



I met Shajjad about one year ago. I was surprised to see the amount of passion he puts in what he does and of his determination to produce a change in the Romanian society. In an interview for CSR Romania, he talks about his work with the volunteers of Little People Romania, but also about the experience he gained in the relationship company-NGO. (Rebeca Pop)

You and your wife, Katie, started Little People Romania, an NGO that supports patients affected by cancer and their families, more than 14 years ago. What motivated you to start this in Romania, a foreign country for both of you?

I first came to Romania in early 1990 a few months after the revolution, bringing humanitarian aid and planned to stay for 2 weeks... well, I'm still here! I fell in love with Romania and seeing the social needs felt compelled to stay and help. Katie was working as a project coordinator for an NGO in Bucharest. We shared the same passion about Romania. We left in 1992 to help with the humanitarian crisis due the war in the Former Yugoslavia and this is where Little People was started. The war was extremely complex and our work was focused on the ever-increasing psycho-social need of refugees and their families. After the Dayton peace agreement came into play we felt it was time to move on. We both felt that the work we developed in the former Yugoslavia with Little People would really benefit Romania too, so in 96 we came back. We set up base in Cluj. After our first few visits to the hospital wards our programs had an immediate effect. Besides launching our program for children with cancer, we also started working with orphaned children and little ones with hearing impairments and other deficiencies.

Little People Romania has extended a lot across the country and has achieved quite a lot of public visibility in the last couple of years. However, I know that most of the people who work with you are volunteers. What is the element that unites people together in such a project?

The contribution that volunteers bring to Little People is invaluable. We have been providing avenues for volunteering since we started and they are the mainstay of our personnel. Our volunteers come from all kinds of backgrounds: student, professional, some are artists, some sportspeople and some the beneficiaries of our projects. We provide ongoing support and training. Everyday across Romania (Iasi – Cluj – Bucharest – Timis) we have our volunteers working in hospitals. They carry out specific tasks that have a deep impact on the lives of the children they are working with. Reports are written daily so we can track the progress within the ward, spot any needs and give direct feedback when needed. The operation is extremely professional and it works! The volunteers feel that they are a part of something special and that their work is valued by the beneficiaries they serve. To have a feel of the kind of buzz that revolves around our work, please check out the Little People Facebook page!

RITTO, which we do in partnership with the national Paralympic committee and the Eon Group

(as the main sponsors), is the largest annual volunteering event to take place in Romania. For 4 consecutive years, the volunteers have been voted the best in the World by the IPC .

RITTO is a sporting event for people with disabilities and is the largest event of its kind to take place in Central and Eastern Europe. The athletes come from over 35 different nations, UK – Germany – Spain – Brazil – Japan etc and they have voted RITTO the best organized and friendliest tournament globally. This is all due to the 700 plus volunteers who do everything from being responsible for cleanliness, to managing the food court, the fundraising for the event, taking care of the players and international umpires and the list goes on. It just shows that Romanian youth can provide world beating leadership in their actions and makes you extremely proud of Romanian youth and what they can achieve when given a little support and direction.

Which are the biggest problems you have faced so far in convincing the companies to offer you their support?

We feel CSR is all about closing social gaps, and with the current crisis there is an even greater need to provide avenues to help the social sector. Providing effective psycho-social support for children, teenagers and young people fighting cancer has been the missing element in cancer care in Romania. Our programs work, they are saving lives and creating the change that is so desperately needed across Romania (and not just in one city). As any young cancer survivor will tell you, many times it is our programs that provide that special touch that is needed to help them pull through.

Yet we really have a hard time convincing the big givers to give. We are not a “photo op” organisation; you will not find the overly emotional and sometimes, in my opinion, degrading image of a child who is under chemo on our media sites. As opposed to that, “hope” is the most powerful weapon we have in the fight against cancer and that is what we portray to the general public and to the companies we ask for funding. Maybe our approach is not shocking or emotional enough, but we work everyday with the kids and their families and we will not disrespect them for the sake of getting funding.

We currently work in 5 oncology wards, daily reaching 80% of all kids under treatment. Our organisation has the largest patient reach in Romania and that will increase to 100% of all children by the end of this year. Our programs are setting the standard internationally. Based on our successes with the Temerarii community, we have been asked to consult other patient groups in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Australia, the UK and Canada to help them set up something as successful and effective. The European Coalition of Cancer Patients chose our organization as a lead partner in an upcoming European-wide program for youth. Temerarii is ‘made in Romania’. It is made up of exceptional Romanian youth who have spent their young lives fighting cancer. Today, they play a huge role with current patients. They take a patient’s hand and say: “I’ve been there – we can beat this!”. The effect is huge! Lance Armstrong, who is a world famous cancer survivor, said that what we do is a leading example in the fight against cancer! So it baffles me that we don’t get the funding from the big givers... However as anyone will tell you who is working within this field we cannot afford to fail, so no matter what we have to provide – and that is where our volunteers play a huge role – we will go on and we will continue to do what we can to give the best possible care for Romania children.

What was the most rewarding experience you have had so far in collaborating with a company?

Danone Romania has been financing a part of our cancer care program for the past 3 years. When their CSR projects came under review and senior officials from their European HQ questioned their involvement in cancer care they could not argue with an 87% employee agreement with funding of this specific program.

Another example concerns RITTO. We contacted hundreds of corporations who were happy to fund a sporting event but when the word disability came up they shied away... E-On was one company that did not and their investment has created a world beating international tournament that has received global acclaim and put Romanian youth and their ability to pull off a world class event for disabled people on the map! RITTO has also helped change mindsets towards disabled people. The press have been great and given RITTO huge coverage. Often we hear reactions like "I never thought disabled people can play sport and at this level of professionalism" E-On helped fund a huge community event with a huge impact.

If you could change anything in the way Romanian companies perceive/get involved in social projects, what would that be and why?

For me CSR should be all about closing social gaps and not about having nice away-days with employees planting a few trees. Tree planting is good but they should use the teambuilding budget and not CSR funds. I do wish CSR people would be a bit more informed about the actual needs of civil society before giving huge amounts of cash away to what amounts to nothing more than a great PR picture. Something, that is unsustainable or in some cases, a project that is a pure waste of cash. I would like to see a multi stakeholder forum to be set up to address the relevant needs of Romania focused on better targeted funding.

The current trend in corporate volunteering I feel needs a rethink. I heard from a number of NGOs and we have encountered the same issues, that unless our programs provide avenues for large numbers of employee volunteer involvement, corporate funding will not follow. It is great if you are doing big clean ups or tree planting, but tough if your work is focused on dealing with orphans or healthcare. We are at times asked to create events with the target of keeping staff happy and fulfilled, which distracts us from the main reason why we are doing what we are doing in the first place. What I believe would help is Corporate teams coming up with ideas of employee involvement that would create awareness and raise funding for a cause and free the NGOs from the task of creating events just to satisfy the KPIs of corporate.

Shajjad Rizvi is a British who came to Romania more than 20 years ago, aiming to get involved in solving the social needs. In 1996, he started Little People Romania, an NGO that supports patients affected by cancer and their families.

Interview by Rebeca Pop, Editor CSR Romania. Copyright CSR Romania

Shajjad Rizvi: The current trend in corporate volunteering needs a rethink

I met Shajjad about one year ago. I was surprised to see the amount of passion he puts in what he does and of his determination to produce a change in the Romanian society. In an interview for CSR Romania, he talks about his work with the volunteers of Little People Romania, but also about the experience he gained in the relationship company-NGO.

You and your wife, Katie, started Little People Romania, an NGO that supports patients affected by cancer and their families, more than 14 years ago. What motivated you to start this in Romania, a foreign country for both of you?

I first came to Romania in early 1990 a few months after the revolution, bringing humanitarian aid and planned to stay for 2 weeks... well, I'm still here! I fell in love with Romania and seeing the social needs felt compelled to stay and help. Katie was working as a project coordinator for an NGO in Bucharest. We shared the same passion about Romania. We left in 1992 to help with the humanitarian crisis due the war in the Former Yugoslavia and this is where Little People was started. The war was extremely complex and our work was focused on the ever-increasing psycho-social need of refugees and their families. After the Dayton peace agreement came into play we felt it was time to move on. We both felt that the work we developed in the former Yugoslavia with Little People would really benefit Romania too, so in 96 we came back. We set up base in Cluj. After our first few visits to the hospital wards our programs had an immediate effect. Besides launching our program for children with cancer, we also started working with orphaned children and little ones with hearing impairments and other deficiencies.

Little People Romania has extended a lot across the country and has achieved quite a lot of public visibility in the last couple of years. However, I know that most of the people who work with you are volunteers. □ What is the element that unites people together in such a project?

The contribution that volunteers bring to Little People is invaluable. We have been providing avenues for volunteering since we started and they are the mainstay of our personnel. Our volunteers come from all kinds of backgrounds: student, professional, some are artists, some sportspeople and some the beneficiaries of our projects. We provide ongoing support and training. Everyday across Romania (Iasi – Cluj – Bucharest – Timis) we have our volunteers working in hospitals. They carry out specific tasks that have a deep impact on the lives of the children they are working with. Reports are written daily so we can track the progress within the ward, spot any needs and give direct feedback when needed. The operation is extremely professional and it works! The volunteers feel that they are a part of something special and that their work is valued by the beneficiaries they serve. To have a feel of the kind of buzz that revolves around our work, please check out the Little People Facebook page!

RITTO, which we do in partnership with the national Paralympic committee and the Eon Group (as the main sponsors), is the largest annual volunteering event to take place in Romania. For 4 consecutive years, the volunteers have been voted the best in the World by the IPC .

RITTO is a sporting event for people with disabilities and is the largest event of its kind to take place in Central and Eastern Europe. The athletes come from over 35 different nations, UK – Germany – Spain – Brazil – Japan etc and they have voted RITTO the best organized and friendliest tournament globally. This is all due to the 700 plus volunteers who do everything from being responsible for cleanliness, to managing the food court, the fundraising for the event,

taking care of the players and international umpires and the list goes on. It just shows that Romanian youth can provide world beating leadership in their actions and makes you extremely proud of Romanian youth and what they can achieve when given a little support and direction.

Which are the biggest problems you have faced so far in convincing the companies to offer you their support?

We feel CSR is all about closing social gaps, and with the current crisis there is an even greater need to provide avenues to help the social sector. Providing effective psycho-social support for children, teenagers and young people fighting cancer has been the missing element in cancer care in Romania. Our programs work, they are saving lives and creating the change that is so desperately needed across Romania (and not just in one city). As any young cancer survivor will tell you, many times it is our programs that provide that special touch that is needed to help them pull through.

Yet we really have a hard time convincing the big givers to give. We are not a “photo op” organisation; you will not find the overly emotional and sometimes, in my opinion, degrading image of a child who is under chemo on our media sites. As opposed to that, “hope” is the most powerful weapon we have in the fight against cancer and that is what we portray to the general public and to the companies we ask for funding. Maybe our approach is not shocking or emotional enough, but we work everyday with the kids and their families and we will not disrespect them for the sake of getting funding.

We currently work in 5 oncology wards, daily reaching 80% of all kids under treatment. Our organisation has the largest patient reach in Romania and that will increase to 100% of all children by the end of this year. Our programs are setting the standard internationally. Based on our successes with the Temerarii community, we have been asked to consult other patient groups in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Australia, the UK and Canada to help them set up something as successful and effective. The European Coalition of Cancer Patients chose our organization as a lead partner in an upcoming European-wide program for youth. Temerarii is 'made in Romania'. It is made up of exceptional Romanian youth who have spent their young lives fighting cancer. Today, they play a huge role with current patients. They take a patient's hand and say: "I've been there – we can beat this!". The effect is huge! Lance Armstrong, who is a world famous cancer survivor, said that what we do is a leading example in the fight against cancer! So it baffles me that we don't get the funding from the big givers... However as anyone will tell you who is working within this field we cannot afford to fail, so no matter what we have to provide – and that is where our volunteers play a huge role – we will go on and we will continue to do what we can to give the best possible care for Romania children.

What was the most rewarding experience you have had so far in collaborating with a company?

Danone Romania has been financing a part of our cancer care program for the past 3 years. When their CSR projects came under review and senior officials from their European HQ questioned their involvement in cancer care they could not argue with an 87% employee agreement with funding of this specific program.

Another example concerns RITTO. We contacted hundreds of corporations who were happy to fund a sporting event but when the word disability came up they shied away... E-On was one company that did not and their investment has created a world beating international tournament that has received global acclaim and put Romanian youth and their ability to pull off a world class event for disabled people on the map! RITTO has also helped change mindsets towards disabled people. The press have been great and given RITTO huge coverage. Often we hear reactions like "I never thought disabled people can play sport and at this level of professionalism" E-On helped fund a huge community event with a huge impact.

If you could change anything in the way Romanian companies perceive/get involved in social projects, what would that be and why?

For me CSR should be all about closing social gaps and not about having nice away-days with employees planting a few trees. Tree planting is good but they should use the teambuilding budget and not CSR funds. I do wish CSR people would be a bit more informed about the actual needs of civil society before giving huge amounts of cash away to what amounts to nothing more than a great PR picture. Something, that is unsustainable or in some cases, a project that is a pure waste of cash. I would like to see a multi stakeholder forum to be set up to address the relevant needs of Romania focused on better targeted funding.

The current trend in corporate volunteering I feel needs a rethink. I heard from a number of NGOs and we have encountered the same issues, that unless our programs provide avenues for large numbers of employee volunteer involvement, corporate funding will not follow. It is great if your are doing big clean ups or tree planting, but tough if your work is focused on dealing with orphans or healthcare. We are at times asked to create events with the target of keeping staff happy and fulfilled, which distracts us from the main reason why we are doing what we are doing in the first place. What I believe would help is Corporate teams coming up with ideas of employee involvement that would create awareness and raise funding for a cause and free the NGOs from the task of creating events just to satisfy the KPIs of corporate.

Shajjad Rizvi: The current trend in corporate volunteering needs a rethink

Scris de Shajjad Rizvi

Miercuri, 16 Februarie 2011 11:17

Shajjad Rizvi is a British who came to Romania more than 20 years ago, aiming to get involved in solving the social needs. In 1996, he started Little People Romania, an NGO that supports patients affected by cancer and their families.