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Gardner-Webb Alumnus Nathaniel Hilliard on a Mission in Moldova

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Office of University Communications

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Written by communications intern Travis Sherrill

For anybody, the task of graduating college and transitioning into a new phase of life can be daunting. So imagine walking across the commencement stage and heading straight into a two-year mission across the world. There's a new language, a new predominant religion, and—oh yeah—you're alone.

Many people would shy from such challenge. Gardner-Webb alumnus Nathaniel Hilliard ('09) embraced it.

Hilliard's home church in Atlanta had an existing relationship with some missionaries in Moldova, a small Eastern European country between Ukraine and Romania. Hilliard had spent part of two summers working in missionary camps there, but he had bigger plans.

"Near the end of my GWU career, I called the missionaries and asked if they needed help," said Hilliard. "I felt like I could do more in the country of Moldova than just in the missionary camps." Turns out, there was opportunity for him to do a lot more, so Hilliard agreed to serve a two-year stint with the missionaries.

When he first left, he says, "there was a little anxiety about not knowing exactly what I was going to do. But the uncertainty was exciting. Saying goodbye to family was hard but saying hello to a new opportunity and a new environment of service was wonderful."

While in Moldova, Hilliard worked with nonprofit organizations to assist in after school programs for orphans, teaching them how to make the transition to adulthood (Moldova's orphans are considered independent adults at age 15). He assisted the missionaries in conducting Bible studies at a Baptist church outside the capital city. He was also "blessed" to be able to mentor the teenage son of his host family.

Still, a person in Hilliard's situation faces numerous challenges. Family concerns, loneliness, religious differences, a language barrier—Hilliard had to learn to overcome each of them during his journey.

The most immediate challenge, he said, was the language barrier. The primary language is Moldavian, which is very similar to Romanian. Most Moldovans can also speak Russian. Hilliard arrived speaking—well, English. He knew something had to change.

“If I’m going to be here and serve for two years, I’m going to have to learn the language,” he thought to himself. Eventually, after much work and perseverance, he developed enough of the language to be able to communicate clearly.

But Hilliard’s most daunting challenge was his inner struggle with self doubt. “There was some doubt with my character or whether I could do something. It was an internal battle. Sometimes it was difficult to serve others and face the challenges that were going on in my life as well,” stated Hilliard.

Through the trials and tribulations, Hilliard says he had the love and support of both his immediate family and his Gardner-Webb family. “As I prepared for the trip and throughout the duration, my friends and family were very supportive, continuing to pray for me. I was able to keep in contact with several people at Gardner-Webb that were extremely encouraging and so I’m thankful for those friendships.”

Hilliard even credits his alma mater with strengthening his inner resolve to embrace a life of service, and for preparing him for the challenges of the mission field.

“Gardner-Webb University does a wonderful job of presenting its students with opportunities to serve. Whether it’s going on a short-term mission trip or working in the community garden for a few hours, the opportunities are ever present. When I was teaching in Moldova, I was able to put to practical use many of the things I learned in my religion classes.”

Ultimately, Hilliard says the experience in Moldova was “the most fulfilling” of his life. “Through the challenges and experiences I had, I was able to learn a lot about myself, but more importantly, I was able to learn how to serve others.”

So what’s next? Hilliard has started a youth ministry internship with his church in Atlanta. Eventually, he aspires to go on to seminary. And of course, Moldova is still on his spiritual radar. “I would love to go back. I would get on a plane in a heartbeat and go visit with the friends I made.”