



Gaining Social Inclusion for Intellectual Disabilities

by Jonathan Rolbin, Esq.

How do you get the community to take notice of a group of persons who simply seek social inclusion? In Timisoara, Romania, I decided just to invite everyone to join me for a walk each week.

For more than four decades, Romania was ruled by a ruthless dictator and a communist regime that locked up people with intellectual disabilities like they were criminals, and hid them from the public as if they had never been born. But things began to change in 1989 with the overthrow of the regime.

The revolution that gave birth to democracy also freed persons with intellectual disabilities who had spent decades out of public view. But complete social change does not take place overnight. Ignorance is a wound that has difficulty healing. For the last 17 years the intellectually disabled have struggled against this ignorance in an effort to simply be included into society.



Today the general public remains largely unaware of the capabilities, possibilities, and abilities of persons with the intellectual disabilities. There are very few companies that employ them, few people who treat them as equals, and few places where they can learn, laugh and feel included.

Adult Day-care Center

One place, however, where they always feel a sense of community is at Pentru Voi, a Romanian NGO that operates two day centers for 144 adults with intellectual disabilities, and where I have worked as a Peace Corps volunteer since August 2006.

When I first arrived in Timisoara, I wondered what this lawyer turned Peace Corps volunteer could accomplish at Pentru Voi, especially since I had never worked with persons with intellectual disabilities. Fairly soon though I realized that I did not need a PhD or a long list of professional achievements in order to accomplish something. I just needed my eyes and ears, and my heart and mind.

Public Awareness Through Exercise

One day, during one of my morning jogs it occurred to me that a great way to create public awareness and encourage social inclusion would be through an exercise program, in public, along the streets and parks of Timisoara. Everyone should exercise, so why not walk the streets and parks of Timisoara together in an effort to promote awareness and social inclusion?

Nike agreed with me, and through their program, established in partnership with Mercy Corps, they outfitted me and my group from Pentru Voi with shoes, t-shirts and caps. They also agreed with me that the public might need a little "push" to join us, and so they gave me an additional 200 t-shirts, caps and backpacks to give away to those people who choose to join us during our weekly walks.



We created a poster announcing our first event and provided the program's details.

In Romanian the program became known as

" Sport pentru schimbare socială." We put posters up all over town, circulated a press release, and invited the Mayor of Timisoara to join us.

Inaugural Event

On June 27, we held our inaugural event. As we congregated on the steps of the grand Cathedral in the center of town, we were welcomed by cameras and news correspondents, and applauded by the Mayor. There were lots of questions and lots of interest. Here in Romania people walk like this in a group if they want something, perhaps donations or a change in the law. But our message was something very different - to just come join us, get some exercise, notice us and include us into the community!

As we started our walk I noticed the grins on the faces of Alina, Olivia, Adi, and all the other beneficiaries from Pentru Voi. They were smiling, because they liked walking through the city, because they were having fun, and because they felt like they were a part of the community. Their eyes no longer looked towards the ground; rather they looked up and ahead. Their strides grew more confident with each passing step. This is what happens when one feels like they belong to a community. And as I looked into their smiling faces, I noticed that I was striding a little more confidently too!