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Grand Blanc native finds a whole different lifestyle in tiny Romanian village

by RoNeisha Mullen | The Flint Journal
Sunday March 09, 2008, 12:00 PM

GRAND BLANC, MICHIGAN -- Alex Kuch grew up in Grand Blanc and was headed for life as a lawyer when he had a change of heart.

Now, he lives in a small village in Romania where the mayor is the only person in town with a car and with Internet access. Oh, there's also a Web hookup at the local school.

The Grand Blanc High School graduate loves it.

"I wanted to do something I was passionate about, experience something completely different and make a difference ... not just talk about it," Kuch said in an e-mail to The Flint Journal.

"I was at a bit of a crossroads and I was not sold on the idea of working a nine to five in a cubicle or doing something I was not really interested in."

Kuch, 26, certainly doesn't have anything resembling a boring life now.

He went to Romania a year ago with the Peace Corps, teaching English two hours a week to students in grades 5-8.

Kuch lives in the village of Poienile Izei in north central Romania, hours away from the famed Transylvania home of Count Dracula lore.

"When I am not in school or tutoring I am helping the villagers make hay, chop wood, put shingles on roofs, dig up potatoes, pick apples, pretty much help with what ever needs to be done," Kuch said.

"Everyone in the village grows their own food whether it be fruits, vegetables or meat, therefore there is a lot of work to be done harvesting those crops and raising those animals."

Kuch's parents, Bob and Jean, say they're proud of their son. They still live in Grand Blanc with Alex's brother, Jeff, and sister Katy.

"We're really thrilled that he decided to go into the Peace Corps. He's always been interested in seeing other parts of the world," Bob Kuch said. "It's been a success for him."

After graduating from high school, Alex spent two years at University of Detroit Mercy School of Law and worked for a wine distributor.

"When I decided to join the Peace Corps I had a vision of living without all the amenities that I was used to in the states," Kuch said. "I did not want to be placed in a large city where there would be a lot of English speakers and modern amenities, I wanted to rough it so to speak ..."

Kuch lives in a small cabin next to one of his host families, a married couple and their children. In the summer, the husband works construction in larger cities. leaving his family behind for months at a time.

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Bob Kuch said his son is "amazed at how they get by."

In Romania, Alex Kuch said he spends a lot time dismantling media-driven perceptions about Americans and trying to fit in as one of the locals.

Kuch, the only American and English speaker in his village, said his American manners are rubbing off on the locals.

"Little things like saying, 'please and thank you,' or 'you're welcome,' are being picked up by a lot of the community."

Before being sent to the village, Kuch spent 12 weeks working on his language and teaching skills in Ploiesti, a large industrial city just north of Bucharest, the capital of Romania. Alex Kuch said his service trip is a learning experience for both him and the villagers.

"I am actually living, working, eating, drinking, breathing with this community hand in hand, helping integrate two cultures as best as I can," Kuch said.

"I think the community as a whole is benefiting from having me there, not only as an English teacher or an extra set of arms and legs to help bring in the crops, but as someone who brings with them a lot of experience as well as a different point of view."

His 27-month service trip will end in July 2009. Kuch doesn't have any definite plans afterward and hopes to stay in Europe.

"After my time here in Romania, learning a new culture and language, I am hooked and want to keep on learning."

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