

Alumna brings diapers, education and hope to Albania

By Anne Button



Claudia Janiszewski received the Albanian Presidential Medal for her efforts to help unwanted babies abandoned by their unwed mothers.

Claudia Janiszewski has traveled the world, survived breast cancer, started her own nonprofit organization, received a national award and recently earned an individualized degree in nonprofit organization administration and development from Metro State. But nothing matches the thrill she gets when she thinks about the women and babies she's helped.

Janiszewski was living in Tirana, Albania, in 1996 when she toured the maternity ward at Tirana Hospital and discovered a group of babies who had been abandoned by their unwed mothers,

stigmatized by a severe cultural antipathy for children born out of wedlock.

"They were like zombies," she recalls. "All were severely malnourished. They were rarely held and didn't even have names."

Janiszewski and her husband were evacuated from Albania during political unrest in 1997, but, she says, "I couldn't stop thinking about the babies." She returned to Denver, founded the nonprofit Organization for the Support of Albania's Abandoned Babies (OSAAB), and enrolled in a grant-writing class at Metro State.

"I took what I needed to run this nonprofit," she says. "It was definitely 'learn as you go.'"

For the next 10 years, Janiszewski lived in several eastern European countries, including Russia, Uzbekistan and Ukraine, working for international nonprofit organizations while her husband assisted the transition from communism to capitalism. She visited Albania frequently to check on OSAAB. And she returned periodically to Denver, taking classes at Metro State whenever she could to learn more about running her nonprofit.

OSAAB provided diapers, formula and oversight to the abandoned children's ward (since renamed Angel's Cradle), while also launching an education and outreach program on the babies' plight. In addition, when Albania took in 500,000 refugees from the war in nearby Kosovo in 1999, OSAAB provided supplies and support to 700 refugee women and their babies.

In 2000, the U.S. Embassy hosted an event that openly discussed the problem of the abandoned babies, and a documentary about Angel's Cradle was shown on Albanian television. Janiszewski began to see changes in attitudes about the babies, in both the medical staff and in greater Albanian society, and says OSAAB reached a turning point.

"There was a sudden increase in the number of Albanians wanting to adopt these children," she says. "The babies themselves are no longer shunned at the hospital. Now,

women are more likely to come in and meet with a social worker before giving up their babies."

In 2002, Janiszewski received the Albanian Presidential Medal. It was an honor to receive, she says, but the real prize was that the government was openly acknowledging the issue of the unwanted babies.

With the hospital assuming more care for the babies, OSAAB is moving on to health education for families. Through a partnership started in 2006 with the Women and Infants Hospital in Providence, R. I., 8,000 women a year are receiving training in prenatal and newborn care. "We're training the trainers, and it's really taking hold," Janiszewski says. Plans are underway for providing further trainer education in updated nursing skills.

When a diagnosis of breast cancer in 2006 scuttled her plans for an assignment in Armenia, Janiszewski came back to Denver for treatment. "Actually, a lot of good things came of (the diagnosis)," she says. "First, I stayed put long enough to finish my degree." Second, and more importantly to Janiszewski, she was able to increase awareness of breast cancer in Albania.

"When I went back to Tirana, people were shocked to see me still alive. The rate of recovery there is so low, because there's been very little early detection." Janiszewski gave a breast-cancer-awareness training at the hospital, stressing the importance of early detection, and the hospital put in place free annual mammograms and pap smears for its female staff.

"In an ideal world, I'd love to replicate our health education work, including breast cancer awareness, in the eight other women's and infants hospitals in Albania," Janiszewski says.

With a track record like hers, nothing seems impossible.