzle (which we regrettably were not able to finish).



After lunch in Gdansk, we headed over to Stutthof Concentration Camp. This camp was one of the most powerful sites I have visited. Having visited the Holocaust museum in Washington D.C. and Berlin, I thought I understood the Holocaust. But standing in a former concentration camp made me realize how much museums are not able to fully capture.



Seeing pictures of the cramped quarters, highly unsanitary “infirmaries” and crematorium had not prepared me for seeing these sites in real life.



Knowing that the devices that lay within my reach were used as devices to exterminate thousands of people. It was also hard to wrap my mind around the concept that I was only seeing less than 10% of the full camp as most of it was demolished after the war. The small part of the camp that I saw was vast in itself and I cannot imagine it in its entirety. It was also hard for me to believe that Stutthof is nestled in such a beautiful part of Poland.

Walking through the worn down halls and buildings brought up emotions in me that were nearly overwhelming. It is hard to imagine that less than a hundred years ago, people had stood in the same spot I stood in trying to forget about where they were and what they were being forced to do. Whereas, I stand there trying to remember these people who stayed strong through the toughest of times.

After Stutthof we went to a beach to enjoy the Baltic sea. This included a short hike through the forest, which was very picturesque. We encountered many different creatures including a not-so-little slug and quite a few bizarrely colored beetles.



The beach was one that rivaled in those in Australia. With the weather finally cooperating with us, we were able to walk along the beach, dip our feet into the icy waters and take some stereotypical photos including the “beach jump”.



Andzelika

May 30, 2013



Name: Andzelika (Angela)

Age: 20

Location: Gdansk

Condition: Chronic myeloid leukemia (remission)

About: Angela is a lively young woman. Angela's treatment has greatly affected her memory. Because of her bad memory, she is required to read a lot in order to help counter its effects. Her favorite color is pink and she gets really excited when she sees something pink. Angela also loves cars and aspires to have her driver's license when her memory improves.

Wish: Laptop

Other gifts: Car computer game, lots of books, board game, cosmetics, laptop bag

When we arrived at Angela's apartment, we were surprised by how many stairs there were leading up to her apartment. Not only was her apartment on the top floor, but the stairwell was also musky and very hard to be in. When we finally reached Angela's apartment on the sixth floor, we were all shocked by how small her apartment was. When you walk in, you are

instantly in the extremely small kitchen/main hallway. On the left is a very small bathroom that did not even have a door. Straight ahead is the living room. This very small apartment only had 1 room excluding the bathroom. It was shocking to learn that 3 to 4 people all lived in this very small area. After settling into Angela's living room, she told us that after she had her transplant, it had taken her 2 hours to make her way up the stairs!

Right after opening her laptop, Angela and I went straight into setting it up. Similar to setting up the x-Box at the hospital yesterday, I was fine up until onscreen messages started showing up. I was very proud of myself though when I was able to make out what to do next based on reasoning and what makes sense in context... well, most of the time.

It just so happens that today is also a holiday here in Poland. This religious holiday is known as Corpus Christi. Everyone gets the day off and goes to church in the morning. If you are unable to go to church, they have many television and radio broadcasts as well. Following mass, each area in Poland has their own procession. This is when the church and the community join in a slow march through the community while singing songs and praying.



Along the procession, they stop at alters and perform a short service. From there, everyone adds on to the march and moves onto the next location.



It was incredible to be able to participate in this festival while I was here. I was able to see the procession coming, attend a short service at a nearby alter and did it all with Angela and her mom! It was a great experience and one that I would not have gotten anywhere else.



Karol

May 30, 2013



Name: Karol

Age: 7

Location: Gdansk

Condition: Acute leukemia lymphoblast (remission)

About: Karol is quite possibly the most energetic and charming little boy you will ever meet. Karol and his parents moved in with his maternal grandmother a few years ago to get out of their old apartment which only had 1 room (no bathroom). Karol's parents have also had a hard medical struggle as his mother suffered a stroke and needs to have another operation after one previously failed and his father had trouble with his lungs. If you were to meet Karol, you would not think that he suffers from leukemia as he is so lively. His laugh is the most contagious laughter in the world.

Wish: Computer (and monitor)

Other gifts: Transformers toys, Lego, shoes, x-Box games, computer games

Visiting Karol is amongst the most fun things I have done on this trip so far. So excited for us all coming to see him, Karol had wanted to get up at 4 in the morning to wait for us! Karol, unlike other little boys, did not start by

opening the largest presents (which was the computer and monitor), but with the smallest, unwrapped ones. Unlike other little boys, he also did not tear through the wrapping paper, but instead carefully peeled off each piece of tape and unfolded the wrapping paper. Through it all, Karol had not said many words, but his laugh was also there, filling the room. He was the typical lively little boy who just wants to have fun.



When I gave Karol the Hexbug, his face lit up as he knew exactly what the little creature was. He swiftly pulled out his other robotic bug from his desk and started setting both bugs on each other. It was thrilling to watch Karol have so much fun with such simple toys. He also took more of an interest in the smiley face beach ball Emma gave him than his other gifts, never letting it go. It was not long before Karol managed to get us all to throw around the ball with him. Who were we to stop playing with such an adorable little boy who would not stop laughing?

After all the presents were unwrapped, we were invited to some cake with the grandmother and parents. The supply of cakes and cookies seemed endless and we were all very full very soon. Karol, however, did not seem to be done playing with us yet. With his new beach ball, he continued to get us to play with him. This led to many tickle attacks and a few plants nearly

being knocked over. By the time we had to leave, Karol was a little sweaty from all the playing.



It was hard to say goodbye to such an amazing little ball of energy.

Kuba

May 30, 2013



Name: Kuba

Age: 7

Location: Gdansk

Condition: Acute leukemia lymphoblast (remission)

About: Kuba is a very shy boy. He has a 3 year-old sister, Zosia. Kuba loves cars and building things out of Lego. He has been waiting for his wish for a very long time.

Wish: TV and PSP

Other gifts: PSP games, books, board game

The first thing I noticed when I walked into Kuba's apartment was his energetic little sister, Zosia. The little girl was immediately screaming and overly exciting at the prospect of new people in her home. Hiding in the other room was shy Kuba. He had been looking forward to our visit for a long time, but once we arrived, Kuba got a bit stressed and did not come out to see us. Zosia, on the other hand, was more than eager to take her brother's place, running around and eagerly taking the presents we had brought for her.

After a bit of negotiations with his father, Kuba agreed to have a few presents taken in to him at a time. In order to prevent stressing Kuba out further, we all took turns going in to see him. Those who were not with Kuba spent our time with Zosia coloring!

It took a little while but Kuba finally warmed up to everyone and we were all able to go meet him. We helped him build his new Lego car and set up his TV and PSP. Though Kuba was shy at first and did not speak, we were all very happy to meet him and had a lot of fun playing with him!

Magda

May 31, 2013



Name: Magda **Age:** 18

Location: Smolno

Condition: Ovarian Cancer

About: Magda lives in a small 1 room house with her parents and younger brother. They also have a very big and friendly dog, a rabbit and 2 budgies. Due to Magda's treatment, her skin has turned a darker color. She is currently home schooled but hopes to go back to technical school soon. Before her diagnosis about 2 years ago, Magda loved playing a variety of sports including ping-pong, basketball and soccer and even has a lot of medals to show for her hard work! Despite living in harsh conditions, Magda and her family are amongst the happiest families I have ever seen. The connection their mother has with her children is amazing.

Wish: Manicure set and cosmetics

Other gifts: A PLETHORA of cosmetics, nail polish and manicure equipment

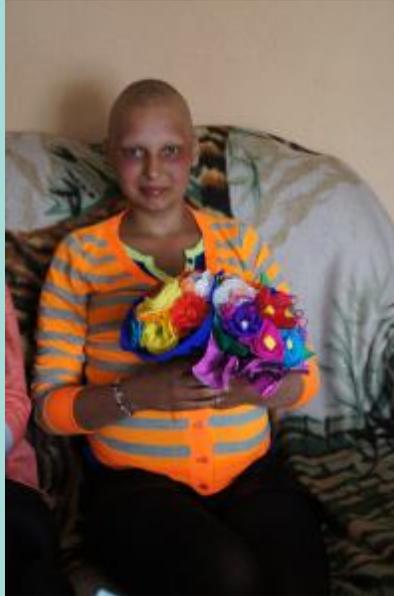
Magda's family is the most welcoming group of people despite the conditions that they live in. A small 1 room home very close to the street.

Outside their home is where they keep their dog, rabbit and 2 little budgies. It amazed me even further when I learned that they do not have a bathroom in the house and must go outside.

The first thing I noticed about Magda is how dark her skin is. This darkness is side effect of her cancer. As usual, we jumped right into the presents. Magda was a bit overwhelmed when I dumped out the bag of presents, filling the entire table with little tubes and balls of wrapped up gifts. Magda's treatment has put her in a very weak state and because of all the tape on the numerous presents, we all pitched in to help her unwrap all the gifts. Before we knew it, the table was overflowing with cosmetics of every kind. The smile on Magda's face was unprecedented by any other smile I have seen. She also continuously joked with her mother about how she is not allowed to touch any of her makeup. Magda was also very excited because she is attending a wedding next month and cannot wait to use all her makeup at the wedding.



Magda also surprised us with some gifts of her own. She made us 2 bouquets of tissue paper flowers that we absolutely gorgeous. She told us that it took her a long time to make and she was exhausted when she was done.



Kuba

May 31, 2013



Name: Kuba

Age: 5

Location: Kurowo

Condition: Hemophilia

About: Kuba lives in a great community with his parents, older brother and younger sister. Due to his condition, Kuba is not able to play with the other

kids in his community in fear that he will cut himself. He is the cutest little boy ever who lives for fun.

Wish: Electric toy car

Other gifts: Hotwheels, books, soccer ball, bean bag chair, shoes, puzzle, Lego cars

When we arrived at Kuba's house, we were a bit later than scheduled. His parents had scheduled a surprise visit from the firefighters and because of this, our schedule changed around slightly. This was not a bad thing however. It was so exciting to see the firefighters put on their sirens and drive right into the area behind Kuba's (and others') house. The firefighters then showed us their truck and let Kuba try out spraying water everywhere (especially at this friends), spraying foam all over and using the jaws of life.



After the excitement, Kuba came inside with us to open his presents. He did not speak much, but he was always smiling. I spent most of my time during present opening time trying to piece together his Hotwheels track..

Nothing topped the excitement of Kuba finding his new electric car though. He immediately jumped right in and started figuring out how it worked. In the process of learning how to work his car, he ran into a few people and got stuck in the sand a few times.

Soon after, his sister decided to join Kuba in the passenger seat and they were off on a short drive around their community. Needless to say, it was the cutest thing ever.



Michal

May 31, 2013



Name: Michal

Age: 12

Location: Bytow

Condition: Brain cancer

About: Michal lives in a very nice home with his entire family (including a little sister). His entire family was very welcoming. He is a very smart little boy who loves reading and playing his video games.

Wish: PSP 3

Other gifts: books, TV, PSP 3 games

We all briskly walked to Michal's house as there was an oncoming thunder storm that we did not want to get caught in. It was a bit of a shock going from visiting Magda in such poor conditions to visiting Michal in a much better home. Though, what I noticed is that it does not matter what kind of home these kids live in, all their families are the same in the fact that they are very caring and loving.

From there, we carefully brought all the gifts and big TV up to the very cozy loft type room on the third floor of Michal's house. From there, his entire family gathered into the room to watch him open all this presents. When Michal had opened up a gift to find PSP games, his face fell a bit when he told us that his old PSP 2 was broken. We did not want to spoil the surprise of his new PSP 3 though, so we all kept quiet. Michal was very excited when finally opened his new PSP and could not wait to start playing it. As usual, I was put on setup duty. Carefully crawling behind the cupboard to setup the TV and PSP was a very fun experience.



Michal started off by playing Fifa. Trying to figure out some part of the PSP, I had accidentally hit the power button... but it was okay because Michal was losing the soccer game so he was okay with it. We also all had a bit of a “blonde” moment when we could not figure out how to use the PSP Move remote when the cable was so short. It turns out that the PSP controllers are rechargeable and you only connect it when you need to charge the controllers. I was also teased a lot because I hit my head quite a few times on the slanted ceiling. We had then changed the game to a Harry Potter game that was immensely cool. It utilized the PSP move, camera and a large “wonderbook” that the game comes with. When you play, the onscreen image of the room replaces the remote with a wand and the “wonderbook”

with a spellbook. As you turn the pages of the book, it also turns the pages of the spellbook. I thought it was quite magical myself. To add to the fun, Michal had 2 pet turtles. After the accident I had previously with Natalia's turtle, I did not quite trust myself with the turtles, but that did not stop me from admiring them. But Michal brought out one of his turtles, set it on the floor and I was able to play with it a bit. So much fun.



Weronica

June 1, 2013



Name: Weronica

Age: 10

Location: Palwice

Condition: Cancerous spinal tumor

About: Weronica was found to have a tumor before she was even born. Right from when she was a newborn, Weronica has had numerous surgeries performed on her. Unfortunately, all these surgeries has resulted in Weronica's feet to point outwards and for her left leg to be significantly shorter than her right. Weronica is also feeling really poorly at this time, causing her to even carry around a urine bag. Through it all, she is such a sweet and energetic girl that loves running around and having fun. She lives in a small apartment with her parents and older sister. Weronica goes to school when she can. She also LOVES horses.

Wish: Laptop

Other gifts: Lots of My Little Pony, horse computer games, computer mouse, books

Before we met Weronica, we had a quick trip to Marlborck Castle to gawk at the architecture and history held within its high, defensed walls. It was especially cool to see how much reconstruction had been done on the castle to rebuild it to its former glory after a lot of destruction in WWII.

Once I met Weronica, I was instantly in awe of how energetic she was despite being in such poor medical condition. We all sat around Weronica as she tore through her presents. The My Little Ponies were first and she now has a very impressive collection of ponies – Rarity being her favorite (personally I prefer Twilight, as she's the nerdiest). We then got into opening her new laptop and quickly started setting it up so she could start playing her horse games.



During present time, Weronica's older sister brought in their 3 kittens that are only 1 week old! They just opened their eyes yesterday and they were the most darling thing I have seen so far on this trip. Their soft "mews" and "meows" won all of our hearts as each of them fit in the palms of our hands. One even found a warm spot on my body and quickly dozed off. They also brought out a small hamster, which wasted no time in dropping a few on Ainslie. Knowing that I love animals, she eagerly pulled me over to see her dog when the little boy was brought home.



We had so much fun with both Weronica and her kittens!

Dorota

June 1, 2013



Name: Dorota

Age: 17

Location: Parabutty

Condition: Bone cancer

About: Dorota has been battling with her cancer for a while and just recently found out that she now has cancer in her shoulder, hip and leg as well. She lives in a cute little apartment with her parents and older sister. Due to previous operations on her right leg, she cannot bend her leg.

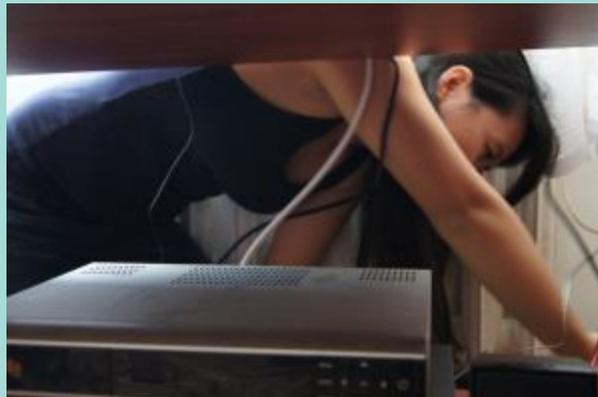
Wish: Home entertainment system

Other gifts: TV, DVD player, subwoofer, surround sound speakers (all part of entertainment system), DVDs, soccer uniform

I was told that Dorota is usually a very talkative girl, but once we got to her apartment, she was very shocked and at a complete loss for words with all the gifts. It broke my heart when Dorota told us that she does not have many friends because people do not like to go near her as they think that she is contagious. It amazed me that people would have such stigma around such a loving young girl. So excited with all the gifts, Dorota even went to the

bathroom to put on her new soccer uniform right after she opened it. After helping Dorota with opening her new home entertainment system and TV, I set right to work to get it all set up for her. To say that some interesting times came out of this set up is an understatement.

It was smooth sailing at first. Quickly setting up the TV and getting the DVD player set up. Connecting the DVD player to the TV was a whole other story. We thought we were missing some cables so we tried to take it from the old TV. This was not the case however. After some fiddling, we figured it out and were successful. It was not long before I had the surround sound speakers set up along with the subwoofer. Though, when it came to trying to set up the cable, more problems occurred. I quickly learned that quite a lot of static had built up in this TV cable as I was shocking everyone I touched (very painfully too). There was so much static that my hair was sticking up on end and I even managed to shock myself a few times (I don't know how I managed to do that). All the while, the other girls were sitting contently on the couch, eating cake and thoroughly enjoying the show I was putting on. Everything was set up in the end and I now have the confidence to setup home entertainment systems! Future engineering student!



Another thing I noticed while with Dorota is how much Polish people like dark hair. Dorota started touching my hair and told me that she thinks my hair is really nice. This had happened with some of the other children we visited as well, but I never thought much of it. I thought it was really cool that they do not see many people with such dark hair as me. I remember on a school trip to China, my friend had been the centre of a lot of attention due to her long blonde hair. However, this time, it was the first time I was the cause of this fascination.