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Bacau: Here *Roma*nians Work Together Beautifully

By Cristina Merrill

DECEMBER 13, 2005

BUCHAREST, Romania – I shall always remember the city of Bacau for opening my eyes to beautiful things happening in this country. Last month I wrote about my visit there with naïve painter Ioan Maric and the charmed world he creates out of countryside living. I stayed on, inspired by the unbeatable cooking of my hostess at the inn where I lodged and the kinder, gentler pace of existence a few hours outside the capital city. The longer I stayed, the more I came to appreciate the merits of mulled wine and hot and peppery plum brandy. The freezing weather was seasonal enough for indoor jubilance.

One early morning I knew I was ready for anything after eating my way through a hearty breakfast — thick slices of fresh homemade bread, generous portions of several marmalades and a three-egg omelet big enough to cure even the most stubborn frequenter of all-you-can-eat locales. (As I found out then and there, you can eat it all in one sitting, without wanting to go back for more.) With the taste of strong, sweet Turkish coffee still nudging my tongue, and the grinds to prove it, I arrived at Ovidiu Rom Association's headquarters downtown to witness another miracle unfolding in this Moldavian city three hours north east of Bucharest: an organization that works with disadvantaged families, mostly of Gypsy origins, by helping parents get career training and find work and persuading them that education, not begging, is the answer to their children's future.

The two-tier program that helps empower both impoverished mothers and their children was pioneered here in 2001 by Leslie Hawke, the mother of U.S. actor Ethan Hawke, and Maria Gheorghiu, a dynamic Romanian educator. With several programs in both Bacau and Bucharest, it has fast become one of Romania's most successful nongovernmental organizations. The association is named after Roman poet Ovid, who spent the last years of his life in the Romanian city port of Constanta, and wrote "The Metamorphoses." Its programs, according to the founders, are about personal metamorphosis, and the word "Rom" has a dual meaning, referring both to Romania and Roma. The association is also a model of collaboration between the public and the private domains. The issues Ovidiu Rom deals with are highly complex, with some elements specific to this part of the world — poverty-induced begging, long-held prejudice against Gypsies (or better, Roma, as they are increasingly called to avoid stereotyping) and a Communist legacy of authoritarian teaching methods that did not encourage creativity and incentive. The fact that it is a mostly Romanian joint effort, as opposed to the charity-type import commonly found here after the 1989 Revolution that toppled Nicolae Ceausescu's regime, also proves that the soil here is fertile for another seed of democracy: community spirit.

Leslie Hawke's name, and that of her famous son, helped draw lots of publicity mileage — and funds — to Ovidiu Rom, in a short amount of time. Ms. Hawke is also an experienced fundraiser and was able to tap into public and private U.S. funds. The association's first fundraiser, which produced close to $160,000, was billed at the social event of the year. Held around Halloween this

Photo: Amarjit Sidhu

Ethan Hawke and his mom (center), together with Romania's prime minister and his wife, at the Halloween Charity Ball hosted this year by Ovidiu Rom.

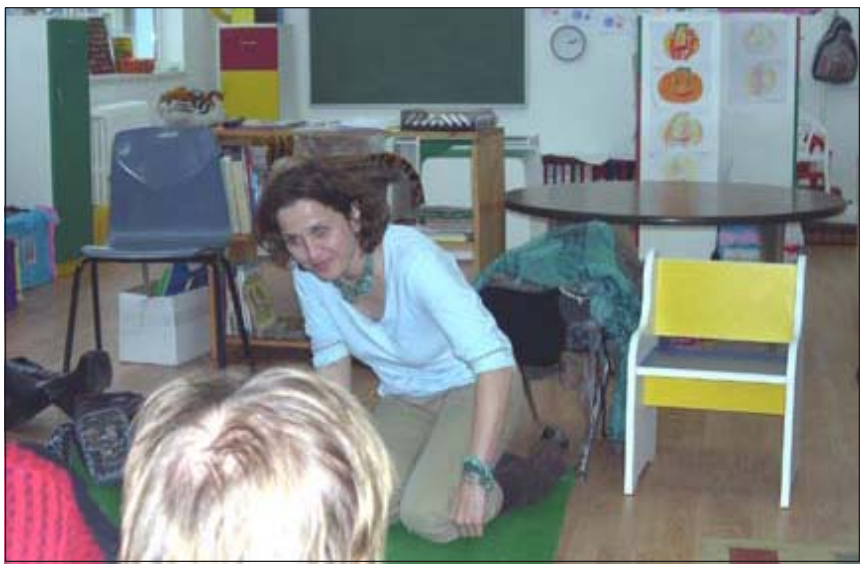
year at the Palace of the Parliament, the eyesore that former dictator Nicolae Ceausescu left behind as legacy of his madness, the three-day affair featuring the actor attracted most of the Romanian and expat elite. And the irony of having a major Communist monument festooned in capitalist glitz was not lost on organizers: T-shirts made for the occasion carried the wording: "People's Palace Bucharest/The world's second largest building/1989: a dictator's fantasy/2005: an icon of change."

The press raved about Ms. Hawke, the confident ex-Peace Corps volunteer who in 2000 got assigned to Romania, instead of her choice of Ecuador. She decided to do something after she saw the first of the many street children begging in Bacau, a boy named Alex. As she herself recounts the story, "I wound up the next day taking him to the shelter that *Fundatia de Sp! rijin Comunitar* [Community Aid Foundation] (the NGO I worked for) ran, and he stayed there for three days. He seemed to be thrilled to be there, but on the third day his mother showed up absolutely furious that we had taken the primary breadwinner of the family away, and that was my first introduction to the complexities of child-begging in Romania and how most of these kids are actually supporting their families. So you can't just take them to an institution and make things better."

At the same time, Ms. Gheorghiu, 36, a passionate teacher whose mother is also an educator (but "traditionalist to the bone"), also wanted to start something that helped advance, and possibly change, the old-fashioned Romanian lecture-centered school atmosphere, so lacking in basic student-teacher interaction. She had undergone Step-by-Step training, which billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros' foundation Open Society Institute pioneered in 1994. The aim of Step instruction is to reform education systems in Eastern Europe by fostering interactive and dynamic environments for parents, teachers and students, and ultimately encourage children to be self-sufficient, confident and creative decision-makers. "I have nothing against traditionalism but I always knew that it is possible to do better, that education goes beyond the mere act of school-based learning or teaching," Ms. Gheorghiu, who is the association's executive director, said. A common friend at the Bucharest American International School put her and Ms. Hawke in touch, a match that worked from the start.

Child begging: When you are poor you cannot be proud

Child-begging is one of the most unpleasant urban problems facing post-Communist Romania. It's heartbreaking to see children working the subways in Bucharest and tourist areas, sometimes carrying newly born babies (baby lambs are clutched at Christmas time), for full effect. Some take drugs. Recently, a sad-looking young boy of no more than nine passed by each passenger in the subway car this correspondent was on. His



"I always knew that it is possible to do better, that education goes beyond the mere act of school-based learning or teaching," says Maria Gheorghiu, executive director of Ovidiu Rom.

"When you are poor you cannot afford to be proud," says Catalin Manolache, a teacher of Romany language and history at Ovidiu Rom, pictured here with some of his students.

palm raised up, he blessed the crowd. (Whatever their miserly conditions, these children always wish well on the rest of us. Maybe because they are still young, they haven't learned how to be bitter or they instinctively know Solomon's words, "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."). His face seemed to light up with joy as he, remembering that he was still a child, caught sight of a woman's poodle. He smiled for a fraction of a second in the direction of the dog. He quickly regained his severe composure, however. Retreating to an empty corner of the train car, he pulled out a bag and started sniffing glue. He existed in a world of his own.

The last regime didn't permit pan-handling, which would have embarrassed the "glorious" system, though it didn't help solve hidden prejudice either. All Romanians were obligated to work or get schooling but they didn't necessarily learn to get along. Worse, Gypsies kept being marginalized, their Romany language forbidden, and many of their children sent to schools for people with "special needs" (and for inferior education), in part because they didn't perform well on culturally biased tests.

Once Ceausescu got deposed, the sudden arrival of unchecked capitalism and unemployment caused many Roma to resort to desperate means. "When you are poor you cannot afford to be proud," said Catalin Manolache, an Ovidiu-Rom teacher of Romany language and history in Bucharest, and a self-described product of "ghetto" Roma beginnings. "Self-preservation kicks in and you think that you'll do anything to get some food. A human becomes inhuman."

Tough street life causes these children to grow up fast. Necessity pushes them into juvenile petty crime. I have been witness to young rascals harassing tourists. Helplessness and indifference, rather than indignation or even pity, has been the general public attitude here in response. I once stopped two police officers to ask why they didn't do something to stop begging by minors. Under Romania's new child-protection law, child exploitation is prohibited here, and parents can face jail for making their children work. They shrugged their shoulders and said that they do not have the manpower to cope with a serious problem that won't go away without fixing deeper roots.

People give generously to children but don't seem to think twice about helping them get out of the situation. Many simply look away. "When you see thirty beggars a day, it fails to impress you," said Mr. Manolache. Poverty runs high, especially among the Roma, which is the largest minority in Europe. Romania has an estimated one-fourth of European Roma. Romanian officials list this minority at only 2.5 percent of this country's 22 million population, but nongovernmental-organizations experts say that the real number is more like 10 percent, or up to 2.5 million people. That's a big number, and when one considers the level of their poverty, inadequate access to education, and high birth rate, it becomes an escalating social problem.

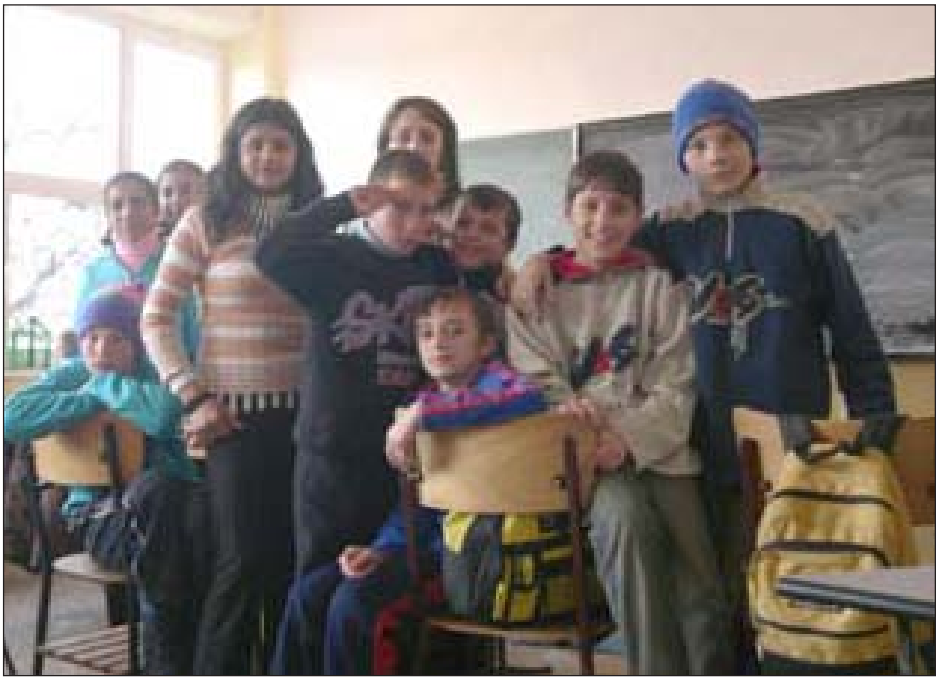
According to the World Bank, between 70 and 80 percent of Roma living in Europe have less than a primary school education. Fewer than one percent go on to higher education. Poverty rates for Roma range between four and ten times that of non-Roma in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania — nearly 40 percent of Roma in Romania and Bulgaria live on less than $2.15 per day. As Ovidiu Rom's literature explains, "A young child's begging is often the primary source of income for these families — the younger the child, the more effective he or she is at obtaining money from strangers. Many of the children who beg on the street do not attend school and are completely illiterate. They range in age from 5 to 14, with the majority between 8 and 11."

In 2001, inspired by The Doe Fund, a New York based nonprofit that assists homeless men obtain jobs, and with the help of a grant from United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Ms. Hawke started a work-training program for mothers. She gave it the same name as in the U.S.. "Ready, Willing and Able." In other words, the help offered is an opportunity created only for those who want to make the commitment to change their life — a proposition not always easy to accomplish because of the complex issues involved.

The Decade of Roma Inclusion finally reaches Romania

I trust that readers are aware of the reputation Roma have had, as nonconformists. Believed to be descendants

of early nomad tribes from the northwestern area of India known as Punjab, they settled throughout Europe more than five centuries ago and most were enslaved until the late 1800s. Depending on one's politics, Roma eccentricity can be viewed as either the reason or the consequence of their not having integrated into mainstream society. Roma women's exotic beauty and colorful pleated skirts, or their men's renowned talents as musicians and master metal craftsmen, have helped create an aura that in the best of times has inspired fairy-tales, for enjoyment by non-Roma. But the subjects themselves experience discrimination and prejudice on a daily basis. The stereotype of the Gypsies as caravan travelers, often unwashed and on the prowl, has persisted until modern times. In this part of the world, non-Roma children were warned not so long ago, as this correspondent recalls her childhood here, to beware knife-yielding Gypsies looking to kidnap them, cut their limbs off and send them into a lifetime of begging.



Many Roma children are offered "grade acceleration" classes as part of Ovidiu Rom's programs — pictured here, students in Bacau.

The Romas' peculiar traditions, in danger of disappearing as a result of lack of cohesion across borders or even lack of education, are unique. Mr. Manolache said that it is important for Roma to "rekindle the spirit of their culture" and be proud of their creative talents. He is heeding his own advice. Two years ago he was working at a gas station and "going nowhere," while now he is enrolled at a Bucharest University for his college degree in Romany language and civilization.

"Gypsies are born talented," he says. His own fine pencil portraits of members of the staff are prominently displayed at the association's Bucharest headquarters. Some of the best musicians in Romania, the wedding-playing *lautari*, are also Gypsy. As Mr. Manolache said, that music has been performed for the non-Roma for centuries, as a way to make a living — but Gypsies also have their own, different songs. Lately, a new music trend has become controversial here. *Manele*, a type of singing that was inspired by Turkish and Arabic music and that originated among the Gypsies after 1989, is being quickly absorbed by the young non-Roma and attracting criticism from many non-Gypsies for being in poor taste. Let Gypsies have their own music, says Mr. Manolache. "Why cannot [non-Roma] accept that Gypsies like listening to *manele*? Over time, Gypsies have performed two types of music, one kind for non-Gypsies and one for themselves. This is for us, Gypsies." Ovidiu Rom's students serenaded this correspondent on a couple of occasions with improvised manele performances.

Mr. Manolache also advised this correspondent on the proper usage of "Gypsy" *vs.* "Roma." It's all very confusing, especially since this reporter was recently corrected by Sarah Scheele, the wife of the European Union's chief of delegation for being "out of date" for using the former term. "Gypsies identify one another as Gypsies," he said. "Nobody will be offended if you call them so, but it all depends on intonation. When you write articles, use 'Roma' just to be safe."

In order for Romania to be worthy of entry into the European Union, due by 2008, this nation has been strongly encouraged to adopt into the mainstream the politically correct term of "Roma," taken from the Romany word for man, "*rom*." Roma-related issues have become an integral part of the European Union membership process. In fact, Romania is currently chairing an initiative launched this year and backed by the Open Society Institute. Endorsed by nine countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic and Hungary, "the Decade of Roma Inclusion" is a major effort designed to ensure that Roma have equal access to education, housing, employment and healthcare.

Even before it became trendy to care about Roma, Ms. Hawke decided that something needed to be done. She decided that getting mothers jobs, and education, was an important first step. She called it the "Mothers Program." Many Roma women get pregnant at an early age and drop out of school. Couples rarely marry legally and because they give birth to babies outside the reach of the health care and civil systems, their children do not have birth certificates. The idea behind the Ready, Willing &

Able program was that by bringing in an income, mothers would not be forced to send their children on the street cover the cost of basics, like food and medicine. In addition, women accepted into the Mothers Program, which operates in Bacau and Bucharest, receive counseling, training and ongoing social services, emergency aid, family planning services as well as advocacy and intervention with city agencies on their behalf. Costs are high — Bucharest programs will run about $100,000 this year.

School as a Second Home and Much More

Alongside the Ready, Willing and Able program for mothers, Ms. Hawke and Ms. Gheorghiu started a multi-tiered program to help get children educated. Dubbed "First Chances," it aims to get otherwise sidelined children back into the mainstream school system. Depending on the level of each child's preparation, the program provides intensive "grade-acceleration" courses to help older children make up missed school years. In Romania, children who fail a grade more than three times are kicked out of the school system.

Because of poverty and culture-induced barriers, many Roma children are in this situation. Through Ovidiu Rom I met handfuls of teenage first graders. The Bucharest program even has a 40-year-old enrolled in first grade, according to center director Daniela Stoicescu. The association also offers remedial teaching, kindergarten services, scholarships and homework support for children who don't have the proper conditions to study at home — and many do not, considering they come from households with no running water, heat or even the most basic furniture. Staffers in Bacau and Bucharest actively recruit kids for kindergarten, grade-school and summer school. Once a child is deemed ready for the mainstream, these employees then work with local officials and educators to make sure that the students can be integrated into regular classes.

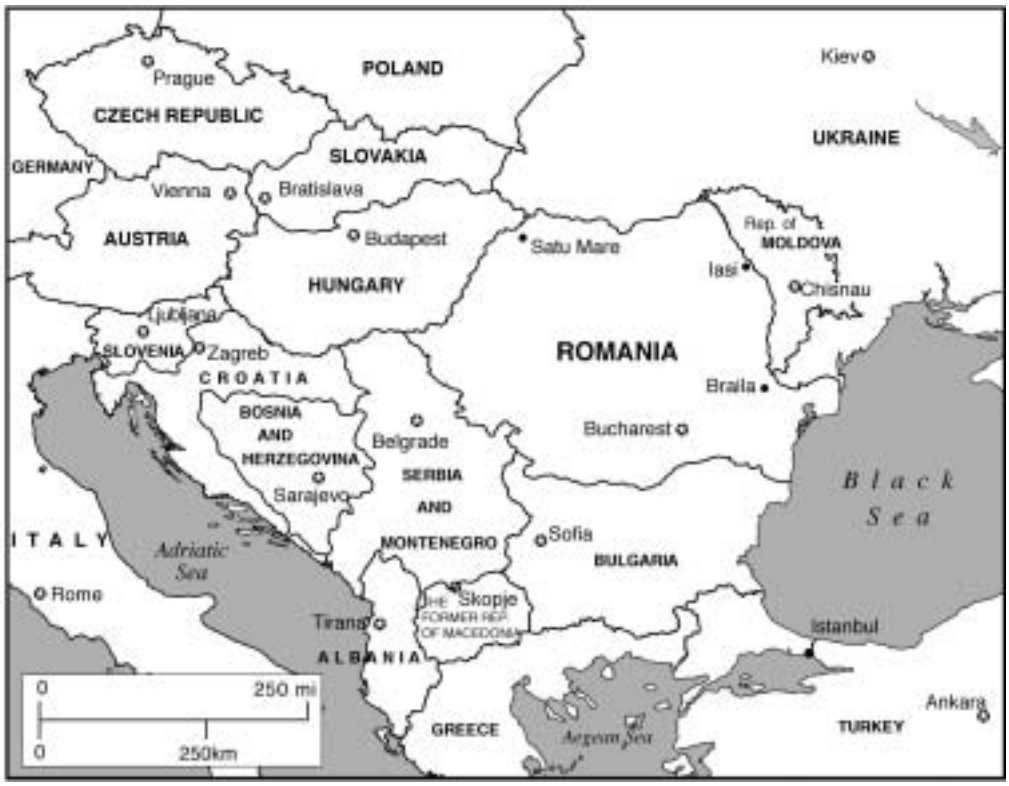
Every day children get vitamins and catered hot lunches. "They don't get much food at home," said a teacher's aide. "You can't concentrate when your stomach is growling." On one of the days I visited the Bucharest center, which operates out of two rooms within a local school in an area considered crime-ridden, the delivery man brought steaming plates of cooked chicken, mashed potatoes and pickled red peppers with hot fresh buns. The children proved wonderful hosts as they brought me a separate portion. "Eat," they urged me proudly," it's Romanian food." Impressively, they cleaned up after eating. I even heard a toddler, delicious in his freshly scrubbed blue uniform, thank a teacher for the meal. "*Sarut mana*," he said. Translated as "I kiss your hands," this is the polite way for Romanian men to thank women. It's sexist, I know, but a highly pardonable offence when muttered by a dimpled 6-year-old munchkin.

For almost all of the children who come here, such as 12-year-old Maria Bold, one of my favorite kids in the Bucharest program, Ovidiu Rom is a second-home and a godsend. As Mr. Manolache explained, her mother abandoned Maria and a grandmother is raising her in poor conditions (no running water, heat or a TV). He said that before he visited her at home, he didn't understand why she was loath to leave once classes ended. Instead, she preferred to hang around and make herself useful by helping clean up the school or water the flowers. Maria herself seems to have blossomed here. As if grateful for the opportunity Ovidiu Rom has provided, Maria wears a permanent wide grin. She constantly laughs, dances and engages others in conversation. "After my visit I stopped telling her to go home," he said. "I now understand that when she comes [here] to school she feels as she should feel at home."

Mr. Manolache said that she is representative of how just about all Ovidiu Rom kids feel. "In my previous job, children couldn't wait to go home. Here we can't get them out of here. It just proves that when you show children you love them they love you back. In fact, here everybody loves everybody else."

As word about the organization has spread, program offerings have increased. As part of a new initiative launched this past summer and sponsored by the U.S.

For Maria Bold, 12, as for most of the children who attend Ovidiu Rom's programs, school is a second home and a godsend.



telecommunications company Nobel, 30 impoverished children will benefit from after-school interactive computer and English courses. Ovidiu Rom has also pioneered a program that encourages rebuilding of urban ghetto areas at the grassroots level. The possibilities are almost as great as the enormous demand for Ovidiu Rom's services. On many days, employees field calls from city social workers eager to get their clients into Ovidiu Rom's classes or from mothers who want access to education for themselves and their children. Just recently, a 13-year-old *mother* came to the Bucharest location wanting to enroll in classes. Space is tight, with the overstretched staff of 15 juggling 50 families (mostly single women) and their 140 children, but Ms. Stoicescu always finds room. Several programs are run, sometimes simultaneously throughout the day, in two rooms. She too has a very big heart.

They all do. Employees are encouraged by Ms. Hawke and Gheorghiu to be creative and resourceful, and this extraordinary team of Roma and non-Roma educators exceeds expectations. Staffers, including Ms. Stoicescu, are involved in literally *all* aspects of the lives of the women and children they serve, including paying bills (in itself a huge time commitment, given the bureaucracy quagmire here) or personal visits to people's homes or workplace. The idea is to encourage women to be self-sufficient over the long run, but initially staff take care of minutiae, freeing up mothers' time.

Staff duties start first thing in the morning, even before classes begin — and never really end. Children are washed (many don't have hot water at home), combed, dressed and sometimes de-loused by a sanitary worker. When necessary, Ovidiu Rom may provide a child's entire wardrobe, from uniforms and underwear to coats and shoes. Children are taught how to care for themselves and even wash their clothes, which they do in a bathroom especially designed for them. No detail is spared, including physical appearance, which is part of helping women gain self-esteem. Women enrolled in the program are entitled to incentive bonuses for keeping a job for a certain amount of time. Ovidiu's staff in Bucharest came up with a clever idea of using these bonuses toward hiring a local hairdresser to come and make women look "pretty." In addition, Ms. Stoicescu has persuaded the stylist to also cut children's hair, for free. When we visited an Ovidiu Rom-sponsored primary school on the outskirts of Bacau and saw shoddy haircuts on pretty little heads, Ms. Stoicescu said that the same idea would work there as well (the Bacau teacher defended himself by saying that he has been cutting kids' hair with a unisex "machine.")

The staff will need all the energy that love creates to accomplish Ovidiu Rom's long-term mission of getting all needy kids in Romania in school. That is why Hawke and Gheorghiu are emphasizing collaboration between the private and public sectors, calling on everyone to come together in order to share ideas and give back to their respective communities. The newly renovated space in Bacau that serves as a state-of-the-art kindergarten has been turned into an educational and resource center for the entire Bacau community. Several of the instructors Ovidiu Rom uses are paid by the local public school district — the additional preparatory training is covered by the association itself. And recently, the staff in Bucharest gave a presentation on their *modus operandi* to national school officials. The founders' philosophy is not to stake a claim to the education model they have pioneered but to encourage others to follow and spread it in the best interests of children. Already, city and private donors have cooperated in assisting and sponsoring many of Ovidiu Rom's programs (fortunately, corporate social responsibility is on the rise here). If the success of the Halloween Ball is any proof, this will be the way of the future — and of the company.

Most of the funding so far has come from USAID but those funds will dry up early in 2006 as Romania gets closer to entering the EU. As a result, it is imperative for the association to find other reliable income sources

— if for nothing else, for the sake of the 130 women and more than 500 children this association helps educate. "Going forward, we want to slightly change the public image of Ovidiu Rom," said Ms. Gheorghiu. Ms. Hawke will remain the main fundraiser but Ms. Gheorghiu will want to emphasize the home-grown element of her team. "A lot of people see us as Ethan Hawke's mom's organization. It's odd, because it's a program made up of ninety-nine-point-ninety-nine percent Romanians." She said that the new face they will want to portray mirrors the times. "I am confident that Romanians can affect this change [in education], that it is their responsibility and that they actually *can* do it. The idea that foreigners come and change things is no longer valid; only someone who doesn't know how Romania works today believes things like that." Echoing what I have also heard regarding available potential here, she said that there are many young Romanian leaders like her, ready to shape the nation. "Maybe what others haven't had are the opportunities."

Gypsies and Romanians working together: a beautiful thing

Narcisa Cumpana is proof that Ovidiu Rom has succeeded already. The first of eight children, she grew up in a poor Roma family outside Bacau. As a child she accompanied her grandmother on trains to beg; by ninth grade she was sent into an arranged marriage and had to drop out of school. By 17, she was pregnant with the child of her abusive and derelict husband, who got sent to prison for robbing a kiosk. In order to make money to send him food and cigarettes, she begged and walked the streets to collect scrap metal (which she would then peddle for money). She did more of the same after giving birth to a second child. She entered Ovidiu Rom's gates four years ago, at 23. "When I first saw the classroom full of children I felt something breaking in my heart," she said. "I had seen those kids begging on the street, and now they were in school. Later that night I cried myself to sleep."

Resplendent in a black evening outfit, with red baubles framing a proud face, Ms. Cumpana told her story to a cheering crowd at the Halloween Ball. A graduate of Ovidiu Rom's Mothers Program, the 27-year-old is a rising star as an educator for them in Bacau. She laughs and boogies a lot. Her energy is infectious and her natural self-confidence now receives the full platform it deserves. "I love this place," she said when I visited the organization in Bacau. "I see Gypsies and Romanians working together. It's beautiful."

Narcisa Cumpana's success story is proof that Roma and non-Roma Romanians can play and work together beautifully.

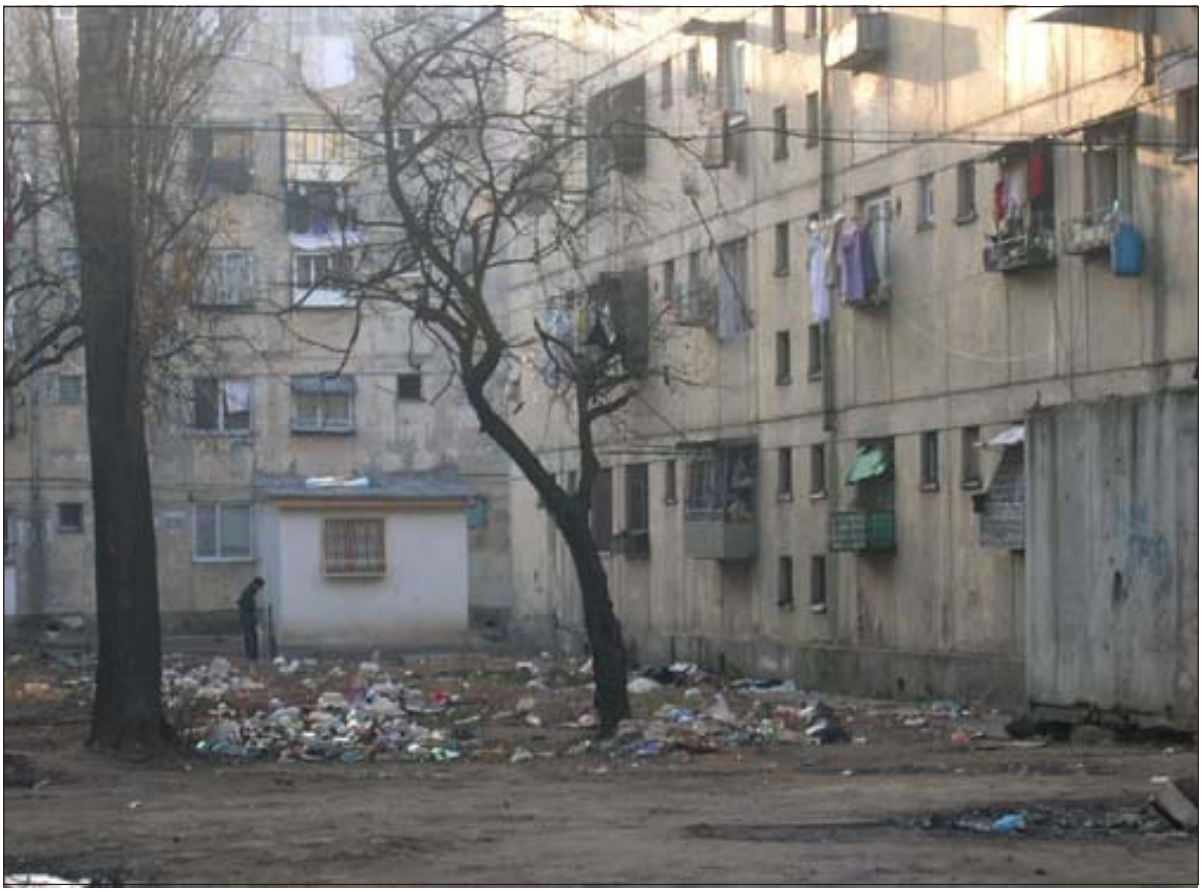
The kind of beauty that Ovidiu Rom creates whenever it touches something or someone looks deceptively easy — but the road to success has been anything but facile. A trip I took about 30 minutes outside Bacau, to Buhusi, an enclave made up solely of Roma families (a place many Romanians still refer to as a "colony"), brought to life for me the kind of lifestyle many of Ovidiu Rom's students and mothers come from — starkly different from anything I'd ever seen. I was told this is was a typical rural Roma ghetto. In Bucharest and other cities, the Roma live in Communist apartment buildings in unimaginably dirty conditions.

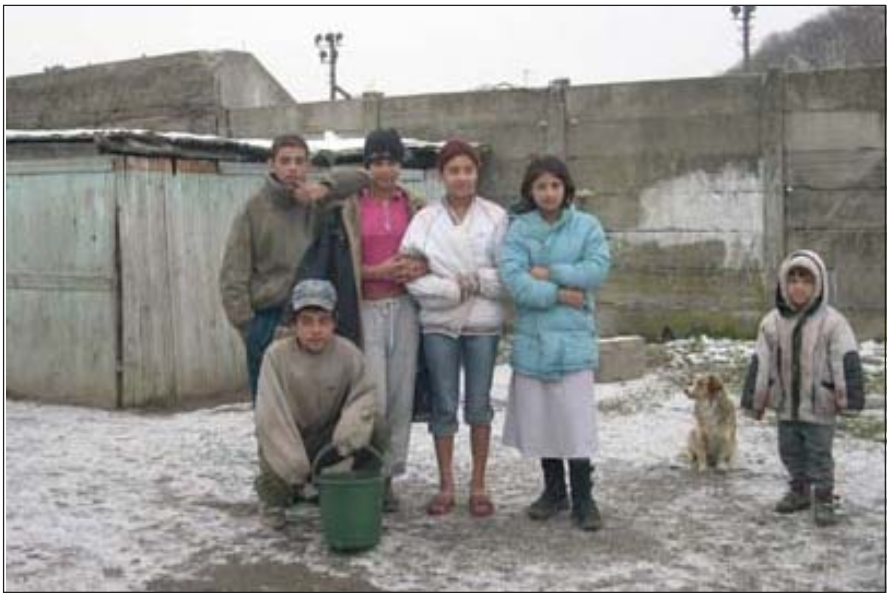
Ovidiu Rom's school center in Bucharest is right next to such an urban ghetto, and home to many students. Garbage lies in huge piles — these are children's playgrounds. Short, grimy, and clustered one next to the other on a dirt road, the makeshift mud homes in Buhusi are teeming with children — about 200 of them, I learn. Many of the street children in Bacau come from here, in fact. According to local lore, children hitch a train ride into Bacau in the morning and, after a fruitful day of begging, have enough money to splurge on a taxi ride back home. Few adults are in sight, save for mothers and grandmothers tending to yet another generation.

I went to Buhusi with members of Ovidiu Rom's Bacau and Bucharest teams — accompanied by a guide who had been trained by Ovidiu Rom and is a state-employed social worker (known here as "health mediator"). Ovidiu Rom has put this enclave under its care, and has taken some children into its program. The guide is of Roma origin. She is here to inspect a newborn baby that she will later vaccinate. Her overall mission is to serve as a mediator between the Roma and the rest of the community and help families get necessary medicine or paperwork for their children in order to be up to mainstream health standards. We made our way into the home of the newborn. Although it was freezing cold outside, many of the children and women we saw had thin clothing or wore no proper shoes. Homes had no heat or running water, and few had electricity. "One must have great strength of will in order to live here day by day and not become completely broken," said Ms. Stoicescu, the Bucharest center director.

Inside the house we found four generations: the baby, the mother, grandmother and great-grandmother (none older than 60). Because of the low ceilings, lack of air and damp coming from wet clothes airing nearby, the atmosphere was heavy. The small room had a bed but almost no other piece of furniture. The women, however, were cheerful. They looked happy. I thought that perhaps Roma lifestyle had been so derided because it had been so misunderstood. Of course, all children deserve medical care, vaccination and education, but white society has placed too much emphasis on changing Roma lifestyle to fit the non-Roma model.

As Mr. Manolache said to me later, "in Roma culture, it's not the physical location that's cherished but the spiritual place. "Roma don't get attached to the place





(Above) Many students in Ovidiu Rom's Bucharest program live in this type of urban ghetto. (Right) The enclave of Buhusi, is an example of a typical Roma ghetto.

where they live, they are more in tune with nature. Someone who is not Roma tends to get attached to his abode and his possessions. His life is greatly impacted if one of his possessions is lost or stolen, whereas a Roma would laugh if something similar happened to him. Roma always find a reason to laugh. What's important for them, for us, is life, love, happiness. [Non-Roma] Romanians don't understand that."

Such differences across ethnic lines compound the task of accomplishing anything in today's Romania. It takes hard work, especially since it involves breaking down old bad habits, working against ingrained prejudice — and building entirely new models of professional, cultural and social ethics. Education, for example, is one such area that needs an overhaul. David Martinez, a Peace Corps volunteer who works for Ovidiu Rom in Bacau, said that lack of leadership among both students and teachers was a key problem he had observed in Romanian schools. Poorly paid and themselves brought up in an institutional educational environment, many teachers do not inspire children to try new things. Worse, lack of money makes them competitive with one another. Mr. Martinez' roommate, also a Peace Corps educator, had been offered a bribe by a teacher at a school where he worked so that he wouldn't offer tutoring (after-school

instruction has become another source of income for cash-strapped teachers in Romania). Corruption is another problem he encountered. A telling example was the story he told about a trip he organized to take his students to a local zoo. It was closed for some reason, but that didn't prevent the children from offering bribe money to the guards to let them inside! Leadership, as Mr. Martinez sees it, is taught in many ways, on the sports field (there is no inter-school competition in Romania to foster school pride, for example), and of course during and after classes. He hoped that Ovidiu Rom's enterprising atmosphere would allow him to help instill "personal" leadership in children.

Ovidiu Rom's founders have been careful to encourage creativity and openness in the smallest of details. Their operating spaces (as part of an arrangement with officials in Bacau and Bucharest, the association is able to use rooms, free of charge, in two public schools) have been completely repainted and tastefully redone — the contrast to the non-Ovidiu Rom facilities is glaring. As opposed to public-school amenities, the association's spaces are bright and cheerfully decorated. Colorful signs, drawn by hand, encourage children to follow certain rules (" we don't skip school without a good reason," "I respect people, nature and things," or "I assume responsibility and don't put the blame on someone else"). The kindergarten in Bacau that serves as resource center for the community, for instance, is purposefully crammed with child art ("creation box"), photographs of the students, and bright shelves. "In an empty space, the tendency toward aggression is greater," according to Ms. Gheorghiu. It could be a learning facility anywhere in the United States or Western Europe. Romania has some private kindergartens, for the rich, but they cost about $4,000 a year, a whopping sum given the standard of living here.

The real battle for Ovidiu Rom is not about cosmetic makeovers. The children (and women) they work with come from difficult backgrounds. Many have known street life, and vagrancy, from the beginning. Keeping them in school means taking them off the street first. The time I visited Bacau, staff members were meeting with several local school officials and educators to discuss an upcoming "Say 'No' to Begging" media campaign to educate the public about the fact that their generosity in giving money to children on the street is only a quick and addictive fix that in fact works to keep the children there. "It's Christmas time, everyone wants to wash their sins and give out money, so we need to do this campaign in advance," Ms. Gheorghiu said. This, as she explained, is an attempt to change public behavior in order to help children's lifestyles long term.

Studies have shown that minors bring home a sizeable income (sometimes twice or three times the average Romanian salary!) from panhandling, which reinforces the vicious cycle of parent dependence on children's income, which is in turn dependent on their working during school hours. This year, Bacau officials have identified 144 children sent to beg on the streets. The campaign Ovidiu Rom was working on, in collaboration with several other public and private organizations, was designed to alert the press and Bacau residents that instead of giving money, they should contact one of six facilities (including Ovidiu Rom) equipped to deal with the problem. Available space to take children in is also a problem — one woman who works for a community-relief organization that operates a residential center for street kids said that she is being stretched to the limit for the 14 spots available. However, she would do anything to find the kids a home, even put two of them together in one bed for the night. But, she recognized, they'll be back on the street the next day.

Bringing change means changing behavior among children, parents and society

Of course, changing parents' attitudes may be the hardest task. That is why Ovidiu Rom accepts into its program only mothers who are "ready and willing" to

Ovidiu Rom helped organize a campaign in Bacau to discourage people from giving money to street children in order to curb the begging habit.

work. A complex system of administrative procedures kick in once a potential new applicant shows up. Ovidiu Rom employees work with city social workers to assess a family's financial situation (some parents try to hide their spouse or partner, in order to qualify for as much aid money as possible), and counsel them to get and keep jobs. Depending on individual situations, parents also receive educational and professional training. And as long as parents make sure that children come to school, Ovidiu Rom will ensure that offspring are well cared for. No detail seems overlooked here. Some of these children sometimes fall through the cracks because their previous teachers, if these kids ever made it to school, failed them for poor performance due to handicaps they had been born with, such as poor speech or vision. Ms. Stoicescu said that she has fitted several children for glasses in Bucharest. Ms. Gheorghiu is hoping to bring a speech therapist to work with children in Bacau.

It's not all nonstop fun and expensive games for the children or Ovidiu Rom's employees, however. The staff also encourages their clients to make the most of their circumstances — and their teachers to work with that they have. "We need to show people that you don't need much to be a good instructor, you can do a lot even with a piece of paper." Another teacher agreed, saying that she grew up in the countryside, where she learned how to count by using "seeds, beans chestnuts and plum pits."

Ms. Gheorghiu, who often commutes between Bacau and Bucharest, spends a lot of her time working to develop her staff's skills. Her instructors, even if they are young, were educated in a system that for the most part still emphasizes rote learning at the expense of critical thinking. She plays games with teachers to help them develop their spirit of observation (and pass it on to children), regularly holds staff discussions, over lunch, dinner or train rides to discuss new ideas, and screens educational movies. The time I visited them in Bacau, she showed two such videos.

The first was "A Class Divided," based on a school teacher's now-famous (then-notorious) 1968 experiment with third-graders in Riceville, Iowa, to combat racism. One day the teacher, Jane Elliott, instructed her class that brown-eyed children were superior to blue-eyed ones, only to reverse the game the following day. The results, apparently, were astounding. Children believed whatever they were told, even acting on their superiority or inferiority, respectively. Children who previously were confident became less sure of themselves on the day they were supposed to feel inferior because of their eye or skin color.

Watching the movie, I thought many Romanians would also benefit from going through this experiment — for the most part, *lighter* is still considered better here. An adjective derived from the word Gypsy is used sometimes to denote dark-skin, in the negative sense. Roma children grow up being told that they are born dark, and therefore inferior to the rest of Romanians. But even if skin-color were an accurate predictor of whether someone is Roma or nor, that measure holds no longer. Centuries of inter-breeding have produced some very blond Roma. And many non-Roma Romanians, especially in the southern part of the country, can be very dark because of Turkish and Slavic roots. I caught even Ms. Cumpana poking fun at herself a couple of times. One time she jokingly told children in one class, to their disbelief, that she was a sibling of a blond teacher. "What can I do, my mother gave birth to me in the dark," she said, laughing.

The other movie Ms. Gheorghiu played was "Pay It Forward," with Kevin Spacey in the role of a social studies teacher who challenges his class to come up with an idea that will change the world. One student devises a game by which he helps three people in need, who in turn will help three others, and so on (and forward). "The idea is not to necessarily give back to those who shaped you but give further and further," Ms. Gheorghiu said. "We're trying to develop here a new concept of equality among generations." She too is a product of, and a believer in, this chain-type generosity. Ms. Gheorghiu confessed during one interview that she grew up with two sets of parents; her biological parents and her "spiritual" ones, the latter a retired couple in her apartment building to whose house she went as a child to read and discuss ideas openly.

This self-admitted "rebel," a wavy-haired beauty with a child's voice and vast amounts of energy for her work, may be the best person to break down the rigid bonds of Romanian education (and parenting) and advance a new concept of community care and civic spirit in education. Romanian parents and grandparents tend to exaggerate their parental duties, overprotecting their children, and their children only — perpetuating and fiercely guarding one's own is still a legacy of Communism survival tactics. She said she has allowed other people, beyond herself and teachers, to help rear and educate her own 14-year-old daughter, Diana. She encourages openness in her work and at home, both of which come together harmoniously. There are no boundaries at Ovidiu Rom, as long as people involved are ready, willing and able to open their horizons. ❑

Current Fellows and their Activities

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • **INDIA**
A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Logic at Rutgers University, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • **FRANCE/MOROCCO**
An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for *Somerville This Week*, in Somerville, MA.

Cristina Merrill (June 2004-2006) • **ROMANIA**
Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceauscescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • **IRAN**
A journalist and researcher for the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Nick is finishing a Master's program in Comparative and Regional Studies (Middle East/Central Asia) at American University in Washington DC. He is studying intensive Persian — as is his fiancee, Rikki Bohan — in anticipation of his departure for Iran after his marriage in autumn 2005.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • **SYRIA/LEBANON**
Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**
With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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