



**In 2001, you founded OvidiuRom association, an association that fights for children's education and that aims to prevent children discrimination. What made you interested in this issue, and why did you choose to found this association in Romania? □**

Actually, Maria Gheorghiu, a Romanian teacher, and I founded Ovidiu Rom in 2004. We started the programs together in 2001 when I was a volunteer in Bacau for the Fundatia de Sprijin de Comunitar. It was completely accidental that I wound up in Bacau. But once I arrived there as a Peace Corps volunteer, I was drawn to the issue because I care deeply about giving children the opportunities to reach their potential as human beings. To my mind, there is nothing sadder than a person who has not been able to reach their full potential.

**Are the companies willing to invest in education?**

Absolutely! Companies know that having an educated population is their only hope for growth. It doesn't matter if you are a bank or a soap maker. There is no market if people do not have an income, and uneducated people don't make much money.

**I know that OvidiuRom collaborates both with corporations, and with the local authorities. □ What are the biggest challenges you face in collaborating with these two entities?**

The biggest challenge is collaborating with the Ministries because their leadership changes so frequently. Things are more stable at the local level. The problem at the local level is money. Their budgets are quite limited. We spend a lot of time raising money from the business sector so that local communities have the resources to (1) recruit every impoverished child in their midst to kindergarten and (2) give their parents a small incentive to send their children to kindergarten every day. I have a dream that someday the government will cover these costs for all children living under the poverty line.

The leaders of most corporations intuitively understand the importance of getting poor children into the education system at the same age as the rest of the population. And when they understand our strategy, they are impressed. Often, the hardest thing is just getting a meeting with the ultimate decision maker!

**The program "Every Child in School" was launched in 2006 and its goal is to eradicate the illiteracy and primary school abandonment in Romania by 2020. What have you achieved so far?**

We are currently using a 4-step methodology integrating: community involvement, incentives for the parents having children with 100% attendance in kindergarten, teacher trainings and public awareness campaign. Number of our beneficiaries reached 1200 kindergarten students in 12 counties and Bucharest.

### **How have you collaborated with corporations in implementing this initiative?**

We literally would not exist without the support of the corporate sector. That's our blood supply; the local authorities are our circulation system. Our methods are quite innovative. We find that corporate leaders are much more open to innovation than EU fund evaluators.

Last year 10 companies "adopted" schools or summer programs. In addition to them we also have our major investors Athenee Palace Hilton, Carrefour, E.ON, Enel, Pepsi, Pro TV and Rompetrol. Our goal is to get 18 companies to each adopt a kindergarten where we are implementing our methodology – and to continue their involvement until 2020. The average cost per school is 15,000 euros or 150€ per child.

### **This year is the sixth edition of the Halloween Charity Ball, an event that aims to raise awareness on the programs "Every Child in School" and "Scoala te face mare". From your previous experience, how useful is such an event in raising awareness on social and educational issues?**

Well, it always helps to have "celebrities" involved. People pay attention to the rich and famous. That's just a fact of life. When my co-founder Maria Gheorghiu or I say something, some people listen. When Vanessa Redgrave or George Clooney say the same thing, a LOT of people listen! The Halloween Ball gives us a chance to talk about important issues. I am usually disappointed that the media covers mostly the glitz and not the substance. Every year I say, "This year we'll get them to attend to the issues."

### **What role does lobby play in your activities and in reaching your goals?**

I assume you mean by that our attempts to influence law makers? I don't think we have made much impact there. But I do think we are influencing public opinion through our public service announcements, "Scoala te face mare".

---

**Leslie Hawke** came to Romania as a United States Peace Corps volunteer in 2000. With Bucharest-born teacher Maria Gheorghiu she initiated the Gata, Dispus si Capabil ("Ready, Willing & Able") programs for marginalized women and children in 2001 while working as a Peace Corp volunteer for the Fundatia de Sprijin Comunitar, a local NGO in Bacau.

Following her Peace Corps service, Hawke and Gheorghiu founded the Romanian NGO,

Scris de Leslie Hawke

Miercuri, 13 Octombrie 2010 05:10

---

Asociatia Ovidiu Rom, through which they expanded the Gata, Dispus si Capabil programs to Bucharest in 2004.

In 2005, USAID awarded Hawke its "Outstanding Citizen Citation" for "the development of the Gata, Dispus si Capabil programs for the benefit of impoverished Roma children and families." Ovidiu Rom was cited as a model in developing community services for disadvantaged children in the June 21, 2008 issue of the Economist. In 2009, Ovidiu Rom received a Sustainability Award from the Global Fund for Children, based in Washington, DC.

Hawke had 25 years' experience in educational publishing and non-profit fundraising and program development before coming to Romania. Her career includes 15 years with the CBS Professional Publishing Division in New York, five years in NGO management and five years in scientific online publishing. An alumni of the University of Texas and the University of Connecticut she has done graduate work in public policy and elementary education.

---

*Interview by Rebeca Pop, Forum for International Communications  
Copyright CSR Romania*

---