



Latest
News



► Tickets are still available for **15th Burns' Supper**, 3rd February 2018, InterContinental Hotel;

► Petra took part in "Competence for Inclusion in International Youth Work", Glasgow, Scotland, representing Romania as part of her graduate program. She was the only visually impaired participant;

► Land & building purchased for new dedicated Guide Dog training & resource centre, București Noi;

► **Caledonian Ball** attended by 360 people to celebrate the 20th anniversary of this event.

► **Șulea Architects** are managing development of new building;

► **Cristi & GD Hamish** moved to Oradea (from Târgu Mureș)



Irina & Silvia Păun (Part B: Silvia's Story)

Silvia Păun was 19 when she entered the same faculty as her twin sister Irina in 2001, at the National School of Political Science and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, having just moved from Buzău. At this time, their Mum and Dad took them to a private eye clinic to see a specialist.

"The Doctor lady was pretty harsh," says Silvia, "she said instantly, after some tests and measurements, 'well girls, you'll be blind by 40.'"

Silvia knew something was wrong, but never imagined it to be that bad. Both her Mum and Dad carried the recessive gene for retina pigmentosa. They then visited Professor Moore in Moorfields Eye Hospital London.

"He asked an odd question," says Silvia. "He said, 'I hope you're not going to be mad, but are your parents related?' He said it was extremely rare for both parents to carry this mutated gene – one in two million!"

Silvia reasons that "maybe it was meant to be, that we are here to learn something in life," she says, "maybe it's not that bad."

When the doctor told her the news she was 19 years old and had just entered the faculty, together with Irina, in a new city [Bucharest].

"Mum and Dad are gonna find a cure," she thought, "I'll just enjoy every moment. I have great support from my family. Even when we met new people they would ask 'how was our social life, did we have boyfriends?' Of course we had boyfriends! High school sweethearts!"

Silvia's first serious relationship was in 12th Grade and lasted five years.



"He was an amazing friend," she recalls, "he was with me every step of the way!"

After another serious relationship, lasting around 5 ½ years, she finally met Sașa, the love of her life.

"I met Sașa in 2009," says Silvia, "although actually we met as friends on vacation with a group of friends in 2007. Sașa was very, very attentive, a real gentleman."

Two years later they were both free, met by accident in a club and went to eat together afterwards.

"It was fantastic – we both cried and had a lot of fun," says Silvia, "he really is my soul-mate and saw behind my disability. He is an extraordinary man."

They have since married and now have a daughter, Ingrid, who is 3 ½ years old.

"Ingrid is the love of our lives," says Silvia, "we are extremely lucky and we love each other so much!"

Silvia believes there are more and more "mixed" couples these days, one with a disability, the other not.

by Ruth Rusby

"We know three couples like this," says Silvia, "it's a very good thing – we want to promote that we are normal people, just like anyone else."

At the University, however, they were shown no empathy or understanding.

"The staff were extremely blunt, they had no heart. They were heartless and ignorant," says Silvia. "I hope I never encounter that feeling again."

Silvia's mother wanted everything for her daughters – to see them happy and fulfilled.

"She was the best mum we could ever have had!" says Silvia, "I hope that for Ingrid I will be the best mum."

While Silvia's mum made a career for herself and Irina moved to Holland, Silvia carried on the business in her private clinic offering treatments.

"I was going back and forth, working from dawn till dusk, it felt great!" says Silvia. "I was very satisfied and earning good money, socially involved and meeting lots of people."

Two years after being with Sașa, around September 2013, they moved in together and realised Ingrid was on the way. They decided to buy an apartment and got married at the City Hall on 16th November 2013. In 2015 they finally did the church wedding.

"I had the fairy tale, the big party with close friends and family circle," says Silvia, "with 70 people on the terrace at Herăstrău. I had a wonderful dress – I absolutely loved it! We were



at the Buena Vista Social Club with a Cubanist pianist. Afterwards we listened to rock! We had a blast! There was no big table, just a round table with Saşa and the godparents – a big table would have been too official! It was a great party and Ingrid was the centre of attention. We waltzed. I really, really loved it!”

Silvia and Irina learned dancing from their grandparents – they could waltz at four years old, do the Tango, Marengo, Salsa, Rock.

In 2017, at the InterContinental Hotel party for employees (where they were giving massages to workers) there was a dance contest. One guy named Silviu needed a dance partner.

“We were the first couple, we won the first prize!” exclaims Silvia. “We danced the Waltz, Rock ‘n Roll, R & B, Rock and Popular, Salsa. This guy Silviu could sense the beat – we put on quite a show! We had a blast! Next year we will do the same. I’m right here – left, right, completely spontaneous. This puts a smile on my face when we dance!”

At parties and weddings, Silvia and Irina were always the first to dance.

“If nobody’s dancing,” says Silvia, “we get up and start the party! We have this from Dad. We used to dance the Tango, Salsa, Rock ‘n Roll with Dad. Mum danced beautifully too!”

“At our 18th birthday party we had 80 people,” explains Silvia. “We made this special dance to Joe Cocker’s ‘Tonight’. Mum and Irina and Dad and Me. We created this dance for the four of us. We have it on tape.”

Silvia hopes that when her sight improves she can watch it on the tape. She hasn’t watched it since her father died.

“I haven’t looked at Ingrid,” says Silvia. “I don’t know how she looks, the details. I caress her face, her lips and her eyes. So I have an image of her. But I don’t know if it’s the correct one. If my picture fits with the real picture.”

Silvia desperately hopes that one day she can receive treatment to restore even some of her eyesight. A lot of research is being done with stem cells.

“We still have 1-2% vision,” explains Silvia, “which means we can see some stuff at the periphery – it’s not pitch black.”

When Ingrid was 2 ½ years old she refused to believe that Silvia was blind.

“She was furious,” says Silvia, “really angry! ‘No mummy, you can see!’ After a while she

started to understand. ‘Mummy I’m here’, helping me into the taxi to kindergarten. But she doesn’t always remember I can’t draw pictures for her.”

Choosing clothes with Ingrid can be daunting.

“I have to be so patient with her shoes!” says Silvia. “She doesn’t just want any old trainers, she wants her summer shoes. Sometimes I don’t have the nerve any more! But she is cute and pretty and smart and loves her kindergarten. The teachers are great!”

The only problem is the staff and parents are terrified to communicate with Silvia and hardly ever say hello, or good evening, when passing her on the stairs. She feels as normal as them, but they are not used to being around people with disabilities.

“It’s not a nice feeling,” says Silvia, “I told Saşa, I think I need to organize a session to explain things to them. They are not helpful with anything; say if I can’t find Ingrid’s backpack. It’s really not okay. We are an educated family and not used to it.”

In Ikea Silvia also encountered problems, after shopping, whilst eating upstairs at a round table with a play area in the middle.

“I couldn’t see the play area!” says Silvia. “No one offered to help me. I spoke out loud and clear. No one said anything – they just sat and stared. It’s not right to judge people, it’s so frustrating!”

Silvia and Saşa also couldn’t find a free disabled parking place.

“We complained at the service desk,” says Silvia, “but the guy couldn’t give a *beep*. We had the same problem at Carrefour and have emailed both companies. I am really shocked by Ikea!”

“I am thankful for everything I have,” says Silvia, “the house, the family, my job, Irina. I don’t know where I would be without Irina. I am honestly really lucky I’m not alone. We laugh a lot! The old couple upstairs says ‘please laugh again! We love to laugh with you!’”

In October 2017 Irina and Silvia were invited to speak at the DisruptHR conference. Their title was “Eyes Wide Open”.

“There were 250 people in the audience,” says Silvia, “It was completely silent while we talked for 10 minutes. Afterwards many said ours was the best speech of the evening. People cried.”

Irina and Silvia are increasingly drawn to public speaking. They first attended the Caledonian Ball in 2014 and were asked to give the main speech.

“Can you imagine – we had to go out and look for stuff, dresses, shoes, everything!” says Silvia. “Saşa was so patient – it took 4-5 hours!”

This was shortly after they had first met Camelia and Stan Platt through a mutual friend.

“Cami was the one who said to us ‘you can do more’”, says Silvia. “She believed in us. We spent days practicing the speech non-stop. It was a great opportunity.”

Since then they have attended Public Speaking courses where they have honed their talents further.

“We love to speak and we love to laugh!” says Silvia. “Cami and Stan have been our guardian angels!”



GUIDE DOG AND PUPPY UPDATES

- ▶ Bobby, Betty & Basil are in the process of being paired with future beneficiaries
- ▶ Bryony may be suitable for pairing with a beneficiary in Timișoara
- ▶ Bella is doing very well as a therapy dog for a 3 year old autistic girl near Ploiești
- ▶ “C” generation of puppies have been assessed for dysplasia and results sent to Belgium for analysis

Upcoming Events

- **Burns Night, 3rd**
February 2018
InterContinental Hotel



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