Compassion & Culture
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Seth Cropsey's Adobe Foundation

Tending the Orphans of Romania

A man walks along a beach littered with thousands of starfish that will die in the sun if not returned to the water. One by one he picks them up and tosses them back into the sea. A passerby notices what he is doing and asks incredulously, "Why do you bother? You can't possibly save them all?" "No, but I can save this one," he says picking up another and tossing it to safety, "and it matters to him."

In this spirit Seth Cropsey, a Visiting Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, founded an orphanage for ten children in Romania. Many in the West were horrified to see the conditions of the Romanian orphanages when the Iron curtain fell. Cropsey had the opportunity to act and did—raising funds, buying a facility and finding house parents to tend and love this household of babies and toddlers.

Lacey: Tell me about the founding the orphanage?
Cropsey: Well, I was working in Germany at the Marshall Center, which is sort of a War College for military and foreign service officers and parliamentarians from the former Warsaw Pact States. I was the chairman of one of the two departments, and most of our students came from former Warsaw Pact countries at that time.

Someone asked me one day in mid-1995, would I help with a visit by a bunch of Romanian orphan kids who were spending part of the summer with their sponsors in Munich. And I said "sure." And the kids came one Saturday and we, you know, made hamburgers, played soccer, and that kind of stuff. A couple of the kids asked me if I'd play tennis with them. Ok, fine. So, I got the tennis rackets, and the next day we played tennis. Then I took them to McDonald's. It was very nice. And then they said, "Will you come and visit?" "Well, I'll do my best." Then this fellow who had asked me to help and who drove back to Romania from time-to-time invited me to ride with him. So I visited this town and was shocked to see people harvesting corn with the same kind of implements they were using in the 14th century. And people who used wood to heat their houses, to heat the water they used for showers. I was taken on a tour of the state's orphanages. They had been divided up. There was a semi-private orphanage there. Almost all the money comes from the state, but the kids had been divided up into one big house and several satellites. The idea was that satellites would become more of a home, less institutional, which is true. I asked and was told that several of the houses had been bought and renovated by Swiss, French, and German professionals—physicians, bankers, a woman whose husband is in the trucking business in Bavaria. And I started to think "there is no American flag here." One thing led to another, and I thought, well, I'll try it. So I started asking for donations in the late fall, early winter of '95, and a friend of mine from college, who is an attorney in New Mexico, drew up the papers to get us a 501(C)(3) status, and that became official in April of 1996. I'd raised enough money by June that we could go to Romania and buy a house. I got an Army engineer to come down and look at the house we picked out, and he said, "It's a good solid house."

Lacey: When you took that initial tour, what were the conditions of the orphanages for infants there?
Cropsey: It was bad and it's still pretty bad. And the reason it's bad is that there are rooms seven and eight times the size of this office that are just filled with metal cribs, painted white, with infants in them. And two or three women for whom it's all they can do to keep the babies changed and fed. I mean, imagine, 30 babies, and you have two women who are taking care of them.

Lacey: They're not getting any stimulation?
Cropsey: No, not much. I know the women who have headed the place, and they're both decent, honorable people, and they know better than anybody else how terrible it is. They know how serious the damage is, but there is no money.

Lacey: Is there no volunteer effort? Some women could come in and hold the babies for a period of time each day?
Cropsey: I tried to get the local Rotary Club and a public

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Jill Lacey is the editor of Compassion & Culture.

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school administrator I know to bring some kids in, in the afternoon. You must understand when Ceausescu was ruling the country and needed bodies to do the planting and harvesting in the spring, the government would go to high schools and get "volunteers," and the volunteers would be taken from their families and put in the fields under foremen and told, "Here, plant this" or "Here, cut that." "You're a volunteer." So volunteerism does not have the positive connotations that it does in America.

Cropsey: "I saw a problem and I thought I could do something small to make a difference. That's all."

Lacey: Wow, that's a powerful lesson for those who are legislating mandatory service programs in this country and calling it volunteerism.

Cropsey: Yes, the idea of compulsion is very dangerous. Our foundation's long range objective is, by our example, to show Romanians that volunteerism is good and productive and not a bad word. Private efforts can take care of things that government cannot.

Lacey: And have you seen fruit there?

Cropsey: Well, let me give you the best example. The best example is that on the day that we opened in October 1998, an Orthodox priest I know came to me and gave me about $120 in Romanian money. I had never asked him for a contribution. He had asked me to speak at his church, and I had. And we became friends, and he gave this $120. Now, his parish is in a town about seven kilometers away from ours, considerably smaller and much poorer, and he was able to raise this money in his church. I was extremely encouraged by that because those people believed that we were doing the right thing and we were doing it well, and they believed it strongly enough to give their own money, and that was a sizable piece of money. A lot of those people make $70-80 a month, and it's not a big steeple church—it's a little country church. So that's a pretty strong sign to me that people see that we're able to have an effect. We have worked with the semi-state orphanage in town and have come up with several programs to do things for them where we share the cost, or we pay. I ask them to pay $1 and then we pay the other $3. They know that the contributions come from the United States, but they also know that they come from private individuals—that they don't come from the government. It's hard to answer the question, but I know that people know that we're doing things that are effective and they know it's not a government program.

Lacey: Your literature says you have two goals. One is to take care of the kids and the other is to promote civil society.

Cropsey: Right. Exactly. The one, of course, causes the other. I mean, taking care of the kids shows that a private organization can have an effect, a positive effect.

Lacey: So your goal is to establish a spirit of self-sacrifice.

Cropsey: Yes, I think that Romania's progress and the progress of other former Socialist states is directly connected to the citizens' understanding of civil society—of something besides government functioning effectively. I don't just mean voluntary organizations. I mean businesses, churches, private hospitals, voluntary organizations, orchestras, what we take for granted.

Lacey: Do you see it beginning?

Cropsey: Slowly. Yes. There are very serious people there who understand that point, who dedicated their lives after the end of the Communist state to spreading that message.

Lacey: Why are there so many orphans in Romania?

Cropsey: Ceausescu had a control over that country that was much, much stronger than any of his neighbors. The Hungarians had their 1956 uprising, and the Hungarian Communist leadership responded by being a little more flexible. The same thing in Czechoslovakia. The other part of it was that Ceausescu forbade abortions and birth control. He could get away with it because his power was greater and he was more willing to use it than some of his socialist

colleagues. I think he thought a bigger population would mean more national security. Romania's almost entirely a landlocked state and they've looked at national security threats over the years from every direction of the compass—threats from the Russians, and years ago from the Hungarians. Before that it was the Turks and before them the Ottomans. And Romania has a fairly big population—23 million. Ceausescu thought that the more people you have, the bigger the army you can have. You want a big army, you want to be powerful, to protect the country. And he could get away with it. And also, though I can't document this, I think he believed in his heart of hearts that the state was better equipped to take care of children than parents, which is an understandable enough assumption for a Communist dictator. So, abortions were illegal even though they weren't in other communist countries. Birth control was illegal even though it wasn't in other communist countries. And there was a culture that encouraged parents to bring their children to the state for care—big problem.

Lacey: So these parents abandoned their kids ?
Cropsey: Yes, basically.

Lacey: So these are not orphans whose parents are dead?
Cropsey: No. Life was hard. The state was willing to take care of the kids, and I can believe the state assured parents that they'd be well cared for and so ...

Lacey: How would they do it?
Cropsey: Bring the kid to the orphanage and say, "Here."

Lacey: Oh, really?
Cropsey: Yes, well, it's not so unusual, you know. It's not reported, but Russia has quite a problem with orphans. Ukraine does. It's not as bad in Hungary and in the Czech Republic. You know, the fundamental difference is that in America we give money to the mothers of kids who might otherwise be abandoned.

Lacey: That there are so many abandoned children there is overwhelmimg. It causes an almost paralyzing sadness for many of us. Yet here you're doing something about it. What motivates you?
Cropsey: I've been there. I went and I visited. I just had the same reaction that I think most other people would have, which is "There *is* something you can do." That sort of pulled the thread and the sock that came after it was that I started to find out who the kids were and I had some personal connection with them. That's in large measure what was responsible. The other thing is that for a very small amount of money, you really can make a really profound difference there. We are going to have ten kids by the end of this summer, and there's a staff of four. From soup to nuts, the bill for a month's salary, food, clothing, for repairs to the building is $2,000. You couldn't have that effect on the lives of ten kids here for $2,000—you just couldn't do that.

When Ceausescu was ruling the country and needed bodies to do the planting and harvesting in the spring, the government would go to high schools and get "volunteers."

Lacey: Does it ever occur to you? Obviously, it doesn't. But what keeps you from thinking that there are 8,000 more children where they came from, and I'm only helping eight.
Cropsey: Yeah. That goes back to what we were talking about. It's by example that we are trying to show that it's possible to make a difference.

Lacey: Multiplying your own efforts?
Cropsey: Yeah, the thing that would be the greatest help to Adobe, but of more importance to addressing this problem in Romania, is if somebody would come along with a large donation that would allow us to put another two orphanages

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in different parts of the county. That would get attention. I think the very best we can do is to help the kids we can help. At the same time that we become large enough so the example starts to set in. That's why I want to see the foundation prosper, so we get more people to know about us. I know several of the government ministers and former ministers and they know what we are doing. They've come out and visited us and they see. But you have to remember that as serious a problem as this is, this is a country that has pressing, every day problems. Will there be enough money so that people can pay for food next month? Is inflation going to rob them of the ability to pay a heating bill? In some cases it does. You can only heat one room.

Lacey: Are there any options for these children to be adopted out?

Cropsey: Sure: There are lots of kids who can be adopted. But several of the kids have been visited by a parent or a family member. By law children who have been visited by a close relative within the past six months are not legally adoptable. But kids can be adopted if no family member visits them.

Lacey: You said Romania tries to encourage adoption within the country?

Cropsey: Yes, it's a political problem for them. Let's put it this way. Middle class Romanians who travel abroad don't like to be reminded that they have this big problem. It's not something that they're proud of, I don't think they're trying to hide it, but it's not a source of national pride. So, what'sobvious from our point of view—have foreigners adopt the kids—is not a political option. Any Romanian politician who said, "I have the solution to this question. We're going to send them all to the United States. Well, the extreme Nationalists would have that politician's number in a hurry, and it wouldn't be good.

Five-year-old twins Tommy and Gitsa

Lacey: So do foreign adoptions not happen then?

Cropsey: Foreign adoptions definitely happen. There were 1,005 Romanian kids adopted by American families last year.

Lacey: Have you facilitated any?

Cropsey: A baby who was one of the first kids in the house was adopted within months into an American family.

Lacey: How do the children come to live at your orphanage?

Cropsey: We try to get kids at the youngest possible age because they have the best chance to lead a normal life. We have Romanian houseparents who take care of them and are paid a good wage. They have a nice place to live, they are treated well, they work hard, and they know of our interest – the foundation's interest—in the kids being cared for as though they were their own. So, things work well. The real strength of this foundation is the relationship between the Americans and the Romanians. That is what makes it work. We need money, and couldn't do without that. But the real success here is that the Romanian colleague with whom I have worked is terrific and thinks the way we think. He has understood from the beginning the sense I have that people who contribute money to the foundation have expectations that must be lived up to.

Lacey: Your home currently has eight kids? What ages?

Cropsey: The youngest is two years and three months, and the oldest (twins) are almost five.

Lacey: Did they all come to the orphanage as babies?

Cropsey: No, the twins didn't. I was at an event of the State Orphanage in Romania last June, I think it was, and I noticed two kids who were playing very well. They interacted well. And I asked the doctor there, who was a psychologist, what she thought about them. She said they were well adjusted kids. They don't fight. Get along well, and they're smart. So I spoke with the

Orphanage director and he said, "Sure, take them." They're always happy to see us take kids. But they're the oldest. Tommy and Gitsa. They'll be 5 in June.

Lacey: It sounds like you have a sense that you need to work with the ones who can be worked with.

Cropsey: We also work with older kids. They're not in our orphanage, but three boys were brought for YMCA summer camp here last year, and I just received a moment ago, the final paper work from three families in Vermont who heard about them—there were some articles in the Burlington newspaper—and wanted to bring them back for a year. So now I've been jumping through hoops since September to get the papers that are needed. And it's not even clear if the Consulate will give them their visas to allow them to come here for a year. It's gratifying to see that so many Americans have responded so warmly to the plight of this little boy from Cuba. But I wish I could have two minutes with all the people who have spoken up for Elian and tell them how difficult it is for a legitimate attempt to bring three kids who have no parents to a family in the United States for a year.

Lacey: Is there a religious meaning for you in all this, or is it a civic responsibility?

Cropsey: I saw a problem and I thought I could do something small to make a difference. That's all.

Lacey: The thing that I always wonder about is can there be a civic virtue without a religious underpinning?

Cropsey: That's a good question. I don't know the answer. I think that religion is very important, very important. There is a Romanian Orthodox priest there with whom I've become friendly, and his second daughter was born a year ago this month and had contracted herpes in the hospital. She needed some medicine in serum for—not in tablet form. We had been good friends. But when he asked if I could help I spoke to a woman who is an Army doctor, and she prescribed the medicine on the spot. The baby's now fine.

Lacey: Now you are really friends!

Cropsey: He is about to win a court case that will return a large parish building across the street from his church. (I guess it is some sort of a community center.) I said to him:If we're able to raise the money, what would you think about superintending an orphanage if we put it here? And he was delighted. And if we get a contribution that allows us to do that, and the sustenance to continue it. I'm very happy that a man of the church of his character would be directly involved. I mean it sends a wonderful signal. Right now in Romania there is a significant religious revival going on. The Evangelical groups are doing fairly well. I think that there is a connection between religion and civic virtue and civil society. We had the house properly consecrated when it opened, and the Orthodox festivals are celebrated by the kids, and the priest comes there from time-to-time. But it's not the core of our effort.

With a quarter million dollars we would buy a couple of new American tractors and ship them over. An American tractor will do in one hour what a Romanian tractor does in one day.

Lacey: Are the house parents religious at all?

Cropsey: Well, you know, it's funny—I wouldn't define religious as it is understood by an Evangelical. The Romanians don't have the attitude towards religion that there is in this country. It isn't a surprise after the shellacking that religion got for the previous fifty years. It will recover, and I think that the recovery of religion is directly connected to the recovery of the healthy civil society. But it's not there yet.

Two-year-old Laura with care provider Catitsa

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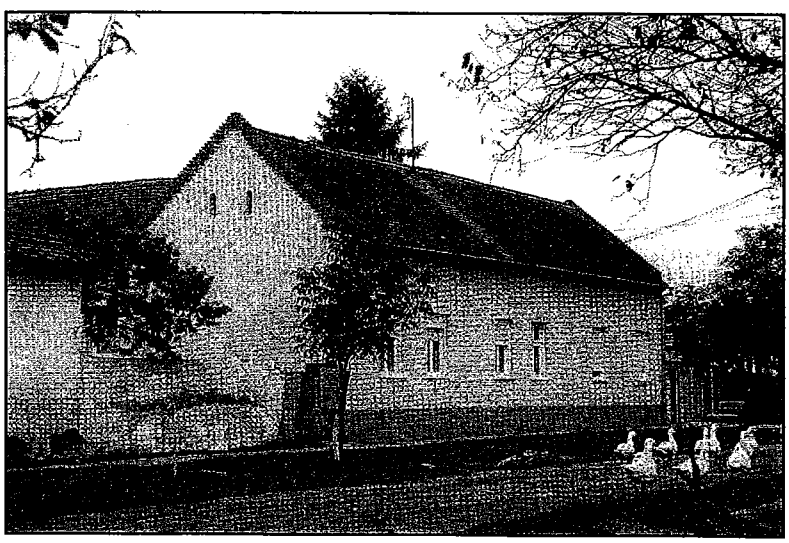
Lacey: Do you do anything to actively promote the adoption of these children?
Cropsey: Not yet.

The Ceaucescus had extended the zoo to include a beautiful old Orthodox Chapel, and they put the animals into it. It's clever but nasty in its own particularly diabolical way. It's the sort of thing you look at and you want to cry.

Lacey: Are there plans for that?
Cropsey: Well I have work at AEI and other things that I'm doing. I can't make this a full-time effort. If that sugar daddy on the horizon out there materializes, and says here's a grant of a million dollars then that would be another matter. The woman who is our attorney in Romania also acts as attorney for several groups that arrange adoptions. We have to be careful because if the village and the surrounding community got the idea that this orphanage was simply a funnel for adopting babies into the United States, it wouldn't go well with us.

Lacey: You have to be very low key?
Cropsey: You have to be low key and build trust over time. That's exactly what we're doing. I'd like to get to the point where kids could be adopted whenever there were prospective parents. People know me in the town and they know I'm not there to sell babies into the United States. I'm not worried about that, but actions do have a way of speaking for themselves. It's just a consideration that I have to be concerned about.



The renovated Adobe Foundation orphanage

Lacey: Do you have a Web page?
Cropsey: We've got one reserved. We've got "Adobe Foundation .org" reserved, and there's a colleague who will retire from the Army next spring who wants to come work for Adobe full time to raise funds. My response is the sooner the better. I thought about doing this full time, and I haven't ruled it out. There is something that is psychologically more satisfying about this than defense planning.

Lacey: Sure.
Cropsey: Especially when the threat to the United States is not quite at the level it was 15 years ago.

Lacey: What are your long-term plans for the Foundation?
Cropsey: Well, the most important thing is that I want the Foundation to get out of the business of asking for money and into the business of producing a revenue stream that would allow it to grow and to pay for itself. What we really need is a donation of about $250,000 to do that.

Lacey: Why that amount?
Cropsey: The village is in the middle of the most fertile agricultural land in Europe. It is just black, rich earth. And whatever they put in it grows. There is a demand for agricultural services. With a quarter million dollars we would buy a couple of new American tractors and ship them over. An American tractor will do in one hour what a Romanian tractor does in one day. And with the capital expenses borne by a contributor, we would start earning money the day the tractor arrives. They can be used for spring planting. They can be used for transport when there is nothing to be done in the field. They can be used for harvesting.

Lacey: So you wouldn't farm directly
Cropsey: No, I have no intention of getting the Foundation into the business of farming. It's much too risky. Prices fluctuate, you can't determine the weather. But you know this: year-in and year-out you need tractors. They need harvesting, they need planting and they need tilling services. And that would give jobs to the best kids who come out of the orphanage, and allow them to take care of the machinery, learn something about how a business works, to have responsibility at an early age.

Lacey: So you'd lease the tractors out?
Cropsey: We would operate the tractors. There's already a cooperative in town and they have a bunch of old Romanian tractors and we would say, "If you come to us we'll undercut the market a little bit, which would produce healthy competition with the cooperative. There's so much land there. I'm not worried about putting anybody out of business—that would not happen. And there is a John Deere dealership about 60 miles away, so we would be able to get parts.

Lacey: What's the name of the town where the orphanage is located?
Cropsey: Santana. It once meant Santa Ana, but Ceausescu changed it to Sintana so it didn't look religious. He was a real creep. I took the kids up to see a zoo in a city about 80 miles to the north, and the Ceaucescus had extended the zoo to include a beautiful old Orthodox Chapel, and they put the animals into it. It's clever but nasty in its own particularly diabolical way. It's the sort of thing you look at and you want to cry.

Lacey: Any other long term goals?
Cropsey: Self-sufficiency—and tractors are the best way to do that. It's an agricultural area, and I think the country is going to improve economically. The first thing that will then happen is that people will spend more money on food.

Alex was adopted by a family in Pennsylvania

Lacey: Is that what tends to happen?
Cropsey: Things are getting a little better, but not at the pace that everybody wants to see. But that earth–the land between Budapest and the beginning of the Carpathian Mountains is just the most fertile plain in Europe. There isn't a lot of fertile land in Europe that's that flat. It's tremendously productive–sugar beets, wheat, winter rye, barley, sunflowers. When the harvest comes in September, the train station in this little village has about a one acre lot where the trucks go in with the sugar beets, and they're loaded directly onto the train cars. This one acre lot fills up with sugar beets to a height of 20 feet. That's from one village.

Lacey: What could people do to help you? Send checks?
Cropsey: Send checks. Send tractors. There are several capital projects where we'll need money. We'll need a new roof—$10,000 for joists, beams and shingles. The natural gas line comes to an end about a half kilometer to the east of the house, and so nobody on our street has natural gas from the pipeline. Those of us who can afford it buy bottled gas. But the price is about four times what it would be if it just came in the pipeline. That would cost $10,000. The house is an energy nightmare. Most of the windows—a whole bank of windows—are single pane windows. And you can't open many of them. So in the summer, you can't let the heat out.

Lacey: Do the kids have any problems when they come over to the U.S. for a summer or a year and then go back and have to readjust to those conditions?
Cropsey: Yes.

Lacey: How does that manifest itself? Do they have behavioral problems?
Cropsey: Sometimes – I don't have enough experience to know at this point. I think sometimes the kids think that because they had one good experience the road will open up in front of them and everything will take care of itself. I try to make it clear to them that's not the case, and they have to work harder. In fact, I think

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that the most obviously debilitating thing thing for children raised in state institutions is not understanding the connection between work and reward, not seeing that you have to give something in order to get something. But just as far as being able to survive in the world and lead a productive life, I think that's the most serious problem the kids have.

Lacey: Do the houseparents at your orphanage try to do something to overcome that?
Cropsey: Ours do, yes.

Lacey: What do they do? Do they have a program?
Cropsey: They give the kids chores. Say that they expect things of them. If the houseparents simply saw their job as making sure that nobody bongs somebody else over the head with an iron skillet then nothing really gets done. They have to show their concern. If they only show their concern by giving more love and affection, it's nice psychically, but it doesn't teach the kid what he needs to know to be a productive adult.

Lacey: So do the houseparents try to teach the responsibilities of a family member?
Cropsey: That's what we're trying to do. You know for a four-year-old it's a little early. But they should clean up their toys and that sort of thing.

Lacey: But you do plan to teach that this more of a family than an institution.
Cropsey: Yeah, that's the single most important point for the houseparents to pass down. They know that's what I consider their job. That's where they earn their keep.

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