



Latest
News

- ▶ Misty's C generation of puppies are 1 year old. They have now all been neutered in preparation for their training
- ▶ Three potential blind beneficiaries have been assessed for pairing with Guide Dogs
- ▶ Grateful to Business Lease for extending their provision of a Dacia Duster for another year
- ▶ TooShark are redesigning a new website for LiE
- ▶ Mrs. Lăcrămioara and Săndica began the school year with new activities in "Lumea în care trăiesc" at Dămăroia & Liceul Tehnologic Special nr. 3. In addition they started a jewellery making course with high school students at Liceul Tehnologic Special nr. 3
- ▶ Rob Bousie and GD Bobby are grateful for Bucharest Marathon supporting LiE and allowing them to promote Guide Dogs at the event
- ▶ Walk for Dogs Charity (Monique Dubbeldam), the President, Mr. Chiotan, of the ANPD & Bucharest Councillor Tudor-Tim Ionescu visited end October to discuss access rights and use of assistance dogs

Irina & Sylvia Păun (Part A: Irina's Story)

by Ruth Rusby

Irina and Sylvia grew up in Buzău and during Grades 1-4 attended the School of National Arts, playing piano for 6 hours a day and learning French as their second language.

When asked why their English was now so fluent, Irina explained: "At first when we started losing our sight, we managed very well on our own. After a while we realised we couldn't read the subtitles of the films on TV, so we needed to improve our English. We enrolled in after University meet-up groups with foreign expats. This was some 8 years ago and we met many international people socially on a Friday after work. We wouldn't be with Light into Europe now if we hadn't learned English!"

Born in Buzău in 1982, when Irina and Sylvia turned 19 they moved with their parents to Bucharest. In 2001 their rare and hereditary disease (retina pigmentosa) had started to show signs.

"Mum quit her job and found a new one in Bucharest," says Irina, "Dad did too."

Irina and Sylvia began their studies at the National School of Political Science and Public Administration (SNSPA), which prepares for the public sector of government. They joined the Liberal Party (PNL) for 3 years and were politically active in the University, reading and making reports, campaigning, were founder members of a women's group and divided their time between University and volunteering.

At one point they were involved with the children from a foster home – the wife of Prime Minister Tăriceanu arranged for the children to be baptized, made a Christmas dinner for them



and raised funds via an art exhibition in a mall.

Irina and Sylvia were at University for four years and were determined to earn their degree in 2004/5. However, at this time their father got sick and was tragically lost to cancer after only 6 months. They postponed their degree by one year.

At this time they could both see and could still take notes. They attended classes and could see the blackboard. Within 2-3 months of losing their father they both lost 80% of their vision. They could barely read the very big font.

"We continued learning for our degree," says Irina, "but by this stage we had to learn electronically with a black screen and large white font. Our friends typed up all the notes. We had to adjust while attending a mainstream university with no special conditions. It got to the stage where they couldn't make the font bigger – it was insane!"

Irina and Sylvia both wrote their final dissertations electronically and managed to defend them successfully. Then it came to their final exam.

"We entered the class, me first, Sylvia second," says Irina. "I couldn't see a thing. I couldn't read the paper! I realised my sister was crying at the other end of the room, asking for tissues."

They were in a huge room for their final 3 hours exam. 1½ hours was already gone – they needed the words projected on a wall with assistants to read the content and take note of their answers, not written exam papers. But of course they couldn't disturb their colleagues. Everything they'd worked so hard for for years was about to be for nothing.

In the end they were given an oral exam of 10 minutes of intense questioning and answers, and somehow managed to pass.

"It was cruel, I cannot forgive them for this," says Irina, "they were not prepared. The secretary really fought for us. She said 'if you stress my girls in any way I will hold you responsible! Be kind!'"

This was their first interaction with the cruel reality of becoming blind, the first big kick.

"The second big kick was the job interviews," says Sylvia. "We went for interviews, people were enthusiastic, and we explained we could work using computers, but in the end nothing came. We stayed at home one year while all our friends were building their careers and life began to pass us by."

They were badly affected by this, in terms of their self-esteem, confidence and needed to do something.

“Mum and Sylvia set up a hair spa,” says Irina, “based on the L’Oreal Academy: washing, treatment & head massage. Like in London, Paris. A place to look ‘wow!’ They invested a fortune – all our savings and more. In the end the only good thing to come out of it was the massage profession.”

They attended a special school in Sibiu and then set up a salon in a very chic house near Vatra Luminosa, with exclusive clients having their hair dyed in the garden and expecting the utmost privacy.

“We learned massage therapy from a teacher,” says Irina, “the why, how, pressure points etc. My hand was on the teacher’s hand, which was on Sylvia’s. We started working from day one! We were giving 10 massages a day to employees of a Law & Partners company. This saved us financially. After this we closed the old salon and had clients at home.”

Gradually they started losing more and more of their vision. With 20% they could still travel on their own, but as it got less they couldn’t bring themselves to take a white cane.

“It might have been easier if we’d learned to use a cane earlier,” admits Irina, “but it was genuinely hard times – we were trying to make peace with it [vision loss] and at the same time trying to hide it.”

“I went to this rock festival,” says Irina. “I went bungee jumping! – In tandem from a crane at 70-80 m! It was an incredible feeling. I said to myself ‘lady this is no time for a heart attack!’ – everyone thought I was a professional! I thought I would scream like never before, but in fact when I’m tense I don’t make a sound! I span around and came back up and thought ‘this is cool, I could be doing this for a living!’”



This was a turning point for Irina. She became proud of who she was.

“We made pottery from clay!” says Irina. “An old guy was doing it. He said ‘of course you can do it!’ it felt amazing – I made a vase to put flowers in!”

In 2007 Irina married her high school sweetheart, but by 2008 they got divorced and her life started again.

“I got the dress and the fairy tale wedding,” says Irina, “but I will not compromise and it was the best decision to choose to step out. Losing our sight changed Sylvia and me a lot. But disability can be an ability. I am skilled in some things because I lost my sight. I am very experienced with people – I can feel their vibe, good or bad, I can know if they’re interested. I don’t need to see their face. Small talk is good as long as it’s in small quantities! I can dedicate more time to things that matter!”

Irina and Sylvia rely 100% on modern technology for their everyday needs – they follow the news but are not big fans of Facebook. They never learned Braille, but use voice over audio books. They can both still play the piano.

“In those early years, when we were just 11 years old,” says Irina, “we learned Strauss and Mozart, Tchaikovsky. I have started to play again now – the sound track of Amelia Yann Tiersen ‘Comptine d’un autre été, but now we need teachers, as we can’t read the notes of the sheet music. We made a band with two couples, a piano, bongo, electric guitar and bass – we played in Dam Square in Amsterdam.”

This was back in 2009/10 when Irina moved to Almere, the Netherlands, for a year. She packed and left and set up a massage cabinet and opened a business, which she built up on her own in part of a friend’s house.

“It felt like Alice in Wonderland,” says Irina. “Old forest, big trees, down by the water. It was a great opportunity! But in the end they couldn’t adjust to me being in their house.”

One day she got lost in Amsterdam. Sylvia, who was in Romania, immediately realised something was wrong with her twin sister.

“I was supposed to meet a business Professor, Huib in Amsterdam Centraal Station at 7-7:30 pm,” explains Irina. “I’d been travelling every weekend in Amsterdam, despite being visually impaired. This time I went past the station and ended up in Sloterdijk! I was on the platform, in the dark, in an industrial area, with no phone signal. I told myself to stay calm and not to fall on the track. I decided to walk slowly

until I could see a light. I walked down some stairs, holding the banister and found some people. I said ‘please put me in a safe place!’ This old lady and her husband put me in Starbucks in Sloterdijk – I had a big smile on my face!”

It was then that Sylvia called: “Are you okay?” she said, “Never do that again! Never!”

This was just the beginning of Irina becoming a strong independent woman. In the end Huib came and she was very happy. He drove her back to the friends she was staying with.

Irina has studied language courses (such as Dutch) using the Michel Thomas method, using increasing vocabulary to build direct sentences.

“The Dutch people don’t have much of a sense of humour,” says Irina, “and you have to be introduced to everyone! The couple I stayed with were lovely, wonderful people and threw a birthday party for me with cakes in the park!”

While Irina was away, Sylvia stayed in Romania with the business.

“I had a rich life,” says Irina, “I was quite adventurous. My Mum and Dad said I was stubborn like a boy. They let me make my own mistakes. I needed to break lose. I was the first one in the whole family to get divorced. But I had Mum and Sylvia, and Mum fought with everyone!”

“Then Charlie came along!” says Irina, “He gave me happiness, peace and cheerfulness! It’s a really nice love story – not fireworks. He was very patient, elegant, a true gentleman!”

Irina met Charlie again by chance in a bar, sometime after her first Caledonian Ball (2014).

“We were in a hipster place just drinking beer and ended up laughing for four hours non-stop. We’ve have been together ever since. I even visited his parents in Ross-on-Wye last Christmas and spent New Year in Scotland!”

Upcoming Events



• **20th Caledonian Ball**,
18th November, InterContinental Hotel

• **Burns Night**, 2nd February 2018
InterContinental Hotel