



Alex and Lee's Romanian Update

November 2004



Jiu Valley Contrasts

Last week, we were surprised to look out one night and see a fantastic fireworks show taking place in a nearby park. While we never determined the cause for celebration, the fireworks' magnitude and radiance amazed us. Even the smokestacks looked almost beautiful when lit up through brilliant colors. We stared out our window in awe for a good ten minutes before we heard the noise of a car screeching to halt as it hit a stray dog. The driver must have also been looking up at the sky.

Friday night we joined our coworkers Ricci and Teo for pizza in nearby Petrosani. We were kicked out when the restaurant was closing after several hours of great conversation. As we walked outside, we ran into six street kids who had been campers in the Viata Program. Alex always described this group of boys as "the fearless ones," a group of kids without a sense of risk in any of our program activities. Meeting them outside that pizza place was a difficult contrast- we had just eaten out with friends and now we were joined by kids that lack education, people to care about them, or decent food to eat.

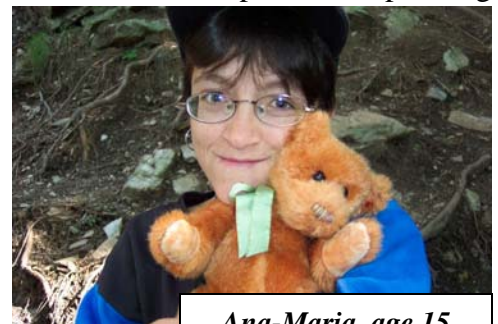
**Rainbow over Lupeni-
Beauty and the Blocks**



The combination of great joy amidst pain characterizes so much of our experience in Lupeni. In almost everything, the fullness of God's love and beauty seems so apparent; however, nothing feels free of the world's brokenness, and sin. One of the most poignant examples of this was hosting 38 kids with HIV/ AIDS for the final week of the Viata Program. The kids came to us more physically ill and more emotionally scarred than we anticipated. Many of our campers were between hospital stays; most required frequent rest. They shared with us their stories of kids taunting them, of doctors refusing to treat them, and of parents' expressing

despair and even shame. Alexandra, age 16, writes poetry and song lyrics to express herself. One poem she shared began with these words:

*When I am at home, my mother cries all the time... because I have AIDS
When I am at my block, kids laugh at me... they know I have AIDS
When I am at school, everybody knows... that I have AIDS*



Ana-Maria, age 15

Our staff wrestled throughout the week with the problems of pain in the world. Tensions were high in discussions about God allowing children to contract HIV (between 1988 and 1991, the Romanian Government reports that over 10,000 Romanian children contracted HIV through shared vaccination needles.) Though we all saw much agony in the kids' conditions, we also experienced great joy with them as well. Our campers had a great week. They loved the adventure of camp, and they soaked in their time outdoors. We filled each day with laughter. They felt at ease being with other kids that understood them. Ana-Maria shared that she hoped other kids might be nice to her at Viata; she was surprised to discover unconditional love and acceptance. Though we struggled to make sense of things, our Orthodox seminary student Bogdan spoke to the kids with amazing clarity and conviction at our Wednesday night church visit. Bogdan began with the sentence, "tonight I want you to hear how important you are to God." He proceeded to share how Christ showed the full extent of God's love when he experienced great physical pain and social alienation. Bogdan told us that God is with us in every moment of struggle and gave us hope for the future. Bogdan's message brought many of us to tears. He reminded us that even though these kids are paying the price for a terrible human mistake, their Maker has not forgotten them. It certainly reinforces our own faith to realize how much God cares for these teenagers.

Thanks for Sponsoring Us!

It was only because so many people responded to our last newsletter that the HIV/AIDS week was possible. We are incredibly grateful. Thank you for your investment of love into these beautiful kids. Thank you for supporting us as well. On September 5th we ran and finished the Budapest Half-Marathon. Throughout the race, we felt inspired by the kids we were running for. We witnessed them pushing their own physical and mental limitations during the previous week; we aimed to do the same. Because of those kids, we ran each kilometer well under the pace for which we trained. We also appreciate Lee's mother timing her visit in order to support us. She was a great encouragement!



Kaizen Highlights

➤ Same Kids, Deeper Commitments

We kicked off a new school year of Kaizen with our Romanian colleagues. While the Viata Program draws brand new participants into Kaizen, we also have the same core group of kids as last year. It is exciting to see these kids fully devote themselves to Kaizen. Their commitment amazes us. Recently Raluca shared that, while she is not a very good student and doesn't feel she has a lot of other gifts, she believes God made her for Kaizen. She says proudly, "I was born for Kaizen." In Kaizen, Raluca has a caring community that loves her, accepts her, and encourages her. Our kids also impress us with their level of compassion. They overheard several staff members discussing the Viata HIV/AIDS week of camp. To respond, they began a public information campaign to educate their classmates and community about HIV. They desire to end discrimination in the Jiu Valley against people infected with HIV.

➤ English Classes

One of our new favorite weekly activities with the kids is teaching them English. While there has always been a small group seeking us out for English help, this fall we began teaching formal English classes to beginner, intermediate, and advanced level speakers. Our entire Kaizen Club committed to this. It has become a great way to spend more time with the kids and help them enhance their skills.

➤ Kaizen Building

One of the largest constraints to Kaizen's growth and quality has been the lack of adequate meeting space. Every week, our apartment houses four different meetings with a maximum capacity of 25 people. Now that cold weather limits our time outdoors, it is perpetually frustrating to stuff so many kids into such a small space and still keep meetings exciting. There is good news! Thanks to recent grants from Geneva Global and the International Women's Association, Kaizen will be moving out of



*Valy, Iulia, Lee, Toni, Florin, Dutu, Eta, and Alex:
our last fall hike together before the cold hit*

our small apartment into a fully operational building by January. The converted warehouse will include a large meeting hall, several smaller rooms, and a computer lab equipped with 15 brand new computers. We will soon have the capacity to reach out to many new kids as well as provide a real home base for Kaizen.

Big Decision, Big Transition... We are returning to the States

We originally gave Young Life a two-year commitment. While our two-year anniversary on Young Life staff is indeed approaching, only recently have we been obligated to think through seriously whether we would stay in Romania longer than our original commitment. A few weeks ago, a job opportunity in Northern Virginia was proposed to Alex. It offers retraining for his "outdated" software skills and work in a field he truly enjoys. This has not been an easy decision to say the least. Through a great deal of prayer, fasting, and seeking advice, we have decided that Alex will in fact pursue this position. We will return to D.C. in January.

We know this will surprise many of you, as this decision may seem to contradict the extremely positive feelings we often share about our time and relationships here. We do truly love people here. Last August Kristin, a summer volunteer, shared when she was leaving that she was surprised that she had made such great friends in Romania. As we consider our leaving Romania, we are not surprised that we have made friends here; rather we are amazed that we have family members here. Our staff especially has seen us at our best and our worst. They have walked beside us through great frustrations and joys; they love us well in spite of our weaknesses. The kids we work with also embody so much life and excitement for us. Leaving these relationships will not be easy. However, we do feel peaceful in moving on. The primary reason for this peace is that we see that Romanians can do our jobs. Both in recently hiring extremely competent personnel and in equipping existing staff with important skills, our foundation's staff members can do our jobs efficiently and effectively. They give us hope for the kids of the Jiu Valley and for Romania.

The reality that we are leaving Romania has not fully sunk in. We cannot provide you with adequate reflection upon our time here at this point. What we do know is that we are grateful. We are grateful that God sent us here and thankful we've witnessed positive changes in individuals' lives and in our community. We are especially grateful for all of your support. Thanks you for your willingness to pray for us, invest in us, and care for us while we are here. Thank you especially for making our programs possible for these kids. You have supported both us and the Viata and Kaizen Programs. Any money left in our Young Life account when we leave will be transferred over to assist with the costs of Viata 2005. We will also be in touch with those of you faithfully supporting us through monthly electronic deposits.

Prayer Requests

- **Pray for our kids.** Pray that the Romanian staff will continue the work we began here, that our kids will continue to grow and learn and develop true community together. Pray for our kids as they come to terms with us leaving. Pray for us to be diligent in keeping in touch with them.
- **Pray for our staff.** Please pray for our relationships with them to continue even though we are seven time zones away. Pray for their motivation to love and invest themselves in the kids, that it would be a joy and not a burden for them. Please pray for all our staff through the challenges in growing this foundation.
- **Pray for us in saying goodbye.** While we are not leaving for two more months, we are already very sad about having to say goodbye. As both of us tend to be homebodies, change is hard for us. We know that we will miss Lupeni, our kids, and our staff. We don't know when we will be back to visit, and we know that when we do visit, our relationships here will be different. Please pray for us as we say goodbye to this part of our lives.

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