

# AFTER THE FALL

## HIV GROWS UP

### The Timeline

ROMANIA 1989 - 2011

#### 1988

The first cases of HIV show up in orphanages and hospitals in Constanta County, Romania. Health care workers are forbidden to report on the cases or identify them as AIDS.



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#### March 1989

In March of 1989, thirty-two children die in one month in an orphanage in Constanta County.

#### December 1989

Communist Dictator Nicolai Ceaușescu and his wife Elena are captured and killed by firing squad during the violent Revolution that ended a 24 year totalitarian regime.



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#### 1989-1995

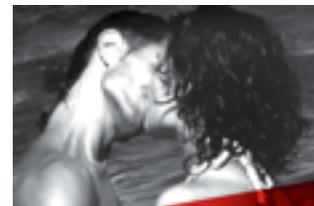
Over 12,000 Romanian children are infected with HIV in state run hospitals and orphanages through transfusions of contaminated blood.

#### 2002

UNAIDS risk analysis presented at the Bucharest Conference shows that Romania is at high risk for an expanded HIV/AIDS epidemic. The majority of the infected children who have survived are reaching adolescence.

#### 2011

Over 7000 of the infected children are long term survivors and a new set of problems emerges for these young people looking for independence, jobs, wanting to date and start their own families.



## SYNOPSIS

### After the Fall, HIV Grows Up

offers an intimate portrait of a group of teens and young adults in Romania. They are the long-term survivors of the pediatric HIV/AIDS epidemic that swept Romania in the late 80s and early 90s as Nicolai Ceausescu's communist dictatorship and reign of terror came to an end. Over 12,000 cases of HIV infection among children were recorded.

They contracted the virus mainly in state run hospitals and orphanages where they had been abandoned by parents who were encouraged to leave their children in the care of the communist state when they could not afford to look after them.

Strange medical practices and outdated blood screening policies in these state

run institutions, combined with the overcrowding brought on by the extreme hardships people faced under Ceausescu's communist dictatorship, precipitated this crisis.

This documentary takes a look at what happened: the difficult history, the caregivers response, and the issues and challenges these kids face as they come of age. They want to integrate into society, marry, have families and embark on successful careers. They are survivors with a variety of stories to tell that are both heartbreaking and triumphant.

These young people face uncertainty based on the difficulties of navigating a system that isn't entirely prepared for them to be adults.

Their journey offers drama and disappointment and many lessons for a global community that will certainly face large populations of HIV infected children around the world who will be long-term survivors. From children who had no voice, to young adults with a message to share, this is the story of "childhood" HIV in Romania.





*These HIV positive young people live in a group home that was founded in 1990 to serve children who had been abandoned by their parents at the hospitals. Foreign aid funded the majority of these homes and programs.*

Filmed on location in Constanta and Bucharest, Romania over the course of two years the documentary features an amazing cast. The young people and the caregivers, the journalists, and activists, all of them fighting for continued access to treatment and to have lives that the young people call “normal.”

The documentary tackles the macro subject of HIV infection among young people, by looking at a micro population of HIV positive teens who have grown up together in a group home in Constanta County in Romania. In many ways they are the fortunate, as they have been cared for through the hard work and dedication of doctors like Dr. Rodica Matusa, nurses like Venera Botescu, foundations, and NGOs like World Vision. Many of their infected counterparts have not been so fortunate. Over 5000 died.

In an interview with Eduard Petrescu, UNAIDS, Country Advisor in Romania, he warns that as these young people grow up they are at risk for becoming a vulnerable group. And that they have to overcome discrimination, the residual effects of under-education and in some cases over-protection in order to integrate successfully as adults into Romanian society.

They are trying to find ways to support themselves, and struggling with side-effects from the medications, battling to stay healthy and dealing with all of the challenges that any 20 year old has.

Ashica, Mioara and Georgie are three friends who have shared these hardships from the time they were babies. They have grown up together, learned to cope with their situation and have all embarked on the tenuous path to

independence and adulthood. This is their story and the story of the many young people we talked to who did not want to have their identities revealed for fear that they might lose their jobs, their housing or harm their loved ones.

The backdrop to their story is the legacy of Communism and the people who have worked so hard to make their lives possible After the Fall.

The legacy of their story is the possibility of long and healthy independent lives.



**Ashica & Mioara and Georgie**



**Kathleen Treat, Creator and Executive Producer** on location with Georgie. Georgie was diagnosed with HIV at a very young age and has grown up battling the disease and living in a group home. Like a lot of the HIV positive survivors in Romania, he faces the challenge of getting work and leading the life that he wants for himself. His positive attitude and zest for life was evident and inspiring in all the taping we did with him.



In 1997, World Vision approached me with a request for funding. Several projects were proposed, but only one stuck out to me.

It was a proposal to support a kid's club in Romania for children who were infected with HIV in the hospitals and institutions in the late '80s and early '90s. The program, started by Venera Batescu, was aimed at providing a safe place for the kids to socialize. They would do crafts together and have outings to the Black Sea or the mountains.

I had been interested and involved in the HIV pandemic for many years already. It was clear to me from the first mention that I would be supporting this project. We assumed, in those early days, that the kid's camp would have a definitive timeline. The children were not expected to live more than 10 years. This was a program that increased the quality of life for these kids while they were still here. There were no long-term goals, no projected outcomes, no strategic initiatives.

I remember visiting Romania for the first time in the fall of 1999. I met Venera at the World Vision office. I met Dr. Matusa in the hospital. The AIDS ward was packed. Dr. Matusa supervised the children, had school lessons, and fed them all.

It was not a hospital—it was a home for these kids. I vividly remember one boy on the brink of death. He was lying on a bench in the schoolroom so that he could be close to his friends. He did not want to die alone in his room.

We visited families and went on field trips with several of the kids. In those days, the parents did not tell the children they were ill. In most families, only one child was infected. It would be the one child that was born into the window of time when contaminated blood was given in hospitals, or had the bad luck of getting a cold during that time, that contracted the disease. We were not allowed to speak of it. The families did not want any of the children to know. It seemed, at that time, to be less about stigma from the outside, and more about letting the child have a stress free life in his short time on earth.

I returned in the fall of 2006. In those intervening years, ARV drugs became widely available in Romania. Though many children died, many more were living.

There were several things during the visit that made a great impact on me and led directly to the making of the documentary. The first: the children were now young adults.

The second: not only did they finally KNOW about their disease—they were becoming advocates and activists. They were going on radio shows, passing out safe-sex information on the beaches, speaking with government officials.

I left that trip with one image—a megaphone.

I wanted to be a megaphone so that a larger audience could hear this message—the one that they, themselves, were telling—, perhaps even the world. This is

where the idea of a documentary first came to be.

It took two years after those first thoughts for the filming trip. There were so many issues to deal with—confidentiality being chief among them. But filming did happen, and other trips followed before completion of the documentary.

I continue to support these youth in Romania, though the kid's club has grown and evolved to include scholarships, vocational training, and other assistance. We could never have imagined, back in 1997, just how strategic the kids club program would be. Through the heroic dedication of Venera, Dr. Matusa, and the countless other people that give their time and energy to these young adults, a generation is alive and paving the way for other HIV infected youth to be able to dream of full, productive lives.

Sincerely,  
*Kathleen Treat*  
 Creator/Executive Producer  
 The Speranza Foundation



# In Appreciation

WORLD VISION

WORLD VISION ROMANIA

UNICEF

UNAIDS

UNOPA

JAPANESE HOUSE/Hope  
Foundation

FRANK FOURNIER -  
documentary photos

CONTACT PRESS IMAGES

THE INTERNATIONAL AIDS  
TRUST

And a special thanks to all of our  
Romanian friends who helped make  
this project a reality.

We are proud that this story  
is told in the voices of the  
people who live it.

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION COMPANY & PRODUCTION TEAM

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We are grateful for the contributions of the following organizations:

