

Surviving the Streets: Street Children Become Role Models in Romania

Alone in Romania

The stories of Daniela, twenty-three, and Voda, twenty, sometimes threaten to overshadow the normalcy of their current lives. They are typical young people, full of laughter and some shyness, with futures full of possibilities. This wasn't the way things looked a few years ago. Both are models of a successful peer education project implemented by the Romanian Association against AIDS (ARAS) as part of the Romanian Family Health Initiative. Child homelessness is a growing problem in Romania, where there are few social programs available to help families at risk for abandoning children. Unlike babies who are given to hospitals, older children often find their way to the streets, forced out by difficult circumstances, including poverty



Peer Educator, Voda (front right), talks with a group of homeless youth in Bucharest,

and abuse. In addition to the psychological hurdles they face, homeless youth are vulnerable to physical abuse, STIs, drug use, and are deprived of many normal childhood activities, such as attending school.

Making It Work

Voda, a peer educator for over two years, first heard about ARAS at a shelter where he was staying. At first he wasn't interested but eventually decided to give the peer educator role a try. Watching ARAS's work with street children

firsthand prompted Daniela to get involved. "I wanted to learn about health and pass the information to others in my situation." Daniela and Voda were trained, along with other potential peer educators, and became among the thirty to join the program.

Peer educators share information with homeless youth and help connect them with the services they need. Explains Voda, "We have a strategy: the first meeting, we talk with them and become friends, explain to them, 'You know, I've lived on the streets'. By the second or third meeting, we can give them information on STIs, HIV, etc." Information is important for this group. "For instance, some believe syphilis will turn into AIDS." Trust is another obstacle, points out Daniela, "Getting them to testing centers for HIV is difficult because they don't trust you and they don't believe they are sick. We take 4-5 at a time for testing because they feel more comfortable going as a group." The work is not easy, especially with kids who are high on drugs. "Sometimes they catch a bit of information that will help them later," says Voda. His message: Learn to protect yourself. "They learn about health, not just about STIs, that's one part, but it's life education. We try to change their lives a little."

In exchange for their work, peer educators receive coupons with which to buy household items, such as food and soap. Voda believes the ARAS approach works because "it's important [for homeless youth] to have jobs, to be integrated into society,

not to be ignored by people.” He believes the project also promotes a positive message about homeless youth because “people will see that they can do something good for society.” Daniela and Voda both believe that though their work is difficult, street children should be given an opportunity. “Street children are smart. They see that they have a chance to change their lives,” Voda says.

More than Numbers

ARAS reaches 800 street children each year, but its success lies in more than these numbers. Beaten by her stepfather, who asked her to beg on the streets, Daniela fled home at the age of eight, where she spent nights in the subway with other children. “Until ARAS, I lived on the streets,” says Daniela, who today shares an apartment with another ARAS peer educator. About her work she says, “It feels good going back to work with street children and to show them that there is a possibility to change your life.” Since being involved with the project, Voda has gone back to school and is trying to finish his education. “If I hadn’t gone with ARAS, I wouldn’t be the same today,” Voda says. “I developed [by working] with ARAS. I became a professional.”

A Voice for the Future

Redirecting the futures of street children will take time. “We are modest. We are not saving the world,” Voda says, at the same time lamenting the sometimes short-term thinking about the issues homeless youth face. “In one year, you can’t solve the problem, [but] in a few years, there will be results. He hopes that the project will continue to find ways to work with other NGOs and the government. Daniela and Voda are just two examples of how the project changes lives. It also gives homeless youth, like Voda, a voice, “If you don’t help street children now, don’t give them a chance, our society will suffer.

