

# Sweet Sleep for Orphans

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JENNIFER GASH brings "sweet sleep" and hope to orphans around the world.

Everything changed for her on a church mission trip to an orphanage in Moldova, a poor, tiny country in Eastern Europe where families frequently give up their children because they can't afford to care for them. When Gash arrived, she found the children's mattresses dated back to the 1950s, with an odor that was overwhelming. Gash was so affected by the plight of those youngsters that she quit her job – with its group health plan and paid holidays – and dedicated her life to helping children around the world sleep more soundly.

In her spare bedroom, with a \$30 donation check from a co-worker, she founded a non-profit, faith-based organization called Sweet Sleep, which provides bed frames, mattresses, and bedding to orphanages around the world.

It all began with that one co-worker's donation, but Gash said, "It was like a Jerry Lewis telethon." She went on to raise \$500, a feat she charted on a chalkboard. And that co-worker was one of a number of supporters who have adopted children from Moldova.

Six years later, Sweet Sleep has a small staff, a board of directors, and a track record of providing beds, bedding, Bibles, and mosquito netting, for more than 5,000 children in Moldova, Uganda, and Haiti.

In January alone, Gash organized an emergency fundraiser for Haiti, sending truckloads of bedding for 3,000 orphans. Last year, more than 200 orphanages in 11 countries applied for Sweet Sleep beds.

Gash teams up with faith-based groups around the world to select orphanages to receive beds. She raises money, organizes bed frame construction in each country, and then she leads mission teams overseas to distribute them.

"We don't just give kids a bed," Gash said. "It's a tool we use to change lives. We gave our first beds with mosquito nets to children in Uganda last summer, and when we went back over Christmas, we found not one of those children has had malaria. The bed is not just a place to lie down and be comfortable. It's a matter of protecting their health, and when children rest better at night, they learn better in school. When they aren't sick, they can go to school. Less money is spent on medical costs, and there's more money for food."

Oddly enough, Gash almost missed that first trip that transformed so many lives.

"My life was so busy and so full, I actually thought about cancelling," Gash said. "It would have been easier not to go. It was inconvenient, and it was expensive. But I followed through. I didn't know what I was doing at first. I was a scaredy-cat. I was scared to fly and scared to be there. But it's not about me anymore."

"Before that first trip to Moldova, my life largely was about what was going on in my life," Gash said. "I never imagined I would be involved in someone else's life in another part of the world, or that I would bring hope to anyone else's life."

After a number of visits back to Moldova, Gash was impacted by a teenage girl named Galina who, teaching herself English, became a translator on Gash's trips. Gash then filed immigration papers to bring Galina to the United States, live with Gash, and finish high school – an unheard of opportunity in Moldova. "I knew it was something I had to do," Gash said. "It's hard to explain. Girls who become too old for the orphanages are easy prey for the mafia's sex trade there. I couldn't stand the thought of what could happen to her."

Life has changed profoundly for Gash since the days of organizing parties and shoe shopping. She is raising a teenager on her own and has become a mother to thousands of parentless children through Sweet Sleep. She meets ambassadors and dignitaries. And she finds herself in the midst of worlds she never dreamed of, such as when the Moldovan mafia tried to stop her from entering an orphanage where they recruit young members, or when a Ugandan man tried to buy her as his bride. "It's been a lot of adventures," Gash said.

Gash says she is living proof of the untapped potential of an individual. "I think the world can beat you down, and you think one person can't make a difference," she said. "But that's just not true. If you slow down long enough to figure out what's important, it can change the course of your life, and you can impact the lives of other people more than you could ever imagine."

For more on Gash's work, visit [www.sweetsleep.org](http://www.sweetsleep.org).

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Mosquito netting helps protect the children against malaria and other diseases.



FEW YEARS BACK, Jennifer Gash's life was on a steady track. She was a typical single 20-something with a great job as an assistant to the mayor of Nashville. She loved organizing birthday bashes for her church singles group, and she was always up for a good shopping trip.

"My life was full of good things, but now it's fulfilled, instead of just being filled," Gash said.

JENNIFER GASH is a *Regions* customer.