



# Doing Good That Is Good

The newsletter of FARMS International

July 2017: Moldova, Newspaper Feature on FARMS International

Providing revolving entrepreneurial loans to poor Christian families - Galatians 6:10

Dear Friends of FARMS International,

Greetings in Jesus! This issue is reprinting a Sunday front page article published in the Duluth News Tribune, featuring the ministry of FARMS International and its ministry in Moldova. We trust you will enjoy this "Good News, about Doing Good."



Joseph Richter, executive director of FARMS International, and his wife, Pat, check in with Tamara Bucur in Moldova via Skype on their home computer to see how her greenhouse operation is coming along. Joe is supporting the country of Moldova through the organization with loans to individuals to build greenhouses and raise produce to sell.

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## Helping Moldova

### Knife River-based charity reaches out to the world

By Brady Slater  
Duluth News Tribune

As a spring rain came down hard outside the Knife River log home belonging to Joseph and Pat Richter, the couple moved through the tidy living space inside. They told stories about

artifacts on display from around the globe. When he reached an array of primitive tools, Joe stopped.

"These are my favorite things to collect," he said, handling a well-worn machete.

A timeless family portrait nearby showed the couple and



**Tamara Bucur of Moldova, an Eastern European country and former Soviet republic, is seen here with the tomatoes she grows in a greenhouse thanks to a small business loan she received from FARMS International.**

their children gathered together high up in the Philippines' Mountain Province. Monsoon rains there could soak them for days, they recalled. But the rainforest was calm and lush in the photo taken ages ago, when their four now-grown children were young and in the midst of the family's eight-year evangelical mission to the country.

The family lived near and worked with an indigenous population that Joe said wasn't 20 years removed from headhunting. He started a church there and trained men in the ministry, while the family also helped to bring elements of self-sustaining modernity, such as water purification, to a tribe that could see its children decimated by an infiltration of the measles.

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"We lived pretty simple," Joe said. "It was a very difficult life."

"But the kids feel that it was God's blessing to have that experience," added Pat.

The Richters, now with nine grandkids, have spent their lives in service to both God and some of the world's poorest people.

The 68-year-olds started together in the Peace Corps and unfurled many purposeful adventures from there — most of them for FARMS International, the nonprofit humanitarian agency Joe heads as its executive director from his office in the couple's home.

Billed as "agricultural evangelism," FARMS International has been providing small loans to entrepreneurial people in underdeveloped and far-flung places for decades. The interest-free loans, Joe said, are not to be confused with the world's predatory micro-lenders, which can charge as much as 36 percent interest and are unforgiving if, say, a small farm's crop fails.

"Poor people have no problem with a loan," Joe said. "It's the interest they despise, because they know what it's done in the past to people they know."

One recent Farms International loan went to a man from Moldova, so he could buy a tow-behind well-drilling rig.

"Hopefully, it will turn into a good project for him that will help a lot of people in his area," Joe said.

Lately, Moldova has been ground zero for Farms International. Joe used his computer to call-up a video chat with his primary contact there, Tamara Bucur. A native Moldovan, she was appearing near the end of another long workday.



**Joseph and Pat Richter of Knife River are longtime missionaries. Joe is the executive director of FARMS International.**

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**Since serving as missionaries in the Philippines, the Richters were given handmade knives and machetes from around the world. They've mounted them on a wall of their home in Knife River.**

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Following a short introduction, Bucur forgave her appearance, saying, "I look like I was out to the sea."

### 'Cows and goats'

Though not far from the Black Sea, Moldova is a landlocked country in eastern Europe, sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania. As part of the Soviet Union, it was the source of

wheat for the state and provided ample wine from once lush vineyards.

But independence in 1991 brought isolation and a crushing blow to trade, explained Leah (Richter) Bailey, a Two Harbors-based farmer and daughter to Joe and Pat.

"As the Soviet Union pulled out," she said in an email, "they literally ripped up the railroad tracks as they left."

Seventeen kilometers from the nearest population center, Cahul, Bucur lives in the wagon-rutted countryside. The World Health Organization called Moldova the poorest country among its 53 European partners — characterized by a large number of people, 40 percent, who work abroad to send money back to family. Some Moldovan women, Leah explained, are guaranteed better lives as housekeepers in other countries, only to unwittingly be drawn into human trafficking. Orphans are rampant in a country that has seen a steep rise in its death rate.

"It's very hard," Bucur said. "My people want to live in unison. But kids go to Russia and Europe to raise some money."

Bucur operates both a shelter for abused and neglected children and a home for elderly people who have no family to take care of them. In the Moldovan plight, the Richters found a scenario ripe for Farms International's intervention.

But in a break from its decades-old practice of issuing modest \$500-\$3,000 loans, Farms International recently provided Bucur and others in the countryside a shipping container's worth of 18 greenhouses.

The greenhouses have been a godsend, said Bucur, allowing



the southeastern countryside to jumpstart an erratic growing season. Already peddling vegetables, some of the produce is being used to help feed the 12 elders and 25 orphans overseen by Bucur and the local church.

"Without the gift of greenhouses," Bucur said, "all we'd have is cows and goats."

## A transformation

Dean Luurtsema is the owner and operator of a family-run garden center near Grand Rapids, Mich. He was driving last winter when he heard a commercial for FARMS International on Christian radio.

"It was talking about organic farming in poor countries — helping orphans and increasing yields," Luurtsema said. "I'm thinking, 'Where is Moldova?' I should know; I'm into geography."

He emailed Joe Richter to say he had a trailer load of greenhouses for the cause. The Luurtsemas had fabricated the 24-by-48-foot greenhouses in the early 1990s, but were now retiring the assets and had put them up for sale.

Farms International is a non-denominational organization that gets more than 90 percent of its monetary donations from individuals and churches. Luurtsema's offer of greenhouses harkened back to a different time for Farms International.

When it started in the 1960s, Farms International would do things like package and ship chicken coops to needy places. The aim was to bring sustainability to poor people in places throughout Asia and Africa, mostly, in an effort to break a cycle of dependency on charitable aid.

But the practice of shipping infrastructure was tedious and costly. Working with the late-Farms International founder Gareth Miller, Joe helped to streamline Miller's pioneering model of offering zero-interest loans to people in impoverished places. The practice evolved to see funds distributed and managed by small volunteer groups made up of church-going locals who knew best how to get positive returns on the loans being made in their towns and villages. Currently, Farms International oversees 24 active loan communities around the world.

"It's not a handout; it's a loan. It has to be repaid," Joe said. "They agree to give back 5 or 10 percent of profits to their church. People begin to find they don't have to be the one on the receiving end of charity. They learn to give to others. That transformation from poverty to a giver mentality is a major thing, and we've seen it over and over again."

Luurtsema Sales was familiar with making overseas container shipments and packaged together roughly \$75,000 worth of greenhouses, 600 additional planters designed for tomatoes and a video the company made on how to assemble the greenhouses.

"It's a great thing to give them an opportunity," Luurtsema said. "We know they're working hard and needed a little help to get ahead — a blessing for them in the name of Jesus."

Bucur and members of about a dozen other families dropped everything as soon as the shipping container arrived. Thanks to the how-to video, they assembled the greenhouses to a T.

By early June, Bucur was already harvesting produce.

"I was so happy to see all of the tomatoes coming up," Bucur said. "It was amazing."

Joe described how the



Moldovan growers discovered a pizza business looking for something other than green peppers. They began raising red, yellow and orange ones now being supplied to the pizza-maker.

Since taking over Farms International in 1993, the Richters have continued to network and learn about new places to practice its unique brand of charity.

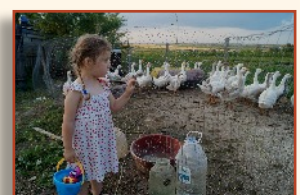
"More recently we started a program in Cuba and have two in Haiti," Joe said. "We're also hoping to start one in Ecuador."

But on a rainy spring day, they were simply pleased to see their friend smiling on the computer screen.

"She's one-of-a-kind as far as being a go-getter," Pat said of Bucur.

"Sometimes you hold your breath," Joe said. "These countries are not easy places. There are communist pasts, a lot of bribery and a lot of other hard things for the people to deal with. But everything (in this case) worked out as well as you could imagine."

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Moldovan girl helping in the garden

## Coming Soon!

I recently returned from a wonderful visit to Moldova. The purpose of the trip was to train a new committee and to visit our ongoing projects. In a future newsletter I will feature this visit, but I wanted to give you a preview of what I saw and how God is working in this very needy country.

Please pray for FARMS and remember to support this vital work. We are enabling real evangelistic outreach in many places of great need like Moldova. *Joe Richter*

19 donated greenhouses, like the one on the left are a great improvement over the improvised ones. They were in full production in June.



A milk goat herd numbering 120 animals grazes next to an abandoned railroad waiting station from the Soviet era in Moldova.

This goat herd is a FARMS project and the owner recently added new breeding stock to improve milk production. Cheese is the main product for sale.

Petru Palamariuc of Moldova, a Christian photographer and videographer, did a great job of documenting our program in Moldova. He even used a drone to capture village life from above. He will be producing a video for us that will be available soon. I am sure you will enjoy the testimonies and seeing the projects first hand.



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