

# Viata Re-Creational Outreach Newsletter of Dana and Brandi in Romania

Christmas greetings not from Romania, but from California! We are back visiting family and friends and trying to raise awareness and finances for the mission of Viata, and now our follow-up program Kaizen! We hope to visit most of you while we are back in the States.

In this newsletter:

- Our biggest challenge.
- What we've been up to (year-end report), as well as where we are going!
- Our Financial Situation -- We need to find funding for 300 more kids for Summer 2003! (Already 200 are funded.) It only costs \$86 a kid for a week at the Viata Program!
- Some Christmas thoughts.

## *Our biggest challenge...*

One of the most difficult parts of our job has nothing to do with Romania. It has nothing to do with the criminal case we are involved in with a prominent public official, with the constant threat of bribes and extortion, with standing in line for two days just to pay one electric bill, or with the palpable suspicion against foreigners (a recent study showed that foreigners are the most feared and least trusted of all entities in Romania—even less than their own secret police). No, rather the most challenging part of our job is to help the majority of our Christian supporters understand that the way to help and love Romania forward is not through traditional evangelistic methods—of “harvesting souls” as our anthropologist friend Dr. Kideckle put it. Even very conservative evangelical Christians who have extensive *first-hand* experience with Romania agree that the need is not to get more people “saved”. (Brandi and I know lots of people who get “saved” every time a new foreign missionary comes through.) No, there is a much bigger, complicated and, therefore, realistic vision involved. Nicholas Wolterstorff illuminates this vision when he writes:

*But we have seen that the church [read missions] exists not for its own sake but for the sake of God's cause in the world. That cause is the overcoming of alienation from God and liberation from the oppression, deprivation, and suffering in which sin works itself out, so that human beings may dwell in God's shalom where there is harmony and delight in all dimensions of existence.* (Educating for Responsible Action, p. 13)

Though it may sound strange at first, we have become quite enamored by a paradigm called “social capital” and its potential for helping restore this harmony to Romania. Social capital studies the importance of values that facilitate interpersonal trust—and it is precisely these values which Communism decimated. The bottom line is that societies with higher levels of trust perform better on all levels, not least economically. This means that, in the big picture, our standards *for* living determine our standards *of* living. (And this is important for Romania where one out of every two children is malnourished, and the average salary is approximately \$100 a month). Yet one might just as easily call this social capital “**Samaritan Capital**”. For social capital is not just community, but a certain kind of community that is transformative for societies.

Corrupt, dysfunctional, apathetic societies have low levels of interpersonal trust. They treat family members with respect (the “honor among thieves” principle), but predatory behavior, Machiavellian deception and trickery are acceptable outside of the family sphere. This “ethic” makes any type of collaborative behavior highly suspect. Yet, as many scholars within the social capital movement have pointed out, Protestants in Northern Europe managed to take seriously the ethical implications of the Christmas story, and saw it as a religious duty to treat with honesty and respect the “other”. Apparently a high enough percentage adhered to this ethic that it “extended the radius” of trust, creating a safe zone of trust and made possible many things that contributed to the prosperity and standards of living that we take for granted today—from the mundane 4-way traffic stop to more complex forms of social organization such as joint stock companies and the abstract expression of these ethical commitments to “others” in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

There are places in the world where basic moral norms are flouted not just by the few but by the many—and openly. Common wisdom in Romania dictates that you “Trust No One”—and we have learned the hard way how true this is. In most of the world there is no such thing as a moral obligation to all human beings-as humans. And the lack of this commitment degrades social and economic productivity (except the fact that security companies are thriving). As mentioned in a previous newsletter, values are like oxygen. You don’t notice them till they are not there, and when they are not there, you fight tooth and nail to find or create them. Romania, a country where everyone claims to be Christian, has a serious depletion of social, moral, Samaritan capital.

Though it may sound strange to those who are not familiar with the language of social capital (social capital in many ways is a fancy word for looking at the quality of community—are people generally trusting and if not, why not?), we believe this framework creates a common ground where Christians and non-Christians, both wanting the best for Romania, can meet. And we believe that the paradigm of social capital gathers up and provides leverage for our purpose of increasing *shalom* in Romania. (For those interested in learning more about social capital, two recommended titles are Francis Fukuyama’s *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, and Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*.)

## ***This Christmas, help us change a kid’s life and keep the Viata Program going...***

We are incredibly grateful for the Bucharest-based Confidence for Kids group that raised approximately 10k for the 2003 Viata Program, in one evening! And we are grateful to The Thomas Foundation and the SG Foundation who have together graciously sponsored Viata for the last three years. However, these latter two Foundations intended only to provide seed money for our first two years and will not be providing funding for the Viata Program in the future. Though we have begun to find in-country donors within Romania, it will be years before Romania’s financial situation allows full in-country sponsorship.

***Viata’s Financial Situation***—*we need the equivalent of 300 donors to sponsor 300 kids at \$86 each to keep the Viata Program going.* A similar program in the U.S. would cost up to 10 times as much. Help us keep the Viata legacy going!!!

Please send contributions to: Account x248, Young Life, P.O. Box 520, Colorado Springs, CO, 80901 (Checks should be made out to Young Life, with Account x248 written in the memoline.)

## *Our Year-end Report:*

- Viata Program's third summer in Lupeni, Romania – Over 500 youth experienced the most important week of their lives. We collected/compiled over 50,000 pieces of data which will provide feedback regarding the effectiveness of the Program in achieving its stated goals of increasing trust, responsibility, confidence, and cooperation.
- 10-day Rotary Team visit – Accomplishments include 1) the donation of over 1000 books to the local high school and 2) the beginning of a Rotary Club in the Jiu Valley—a very important civil society initiative, of which there are few.
- Kaizen publicly launched and approved by the school system. -- The Kaizen Club engaged in historic service projects in this depressed region.
- Kaizen Youth Center Launched! -- The Santa Ynez, CA-based SG Foundation kindly granted 20k for the purchasing and renovating of a much-needed building.
- CfK (Confidence For Kids in Bucharest) raised 10k in one evening for the Viata Program.
- Wilderness Education Association (WEA) Training— The Viata Program hosted a 25-day professional development course focusing on judgment, decision-making and ecological practices. Done in partnership with the University of Timisoara and Retezat National Park Authority.
- New partnership with Cluj University -- to develop performance metrics to properly assess the impact of our programs.
- Humanitarian Aid -- Supported many poor families with clothes, school supplies, etc. (10 families already received complete sets of school supplies, and this January, 100 more families will be helped in the same way—with the help of a Rotary Club.) We also feed up to 20 hungry youth a day.
- Our programs published in *Zip Lines (Spring)*, and a leading British Magazine, *Harpers and Queen (December)*.

## *In the works:*

- Launching our second *Kaizen* club (our follow-up program to Viata) in February. This club will be tracked by the University of Cluj using performance metrics we will together develop. Robert Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone*, “What we need is not civic broccoli—good for you but unappealing—but an updated version of Scouting’s ingenious combination of values and fun.” Our follow-up program *Kaizen* (“*continuous improvement*” in Japanese), by combining the disciplines of adventure education and service learning, is doing just this. ***Kaizen is a new club that creatively combines service, learning and fun to continuously improve both self and society.*** Kaizen may be the new Scouts of Romania!
- Developing a Strategic Proposal for Social Capital Development, including:
  - On-Line moral/character development curriculum
  - Hero-Bank celebrating Romania’s true heroes
  - Kaizen Club activity and curriculum base available on-line.
- Conference on adventure education and service learning at Project Adventure.
- University of Timisoara will offer first-ever adventure education course.

**Our principal goal for the next few years is to create a class (year-long curriculum) on civic/moral education that will be adopted at a national level. (This may happen through, or separate from, the Kaizen Club). There is little to nothing being done to redevelop the social/moral capital deficit left by Communism and we are developing a strategic plan-- national in scope.**

## ***Final thoughts – the Greatest Christmas Gift...***

Back in Bucharest, there is an English language bookstore at the Marriot Hotel where we hang out from time to time. There was a prominent philosophy text published by Oxford Press there that offered the following ethical hypothesis: successful and harmonious living is about balancing two opposites. These two opposites are 1) doing for others—the “impersonal” values and, 2) doing for yourself—“personal” values. These two desires war and eat away at each other, and they are mutually exclusive—to feed one is to starve the other and vice versa. Ergo, the ethical life balancing these two contradictory appetites and feeding both wolves equally—not letting one conquer or drive out the other.

This seems to have some initial plausibility; yet on further thought it sets up a legalism, a point of view that is scrooge-like, and ultimately lacks the moral and spiritual resources for serious commitment. This is so especially given human’s capacity for self-deception—“I honestly did not notice that I was giving the larger, juicier portions to my personal wolf...” and meanwhile the other-regarding side’s ribs are showing. “After all, everyone says to love others you have to first truly love yourself.”

However, we want to illuminate a third way...a way that was opened up to us through the advent of Christmas. In many ways, the greatest gift ever given to humanity is the gift of a perspective that unites and integrates things that previously seemed opposite, contradictory.

As one writer says:

*In the New Testament it is taught that willing and voluntary service is the highest duty and glory in human life...There are those who joyfully order their own lives so that they may serve the welfare of mankind.*  
(W.G. Sumner)

Have the great heroes of the world taken us to another plane of living through this balancing act between self-love and other love? Do you think Mother Theresa or Dorothy Day, or Jimmy Carter (now winner of the Nobel Peace Prize), or Dietrich Bonhoeffer engaged in this moral accounting, keeping track of how much one is *allowed* to do for oneself, and how much one *must* do for others? Indeed, do you think the average bloke, the father who works overtime for his family that he barely feels he knows anymore, the young rising professional who faithfully spends his weekends as a big-brother or sister, the cashier who on her double shift still makes you feel important—do they think in these terms of one for me, one for you...? No. All these, in greater or lesser degrees, have found the higher integration. They have slammed shut the moral ledger book, elbowed out the timidity, and acted in faith on a perspective, a hope that life “backs” service and self-giving.

Yet -- and we give witness to this commitment (in our own lesser ways)—the result is usually not even felt as sacrifice, but of joy.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said it this way, “It is one of the most beautiful compensations of life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.”

No one has said it more succinctly than Tagore: “I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.”

No one except One: “It is more blessed to give...”

We wish to give you the Christmas gift of this perspective. It is truly the gift that keeps on giving!

Thank you for your friendship and the many ways you support the Viata and Kaizen Programs in Lupeni, Romania. Merry Christmas to you and yours! Sarbatore Fericite!

The Viata and Kaizen Programs in Lupeni,  
Romania

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