On July 10 we left from the USA and we arrived in Bucharest, Romania on July 11 at about 12:30pm after two connections and 18 hours of traveling. We were greeted by the local coordinator, Ilinca Tranulis, who took us to the university housing we would live in for three weeks. On the way she showed us around Bucharest, and once we reached our new home, she introduced us to some students in an exchange program who were living on the same floor as we were. After Ilinca left, we settled into our room, which would turn out to be more than adequate for Beth, Julia (our other roommate) and Alexis. The room had a bathroom, which we washed thoroughly one night with bleach cleaner, the main room with three small wood-boxed beds, and a little kitchen with an oven, a sink, and a refrigerator. We were all so tired by the end of our busy days; we slept very well there, except for the couple of nights when we let in too many mosquitoes.

On July 12, our three week rotation at the orphanage, called Luminita, began. For the next three weeks, our group, which was composed of Alexis and Beth from the USA, as well as Julia from Austria, Eva from Spain, and Rianne from the Netherlands. At first we would be met by a Romanian medical student who would help us navigate the Bucharest bus system for an hour before arriving at the orphanage. After a couple of days, we were left on our own to travel to the orphanage as we felt comfortable to make it in our little group. For the first week or so, we always had someone with us who spoke Romanian who could help us with communicating with the children and their teacher, but afterwards, we just arrived on our own and learned to communicate through the little Romanian we learned and the little English that the teachers and children knew.

The orphanage was a bright and pretty place with Disney murals on the walls, and plenty of people taking care of cleaning and tending to the kids. We spent the majority of our time with a group of children between 8 and 12 years old. There were 11 kids, all of which were boys except for one girl. From the very first day, they were happy to see us, and as time went on, they became more and more comfortable with us. We learned a lot from the children, and we hope they learned from us as well. It was amazing to see how much you can communicate with such a language barrier. There was another group of younger children who we also spent time with, as well as some who were up to 18 years old. We were lucky to be exposed to so many age groups, and a few of the older kids knew English well so we learned a lot about their lives and living in Romania from their points of view.

Most days consisted of us taking small gifts to the children that we had brought from home, including coloring books and crayons, containers of bubbles, balloons, and clay. We would sit and sing with them, and play games that they taught to us. We also played on the orphanage play ground and took the children to the park. Our days would start around 10:00am, and we would leave about 12:30, then many days we would spend a couple of hours from 4-6pm in the afternoon. Although this organization is made of medical students from all over the world, it was not a medical trip. As a result of being
institutionalized, the children’s development is often stunted because they lack normal one-on-one stimulation they would receive from a family. It was our job to provide additional attention and stimulation that the orphanage staff was unable to provide.

After leaving the orphanage, Ilinca had done a fantastic job setting us up with other students in Romania who took us all around Bucharest so we could see the history on the streets and in the museums. There was much to see in the city, and we were always busy. There is a fun nightlife in Bucharest as well, and we all became fast friends within our project and with the other students in the exchange program. We were able to learn about medical school and life all over Europe from these wonderful people. Living in Bucharest itself was fun and exciting. We found favorite places to eat and relax, as well as a small internet café we frequented and a huge supermarket, which was a crazy place to be late in the day. The food in Romania is wonderful, and with all of the walking around the city, it was also a very healthy trip.

On the weekends we were equally busy. We had three weekends to fill while in Romania. The first two weekends, we went as a big group with Ilinca and several of her friends, along with the exchange program students. The first weekend, we went to the Black Sea and saw many towns, including Constanta, Mamaia, Mangalia, Doi Mai, and Vama Veche. It was a beautiful area, with fantastic food and much to do and see. The second weekend, Ilinca again set us all up to stay in a beautiful apartment in Brasov. We saw much of Transylvania that weekend, including Sinaia, Bran, and Sighisoara. Again, it was a gorgeous area, one that we would tell anyone to visit. The third weekend saw much of our group split up as it was time to leave for some of us. The three of us who were left, went with two Romanian students we had met to Pitesti which was also in Transylvania to visit their family. We were there for a birthday party, and we saw the area and how a Romanian family lives outside of Bucharest. It was a wonderful weekend, and we greatly appreciated the hospitality we were shown and really enjoyed their company. It was a great last weekend, as it gave us all such a wonderful ending to our trip and made us excited to see our own homes and families. Also, Romania facilitates further travel through Europe. For example by train you can travel to Budapest, Zagreb, Split, Dubrovnik, Mostar, Sarajevo, and Belgrade in the east and as far as Spain in the west.

Overall, we learned so much from the children in the orphanage as well as from the wonderful people that we met. Ilinca has continued to communicate with us, which is great, as she was priceless to us as a coordinator and as a friend while in Romania. We have a completely different view of Eastern Europe, particularly Romania. It is a bustling and beautiful place to be and visit, but can be a heartbreaking place as well. We hope to return someday and we would love to see the friends that we made over the summer again.