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### **Hope flowers in Romania**

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

LAZU, Romania — One by one they reveal their dreams. Alina Dumitru, 14, yearns to be a fashion model and will strike a magazine-cover pose with little prompting. Elena Ilie, 17, who has a flair for making *clatite*, a rolled-up pancake slathered with jam, imagines a future in baking. Marius Varga, 18, thinks he might like a wife and kids someday, but for now, he just wants his driver's license.

Not too long ago, even modest aspirations seemed unfathomable for the kids who live at Casa Florilor, a house in this village that is primarily distinguished by the Texas flag hanging from the second-floor balcony and offering a clue to the home's link to the Lone Star State.

Abandoned by their parents and living in a group home that means Flower House, they are among thousands of Romanian youngsters with HIV. They are not infected from their mothers but from contaminated needles or transfusions of unscreened blood. Of nearly 11,000 people living with HIV or AIDS in Romania today, nearly 8,000 were born in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The unique circumstances of the pediatric AIDS epidemic is one of the legacies of Nicolae Ceausescu, the communist dictator executed 15 years ago after a violent revolt that opened the door to democracy.

First, Ceausescu banned abortion and birth control, which led to large numbers of unwanted pregnancies. Second, Ceausescu insisted that Romania did not have a problem with AIDS, so blood was not screened. Third, hospitals typically reused syringes. Fourth, many of the abandoned children suffered from malnutrition and anemia, so it was common practice for sickly children to receive whole-human-blood transfusions.

### **Concerted efforts make difference**

Constanta, a port city on the Black Sea, and the surrounding county, which includes Lazdu, were hit especially hard. About 1,700 children, many of them orphans, have been diagnosed with HIV. Of them, about 1,100 have died.

But over the years, the picture has been improving.

In Constanta, a key source of support arrived in 1996 when Mark Kline, a pediatric AIDS specialist from Baylor University's medical college in Houston, visited the area.

Disturbed by children being "warehoused in residential facilities, wasting away," Kline set in motion a plan that led to the founding in 2001 of the Romanian-American Children's Center and to Casa Florilor.

The center, where children's drawings of angels, saints and the occasional beach scene brighten walls painted in clinical gray-white

tones, was created through a partnership with Baylor and other non-profit groups along with the local hospital and the Romanian government. It serves the 600 or so survivors of the pediatric epidemic.

Under the partnership, Romanian doctors have trained at Baylor, and Baylor personnel have come to Romania. A critical component is the donation of millions of dollars in state-of-the-art medications from Abbott Laboratories. With proper medications and improved care, the mortality rate of HIV-infected children dropped from 15% to 3% in three years, Kline reported in the August *Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal*.

Now, Baylor is expanding to other resource-poor areas of the world where pediatric AIDS looms even larger. A clinic opened June 2003 in Gabarone, Botswana. Programs in Mexico City, Uganda, Libya, Lesotho and Swaziland are in the works. Kline, who also is chief of retrovirology at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston, wants to create a network of centers in developing countries. Romania "is where we proved that the concept could work," he says.

### **Future remains critical**

Still, challenges remain here. Experts predict a new wave of HIV/AIDS as illegal drugs become more common and as HIV-infected children mature into adulthood, says Nicoleta Vaseliu, executive director of the Baylor-Black Sea Foundation, which supports the Flower House and other local programs. While many AIDS experts say the Romanian government is more committed than ever to the problem, health workers are waiting to see whether Romania's just-elected president, Traian Basescu, will make good on his promise to eliminate layers of corruption that have sometimes slowed the distribution of drugs and other supplies.

Another worry is that as the current wave of children mature into adulthood, they won't have access to services such as job training and life skills. "We have given them a chance at life. Now we have to give them a future," says Mary Veal, a U.S. humanitarian aid worker who has worked with AIDS- and HIV-infected children in Bucharest for 11 years.

Currently, such services fall mostly to non-profit groups and local volunteers. In and around Constanta, some parents of children with HIV offer AIDS awareness and sex education programs in the community and schools.

Social workers and psychologists help kids and parents explore issues such as sexuality, death and, perhaps most important, the stigma of AIDS. Though laws were created to protect those with AIDS and HIV, many parents and children at the Romanian-American Center have not disclosed the illness, even to family or close friends.

At Casa Florilor, volunteers take turns cooking meals, running errands and supervising chores and activities. "They advise us," says Marius, who takes care of the household's three dogs, Nana, Laica and Lola.

Even more, he says, "we have people who love us."

It's not hard to do, says Steluta Piciorea, a volunteer who lost her son, Marian, to AIDS four years ago. "They helped me go through the grieving process. I always say that all these children are my own."