

NEWS

Youth looked to for leadership

Bates seeks to make IMPACT in Romania

BY DAN BREEN
STAFF WRITER

ORANGE CITY—Twenty years and one month ago, a new world started in Romania, one free from the chains of communism's Iron Curtain.

The country has changed in many ways since then, but the corruptive effects of communism still grip the eastern European country. It remains a country that lacks trust in its citizens and bears the marks of social alienation, corruption, apathy and depression.

"Most post-communist cultures were left with an apathetic, learned helplessness," said Dana Bates, founder and executive director of New Horizons Foundation, the largest nonprofit, nongovernmental youth organization in the country.

Bates, who also is the director of the Northwestern College Romania Study Abroad Program, was on the campus in Orange City this week to meet with students about Romania.

His goal is to build a new sense of trust and pride in Romania starting with the youth.

New Horizons is a youth-focused ministry aimed at developing trust and citizenship for the next generation of Romanians. The organization is based in Lupeni in the Jiu Valley coal mining region of southern Romania. Lupeni is a town about the geographical size of the Northwestern campus but has a population of about 30,000.

Post-communist corruption still is a huge problem in Romania but one Bates thinks can be reversed in the next generation.

"We feel youth is the proper place to intervene to help to take that next step," he said.

The 41-year-old Bates grew up in the United States and went to Gordon College in Wenham, MA. After the fall of communism, his parents moved to Romania to begin an orphanage that served nearly 170 children. In 1994, he traveled with his wife on a backpacking trip to Romania to get a sense of the country firsthand. What stuck out was the lack of activities for youth to

get involved in. It was not until after he got back that he decided he had to do something about it.

"I literally woke up in the middle of the night and said to my wife, 'We've got to do this,'" Bates said. "That bug hit me. A lot of things seemed to fall into place."

With the help of some of his Gordon College friends, he traveled to Romania in 1999 and set up a ropes course and laid the foundations of a program called Viata — pronounced vee-ET-za — which in Romania translates to "the life." Viata is a team-building adventure camp built around experiential learning through a ropes course, rock climbing, hiking and team building activities.

"There's absolutely nothing like it in the whole country," Bates said.

The program has been extremely successful since its first year in 2000. About 500 children have gone through the program each summer, building life skills, but more importantly, developing trust in one another that Bates hopes will lessen, if not eliminate, the post-communist corruption.

After the first couple of years, Bates decided that a new element needed to be added because no follow-up activities were available for the students who went through Viata. In 2002, he began IMPACT and combined it with Viata under the umbrella of New Horizons.

IMPACT — an acronym for Involvement, Motivation, Participation, Action, Community, Teenager — is a community service club in which teens can become active citizens and take a role in improving their communities. Eight years later, it has become the largest youth organization in Romania with 170 clubs, typically made up of about 15 members ages 13-18.

"Youth literally walk through the towns to see what they can do in the communities," Bates said.

His goal is for the organization to become like the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts of the post-communist world. IMPACT already has expanded past Romania to 10 clubs in Honduras, and more are expected to start in Kenya during the next year.

Each club can choose whether it wants to be a faith-based group or keep religion out of its community



Dana Bates talks to a class at Northwestern College in Orange City about New Horizons, a youth organization in Romania started in 1999. New Horizons is a program designed to build trust after the country came out of communism in 1989. (Photo by Nathan Papes)

ROMANIA STATISTICS:

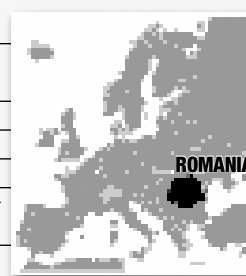
Population: 22.2 million
Size: 92,000 square miles (slightly smaller than Oregon)
Capital: Bucharest
Divisions: 41 counties within the country
Language: Romanian (form of Latin)
Religion: Eastern Orthodox, 87 percent; Protestant, 8 percent; Roman Catholic, 4 percent
Time: Eight hours ahead of the Central Daylight Time

Adult literacy rate: 98 percent
Life expectancy: 72 years
Population urbanized: 54 percent

Source: www.CIA.gov

FOR MORE INFO:

■ To learn more about New Horizons in Romania, visit the Web site www.new-horizons.ro.



A group of Romanian teenagers works on a team-building exercise at the Viata adventure camp in Lupeni, Romania. Dana Bates, the founder of the camp, was in Orange City earlier this week. (Photo submitted)

can head and the impact it will have. "Romania's future is bright if they can tackle the corruption issue, if we can tackle the corruption issue," Bates said.

service.

Northwestern plays a key role in New Horizons through its Romania Study Abroad Program that completed its third year in December. Students who choose to participate in the 16-credit program get to help out with Viata and are connected with a local IMPACT chapter.

The college students in many cases are able to encourage the growth and development of a country through its

participation.

The Northwestern study abroad program is offered in the fall semester every year, and plans already are in the works for 2010. In the semester, the students study Romanian culture, history and language; eastern Orthodoxy; sustainable development; and experiential education.

Service with New Horizons comes in the experiential education class. Bates is excited to see where the program

Sibley's Trinity Lutheran Church to host 'Polka Worship' again

Couples danced at service last year

BY BETHANY BASHIOM
STAFF WRITER

SIBLEY—By the end of the service, two couples were dancing in the aisles last year for the inaugural "Polka Worship" at Trinity Lutheran Church in Sibley.

"It was surprising to see how many young people liked it and got involved in the service," said the Rev. Scott Meyer of Trinity Lutheran. "It went over extremely well."

The pastor will lead another a second polka-style worship service at 10 a.m. Sunday, Jan. 31, after seeing church attendance nearly double from an average of 150 to 280 people that morning. Meyer said when he was growing up he would borrow his dad's record player and listen to polka.

"I had heard about other churches having polka-style

AT A GLANCE:

What: "Polka Worship"
When: 10 a.m. Sunday, Jan. 31
Where: Trinity Lutheran Church, 704 Popular Drive, Sibley
Meal: Authentic German food will be served 11 a.m.-1 p.m. with an offering taken for the church building fund

services and thought we could give it a try," Meyer said. "I think some members were a bit skeptical, but it turned out to be a lot of fun. The response was so positive, and it really appealed to broader age group."

"We put up signs all over town and invited people from other churches," said Barbara Schuster, a congregation member who helped organize the special service.

The church brought in musicians from the area and two individuals from a Lutheran church in Sioux Falls, SD, with a variety of musical instruments — a tuba, an accordion and some drums.

Organizers used the lyrics of traditional hymns sung during Sunday morning services and put them to popular polka tunes such as "Beer Barrel Polka."

Following the service, church-goers are invited to stay for an authentic German meal. Other community residents also are welcome to attend the meal that will be served 11 a.m.-1 p.m.

"We have all the fixings — brats, sauerkraut, German potato salad, baked beans, desserts and hot dogs for the kids," Schuster said. "Last year was such a success that we ran out of brats and had to get more."



Brad Willemsen grills brats for the meal following last year's "Polka Worship" at Trinity Lutheran Church in Sibley. The service will be held again 10 a.m. Sunday, Jan. 31, with the meal to follow. (Photo submitted)

OBSERVATIONS



CONNIE WAGNER
CO-PUBLISHER

It's almost done

Hopefully, today will be the last day of any hint of Christmas decorations around the Wagner house. Those decorations were hard to get out this year, and now they seem to be just as hard to put away.

As far as I'm concerned, once the last present is unwrapped, I'm ready to start cleaning up and out. And, as in most marriages, Peter is just the opposite. He would be quite happy enjoying them well into February. One of his "rules" is he doesn't want me to help him; he wants to be super organized and do it all in his order and put them one by one away. But as far as I'm concerned, he spends more time organizing than he does getting them put away. I know I could do it in half the time; maybe everything wouldn't be in nice, neat little rows, but I'm not exactly a sloppy person either! None of this is anything new; this ritual has been going on for 40-some years.

So, anyway, New Year's weekend saw table decorations and a few other odds 'n' ends disappear. Whew, what a relief that was; the house was beginning to be back to normal somewhat, except for the four Christmas trees, and they weren't to be touched those days. Also you know!

Each tree is themed, also Peter's idea. One is a tall, slender tree done entirely in silver. It sits in our dining room. Another

is the largest and tallest and is in our living room. It is done in golds and reds with special decorations mostly given to me by our sons and their families. Four very special decorations on that tree include one from Jay and CeCe celebrating the birth of our first grandchild, Zoey, and the same year one from Jeff and Myrna announcing the upcoming birth of their first child, who would be Sam. Then one from Katie and then lastly Kiernan. Peter has relented and will let me decorate that tree, and I'm quite satisfied quitting right there.

But then there is the family tree, where the gifts are placed around. That one is filled with all of our memory pieces: vacations, sports teams, collections, counted cross-stitch tiny pillows I made a hundred years ago, decorations made by our boys and interests they've had over the years, and many made by their children. And, finally, at the top of that tree sits an old, old Christmas angel from my childhood home — the one many of you will remember made with spun glass. I was warned each year if I touched that soft appearing white cloud, I would get a bad cut on my finger. And I would, and I did.

The fourth tree was Jay's tree that he had in his little Des Moines apartment. We decorate that with small stuffed animals. The Disney animals were promotional

items given by McDonald's many years ago. At the time, we had a lot of fun running all over trying to make sure we had one of each. Many stories exist of the antics we went through getting those decorations.

So those were our trees, and low and behold, the day Peter had promised to dismantle them, he had other projects more important that needed to be done. I nagged, and finally he succumbed and I had the honors. I really enjoyed doing it. The first two went quickly; the ornaments were quite new, and I just got the job done. But then I went to the tree with all the old ornaments, and I was able to touch, hold and remember each ornament and how it became a part of our annual tree. There were many tears and many trips into Peter's office to remind him of a particular ornament. That tree took a long time. But they all were finished in an afternoon, and I didn't hear any complaints. Now, I just want to wonder if I may have gotten something started I won't appreciate so much next year.

And, as you are reading the paper today, I'm hoping Peter will be up on his trusty Christmas ladder taking down all of his Department 56 Christmas Village houses and Christmas 2009 will be behind us.

Oops, one more Christmas subject: the office received a red poinsettia, which

is most unusual and gorgeous, this year from Village Northwest Unlimited. The red leaves are curly and somewhat tight. From a distance, it looks almost like a red mum, OK maybe a long distance, but it has my admiration. In fact, I'm going to repot it and use it for Valentine's Day! Thanks, VNU.

Remember to attend your county caucus today (Saturday, Jan. 23). We complain and complain about government, but this is where it all starts. You'll see your neighbors come and volunteer and take part in the system. Typically, this year in the cycle is pretty poorly attended, so it's a good time to come and get your feet wet. Last time, the Osceola County Courthouse couldn't hold everyone — it was a presidential election year. This year, hopefully, there will be a lot of conversation and support given for the various people running for governor in the Republican arena. The Democrats, undoubtedly, will be talking about what just happened in Massachusetts and, of course, their candidate, Gov. Chet Culver. A lot of people find politics disappointing and boring. I find it interesting and exciting. Try it and know for yourself.

Connie Wagner lives in Sibley. She is the co-publisher of The N'West Iowa Review and may be reached at cwagner@iowainformation.com.