The gift of a

BETTER FUTURE

Supporting outcast children is a way of life for Harpenden’s Sarah Wade, whose charity career began as a ‘naive’ 19-year-old. Sandra Deeble met the Humanitas founder making a difference this Christmas and throughout the year.
After doing her A Levels at St George’s School in Harpenden, Sarah Wade travelled to Romania to volunteer in an orphanage and gypsy camps for two weeks. It was a decision that changed her life. After her initial fortnight, she came home, worked in a restaurant to raise funds and went back for six months. This became 13 years, in which she adopted a child and set up a charity to build residential homes for abandoned children.

‘I was going to go to university but I was very undecided,’ the 36-year-old says. ‘I wanted to try and do physio, and then I was looking at third world studies. I was taking my gap year to figure things out.’

Sarah is now CEO of Humanitas, the Hitchin-based charity she co-founded. Its focus is children who are suffering the consequences of failing states.

‘We specialise in three areas,’ Sarah explains succinctly, ‘healthcare, education and homing kids.’

The charity has long-term projects in Romania and Ghana and it also works with refugees. She is currently in Bangladesh with the Rohingya community which has fled a brutal military operation against it in Myanmar.

I meet Sarah in Coffee Lab in Hitchin’s Sun Street a couple of weeks before she heads for Bangladesh. Thanks to social media, while writing up my notes I can see updates about what she and the medical team are doing there, and it feels hugely reassuring. Around 15,000 refugees are arriving every day, and 80 per cent of these are women and children, so to know that a group of people from Hertfordshire are on the ground, giving emergency medical care to those who need it most, makes it more real, and in a positive way.

Above Children at the schools in a rural village in Ghana, built and run by Humanitas
Photography: Kasia Burke

Right Sarah with one of the abandoned girls Humanitas is supporting with its safe homes project
‘I want us to be a very community-focused charity,’ Sarah says over her coffee. ‘I want people to feel that they're involved. There can be a real sense with charities that you donate your money and you’ve got no idea of what's really going on. What we’d like to do at the end of our refugee trip to Bangladesh is to have a coffee morning so that people can come along and ask “What did you actually see there? What is really going on?” We want people to come and chat to us – to be approachable and accessible. We see all this stuff on TV and it's so huge that now everyone is either numb to it or freaked out by it.’

The community focus is very much alive and kicking in Hitchin. Coffee Lab is a supporter of Humanitas, and earlier this year the café had an exhibition of photographs by Hitchin’s Kasia Burke (some of which are shown here) who travelled to Ghana to volunteer in the Humanitas school in Ayensuako. If you’d like to see them, the photos have now moved up a few doors to Quotidian, the baker on the corner of Sun Street, and will be on show (and sale) until January. The story of Kasia’s experience at the school is also on the Humanitas website, humanitascharity.org

What was Sarah’s inspiration to head to Romania as a 19-year-old?
‘I’d seen it on Blue Peter when I was a kid with the shoe boxes and things,’ she says. She admits that while her parents have always been very supportive of her choices, if she had a 19-year-old daughter she wouldn't want her to see the things she saw then.

Sarah has been back in Harpenden for three years, with her adopted son, Dylan. He is now 16 and has just started college in St Albans. They are both bi-lingual. The story of how Sarah adopted Dylan was made into a BBC documentary, Baby Be Mine.

Humanitas looks after 27 children through its Safe Homes project in Romania, where permanent foster parents live and work with the children in residential homes. Sarah visits once a month. All of the children are Roma, and most have been abandoned, rather than orphaned. It was Lydia who inspired Sarah to start the project.

‘She was six when I first met her. She was in the orphanage and she was in a bad state. She'd been locked away in this tiny room and tied up all day. It took me about six months of going to see her every day before she would let me untie her. She would scream and attack you. This poor girl had lost her mind due to the conditions she had lived in.’

Lydia is now 19, and is thriving, although Sarah explains that most of the Roma children Humanitas looks after will need long-term care.

‘It’s a lifetime project and it’s quite costly,’ she says. ‘When I started, all I could think about was “What can I do about this?”

‘We see all this stuff on TV and it’s so huge that now everyone is either numb to it or freaked out by it’
The first thing was just to get these kids out of the orphanage. With maturity and learning, as an organisation we now look at things in a more preventive way. So we set up family planning clinics and started working with Roma because 99 per cent of kids who are abandoned are Roma.’

What about adoption by Romanians? ‘Romanians won’t adopt Roma. This is where the problem actually stems from. There’s this huge stigma against Roma. They are outcasts.’

And in the UK? ‘International adoption is shut between Romania and England. It’s been closed since 2000.’

The reason, it turns out, is corruption. ‘A lot of kids were being sold. There was a lot of money going here, there and who knows where. In England and in other countries I think that people would happily adopt a Roma baby, but if it was opened up, the same thing would happen again.’

What is it like working in a country that is so corrupt? ‘We’ve licensed ourselves privately so we run a private foster care system and a private home so we’re not dependent on the government,’ Sarah explains. ‘And in Ghana there’s a lot of corruption but it doesn’t come near us because we’re running a private school.’

Sarah seems to have a knack of finding the best way of doing things – getting around and past obstacles. Would she call herself a natural problem solver? ‘I think I am,’ she laughs. ‘I think we’re good at that. We tend to ask “What’s the most efficient and effective long-term way that we can handle this?” It’s about assessing and addressing problems.’

The problem-solving led Humanitas to a national programme in Romania for children with hydrocephalus. ‘Kids are born with water on the brain and it’s a really simple surgery. They basically put a shunt in the back of the child’s neck and it drains the water out.’

This project led the charity to Ghana where hydrocephalus is a huge problem. While there, in the remote and forgotten area of Ayensuako, charity workers discovered many orphans. ‘If you are an orphan, you don’t have anyone to pay your school fees,’ Sarah says. So the charity built and now runs a pre-school and junior school. ‘We started with 50 kids and now we’ve got 140. We’re pretty much educating the whole village.’

‘It costs us under £10,000 a year to run our school in Ghana. Some organisations are running schools of that size on £30–£40,000.’

‘A lot of kids were being sold. There was a lot of money going here, there and who knows where’

Top, below and overleaf
There are 140 children being educated at the two schools in Ghana. It costs less than £10,000 a year
Photography: Kasia Burke

Bottom left Working in Serbia during the refugee crisis
Rather than employ eight teachers, we have four, and they do eight classes between them, in the morning and afternoon.’

Humanitas is also developing a permaculture farming project.
‘We want to make the school sustainable,’ Sarah says. ‘We’re trying to work so that we don’t have work to do. We want to create proper, long-term change.’

Sarah’s ambition for the charity is perhaps surprising – to stay small.
‘A lot of organisations outsource their work. I don’t ever want to outsource anything because that’s when things are run less efficiently and funding goes missing.’

The turnover for the charity was £255,000 last year, with money raised largely through fundraising. Sarah recognises that it is an unusual charity – a senior team wouldn’t usually work so directly with projects. They are currently a permanent team of five, including Ramiz Momeni, a doctor, who is also currently in Bangladesh. Medical professionals also volunteer to go out to work with refugees. In the past few years, they have worked on the borders in Croatia and Serbia, and more recently with Syrian refugees in Lesbos.

‘We’ve spent the last two years in Greece. We’ve followed the crisis.’ Sarah explains. ‘Because we’re smaller, it can be easier – we can go where the need is.
‘It’s worth noting that a lot of people want to go home eventually. In Lesbos, when you see families and the elderly getting on a boat to Athens, it’s not as if people are saying “Yes! We’re going to Germany!” It’s not what a lot of people want. People are crying and in great distress. They are not celebrating.’

While frustrated at the way refugees are sometimes portrayed negatively in the UK press, she says she remains calm. You get the sense she is conserving her energy for positive action.

Reflecting on her achievements, did she ever think she’d end up where she is?
‘I didn’t think!’ she laughs. ‘I was probably quite naive. I was young. I didn’t start with a dream of getting to this point. I started because I wanted to do something for the kids in those orphanages. It grew naturally. It was an easier thing to stay and do something about it than to do nothing about it.’

HOW TO PUT A SMILE ON A HUMANITAS CHILD’S FACE THIS CHRISTMAS

Give a Christmas present: This is done through allocated funding via the Humanitas website. If you click on a football, Sarah will buy a football in Romania to give to a child. She will do all the shopping herself and give the gifts to the children when she is there in December.

Visit the shop: The Humanitas shop is at 31, Bucklesbury, Hitchin. It is currently closed for refurbishment and will reopen in January with a focus on eco-friendly and Fairtrade products.

Volunteer: The charity needs volunteers who can help in the shop, and also with research and administration. Medical professionals are much in need in the field.

Fundraise: Contact Humanitas if you need help or ideas. The office is at the Humanitas shop at 31, Bucklesbury, Hitchin.

Education: From next year schools will be able to link with the Humanitas school in Ghana.

Donate: Money is always needed to run long-term projects in Romania and Ghana but is also desperately needed now to help Humanitas treat Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Links: facebook.com/HumanitasCharityPage humanitascharity.org