

WHY HAS VALERIU BEEN HONOURED?

Valeriu Nicolae has been honoured by the World's Children's Prize Foundation because of his tireless struggle for the very poorest and most vulnerable children in Romania and throughout Europe.

Valeriu grew up in extreme poverty and was the victim of discrimination because he was Roma. The Roma people are an ethnic group that has lived in Europe for almost a thousand years, but they have always been the continent's poorest and most discriminated minority.

Valeriu has been fighting for over 20 years to tackle discrimination and racism, and to protect the rights of all children living in poverty. In 2010, he began working to help children and their families in Europe's poorest and most dangerous district for children – the Ferentari ghetto in Bucharest, which has been forgotten by the rest of the world.

When Valeriu started a club for children in the ghetto, hardly any children were attending school there. Children and young people were dying every month of malnutrition, abuse, drug overdoses and suicide. The *Alternative Education Club* became the focus of efforts that helped change the lives of Europe's poorest children. Today, hundreds of children get help every year to cope with school, learn about their rights and get support to develop and live a good life. The poorest children are given shoes, clothes and sometimes food. Children who take drugs and/or are exploited and forced to sell drugs and/or sex are given support to leave that life behind and have the childhood to which they are entitled. Valeriu also fights for better laws and systems that protect children from violence, discrimination and hate crimes, and strengthens their rights and opportunities.



Valeriu fights for the very poorest and most discriminated children in Romania and Europe.

One weekend, Valeriu walks quickly through the Ferentari ghetto. He greets the children playing among the rubbish heaps on the pavement outside the dilapidated buildings.

A group of children are playing by a container overflowing with rubbish. Some have climbed inside to look for something of value, perhaps to sell. They poke about carefully among the refuse, because they know that drug users throw their used needles everywhere. One prick from a needle could infect you with serious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis.

Big change

On weekdays, the children are at school at this time. But that's not how it was when Valeriu first came here. The few children that had even started school soon dropped out. Most parents in Ferentari have little or no

education and they can't help their children with homework. Prejudices about poor people in the ghetto meant that children from this area were often bullied at school by both other pupils and teachers.

When Valeriu decided to start up an alternative education club for children in Ferentari, offering help with homework and fun activities, he was warned against it. Usually by people who had never even been here. Many said: "The ghetto is hopeless, nothing will ever get better there."

When Valeriu and his friends built a new play area in Ferentari people told him: "It'll be ruined in a few weeks, everything broken

and covered in graffiti." But today, seven years on, the play area still looks like new. The children clean it and look after it.

Smell of rubbish

There's a horrible smell from the wastewater that leaks from the buildings and rotting rubbish on the ground. The council stopped collecting the rubbish here ages ago and no one listens when the people in Ferentari complain. Valeriu spots a woman he knows sorting through the rubbish. She has three children who come to the education club. She's looking for plastic bottles so she can get the deposit back on them and buy food today. Like most other adults in the

ghetto she's unemployed. Many become desperate and start selling drugs or sex, or steal to support themselves. This mum doesn't do any of that but the children's father is in prison.

Poorest street

Valeriu enters a doorway on Livezilor Alley, the poorest part of the area and one of the most dangerous city blocks in the world for children to live in. Criminal gangs that control the drug and sex trade here make many people feel powerless and afraid. Valeriu was also afraid at first. He's had his tyres slashed, and been threatened and chased off many times. Some thought he was trying to disrupt the drug trade. Others were just afraid he would take their children from them.

Home visit

Valeriu goes up the stairs and knocks on a door in a dark corridor. Zana, 11, pulls open the door and says: "Hi Valeriu!"

Zana lives in the only room in the flat with her little sister Rebeca, 6, and big brother Bobo, 13. Their great-grandmother, who is almost blind, has been looking after the children since their mum ended up in prison. The flat is very neat and clean but run down and cramped. It does have electricity and running water, unlike many others in the area.

Children's club popular

At first, Valeriu had to go



Zana and her siblings get help with homework at the Alternative Education Club.

Zana misses her mum, who is in prison.



round the area and talk children like Bobo and Zana into coming to the club. He doesn't need to do that anymore. But he still visits the children at home now and then. Sometimes he discovers that a parent has a bad drug problem or has gone abroad to get some money together and left the children on their own. If that happens, he tries to find a solution.

Bobo goes to football training with Valeriu every Sunday.

"We're finally starting a girls' team," Valeriu tells Zana. "You should join!"

Valeriu talks to their grandmother too. Does she need anything? Have the trouble-makers in the building been causing any problems?

Grandma says things are quiet at the moment, but that the children miss their mum.

Helping all children living in poverty

Bobo and Zana's family are Roma, one of the poorest minority groups in Romania.



Rebeca, Bobo and Zana live with their grandmother in a one-room flat in Ferentari.

They make up less than ten percent of the population, and the term Roma actually has nothing to do with the country's name Romania. The Roma people are called Roma all around the world. The Roma have lived in Europe for almost a thousand years, but have nearly always been excluded from society, harassed and even killed just because they are born Roma. Valeriu is also Roma and has been campaigning for many years against prejudices and racism. But the important thing for him is not just helping Roma children, but all children that are living in poverty in Ferentari.

Valeriu gives back

Valeriu was one of the few Roma of his generation who studied at university, despite a difficult childhood. He left his homeland Romania and worked well-paid jobs in Europe. Some were about strengthening the rights of the Roma people. But after a few years, Valeriu had had enough. He was tired of writ-

ing lengthy reports that no one seemed to read. He couldn't stand the thought of going to another conference at a luxury hotel and listening to fancy speeches about how to help poor people. Because nothing got better for poor children like Bobo and Zana; if anything, it got worse.

"I felt guilty," says Valeriu. "I grew up like them, in extreme poverty. It was tough, I had nothing and I had to work really hard. But there were also people who helped and supported me, so I was able to have a good life. Now I have everything I need, and I felt I should do the same for other children. That I should give something back."

Valeriu moved back home and started the *Alternative Education Club* in Ferentari.

"You can't wait for someone else to change something you think is wrong. Only when you've done something yourself can you ask others to help. Anything else is hypocrisy. That's how I feel, and I hope the children in Ferentari feel the same." 🌐



In Ferentari where Valeriu is fighting for child rights, some streets and parks are full of rubbish and used needles.



Valeriu encountered racism frequently when he was growing up. In the picture at right, he is 14 years old.



Valeriu's Mother's Day card to his mum.



Valeriu grows up

Valeriu grew up in the countryside in an area where everyone was different, yet they managed to get along. He had lots of friends who looked different and spoke many languages. But when he was seven the family moved to a bigger town. Suddenly no one wanted to play with him anymore.

On the first day in our new flat, mum told me to go out and play so she could clean in peace. I saw a girl in the yard with blond curly hair who looked friendly. I asked if we could play, but she replied: 'I'm not allowed to play with gypsies because they've got lice.'

Valeriu didn't understand. He started crying and ran home to his mum. She stopped cleaning and sang him a song to cheer him up.

"It was about a brown bear who had to struggle to get along in a world full of white bears. Later, she made up her own song too, about how if you're kind and you work hard, you'll get along in life. She never let me blame any

difficulties on the fact that I was Roma. She said: 'You have to prove that you are good enough. And to be good enough, you have to be at least ten times better than all the non-Roma.'

Racist stepfather

To Valeriu's new neighbours, he wasn't just an ordinary boy, he was a "dirty gyppo kid". Even his stepfather, who wasn't Roma, used to call him gyppo kid instead of Valeriu. The word gyppo was used by many to describe people from the Roma community, often as an insult.

"My stepdad hated Roma, just like others in Romania and many other countries have done for centuries. He had all the usual prejudices,

like that Roma are dirty, lazy and thieving. In fact I never could understand why he married a Roma lady! But he liked to drink, so maybe he felt at home with the many alcoholic men in our family."

Clean and well-fed

Valeriu's mum worked hard in and outside the home, so that Valeriu and his two older stepsiblings would have a good life.

"We were poor, but we always had clean clothes and never went hungry."

When the stepdad drank, he became violent.

"He often said he was going to kill us all, but he mostly beat my mum. Sometimes she hit back, with the dustpan, or threatened him with an iron bar to make him stop. I often got between them to protect her. But we didn't stand a chance against dad, he was much bigger and stronger than we were. And there was

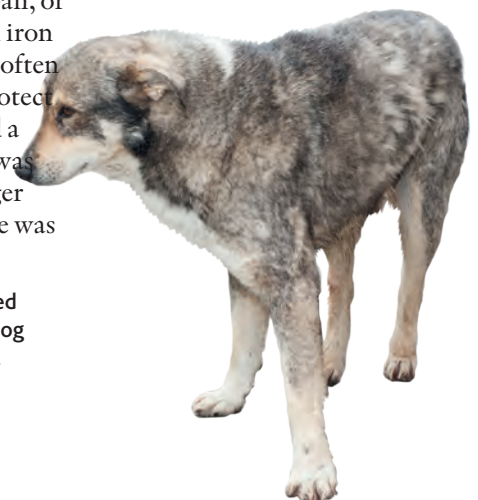
no point in complaining to the police because almost all men beat their wives and children, even the policemen! It was accepted in society. My aunt even told mum she should be grateful that he beat her, because it meant that he loved her!"

Left to own devices

Valeriu soon realised that most of the parents in his new neighbourhood didn't allow their children to play with Roma children.

"It was good in a way," says Valeriu. "I didn't have anything to do, so I wandered around and found a library. The lady who worked there didn't have any children of

Valeriu extracted an infected tooth from an abandoned dog and gained a faithful friend.



Enslaved for 500 years



The Roma migrated out of India to Europe nearly 1,000 years ago. They have been subjected to antigypsyism, racism or prejudice against Romani people, for nearly as long. The word antigypsyism describes the ancient prejudices about the Roma which have resulted in discrimination against them – being treated worse than others. Just like the Jews in Europe, the Roma were not allowed to become residents and cultivate land in the past. Instead, they were forced to constantly move. In Romania, the Roma were enslaved in the 1300s and used by the state, church and individuals. Slavery was first abolished in 1860, around the same time as in the US. World War II saw the worst organised mass

killing of the Roma in history. Half of Europe's Roma people, hundreds of thousands of children and adults, were murdered by the Nazi regime. Even today, the Roma are the most discriminated minority group in Europe. In Romania, they are blamed for almost everything that goes wrong, even though only three percent of the population are Roma and few of them have any power to influence society. Thanks to the battle being fought by Valeriu and others against antigypsyism, some things have improved. For example, new laws are in place to protect Roma children better and give them the same rights as other children to education, health care and a safe home. But it still is not enough; laws must also be followed...

her own, so she looked after me and showed me loads of great books. I read adventures, history and about other countries – and I learned a lot.”

Valeriu also made a friend – an abandoned dog.

“It was a bit bad-tempered at first, but I realised it was in pain from an inflamed tooth. I got the dog to open its mouth and managed to take out the bad tooth. After that, the dog was my faithful friend.”

When Valeriu was 12, he fell in love with a girl whose parents didn't like Roma people either.

“It was after the summer holiday, so I was even darker than usual. I remember scrubbing myself with a hard brush to try and make myself whiter, but of course it didn't help!”

Dictator falls

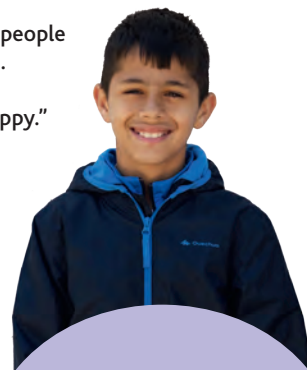
During Valeriu's childhood, Romania was ruled by a dictator who squandered the country's money on himself and his family, while the people lived in poverty. “The only good thing,” says Valeriu, “was that during the final years, the Roma were treated the same as any other Romanian, neither better nor worse.”

1989 saw revolution and free elections. But after so many years living under a dictatorship, it was difficult to establish a real democracy. The people elected politicians who promised to make everything better, but who then just continued to make themselves rich. Dirty politics.

In the end the people grew tired of dirty politics. Valeriu and hundreds of thousands of others took to the streets and

Cristian, 11

“I get so angry when people pick on you and fight. Playing football with Valeriu makes me happy.”



Daniel, 13

“My favourite subject at the Education Club is maths. I also want to learn computer programming and be better at football!”

We love the Education Club!

Rebecca, 12

“I love the Education Club because I learn new things here and get to play with friends. Valeriu and the others are kind and support us. Irina (photo) is good at helping me understand things!”





Valeriu actually prefers basketball to football, but the children in Ferentari disagree!

protested until they got what they wanted: a new election. For a period of a year, while preparations were under way for the election, a temporary, apolitical government was put in place and Valeriu was asked to work as an adviser.

“I got to work on reducing poverty, increasing gender equality and protecting children and women from violence. It was interesting to see how power works from the inside! I also saw how power changes some people. Suddenly, some felt they were better than others, even though they were exactly the same people as before.”

Two jobs

Until recently, Valeriu had two jobs. From Monday to Friday he was working in Brussels in Belgium, at the European Commission on Human Rights. Valeriu had been appointed Special

Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues. Every weekend, Valeriu went home to work at the Education Club and the sports center in Ferentari, together with his family and friends.

“None of us got paid. My salary from the European Commission was enough. We just did what we could,” says Valeriu.

Dreams for the future

Now Valeriu has decided to give up his well-paid position and come back home, to work full time on what he feels most strongly about.

“I will continue my work with the children in Ferentari. I also want to start a company, because the children who grow up here need somewhere to work. I’ve got lots of ideas that I want to make a reality together with the children in Ferentari.”

What does Valeriu do?

Valeriu and his network of friends, volunteers and organisations work with the following initiatives:

- The *Alternative Education Club* in Ferentari, which helps hundreds of children every year. The children get help to cope with school and get to do lots of different activities: sport, dance, drama, music and other creative workshops. They also learn about their rights, health and democracy, and they go on trips and study visits.
- The poorest children are given shoes, clothes and sometimes food.
- Children who can’t live at home have the chance to move to decent foster homes, and are later reunited with their families if, and when possible.
- Children who take drugs and/or are exploited and forced to sell drugs or sex are given support to leave this life and have the childhood to which they are entitled.
- Valeriu also campaigns for the introduction of laws and systems that protect children from violence, discrimination and hate crimes, and to strengthen their rights and opportunities.

We love the Education Club!



Andrea, 10

“I like learning to dance. When I’m older, I want to be a dancer and teach other children to be good dancers.”



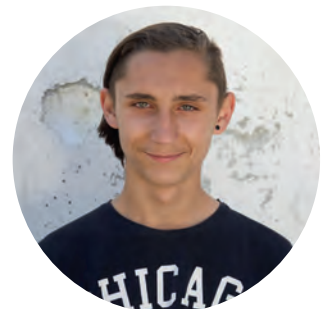
Bianca, 12

“Our teachers at the Education Club are like really good friends or extra parents!”



Nicoleta, 13

“I’ve been going to the Education Club since I was little, it’s helped me a lot. Now I also help the younger children.”



Marian, 15

“The thing I hate most is when boys fight and when it snows! My favourite is playing football. When I’m older, I want to be a chef or a waiter.”



The children from Ferentari helped out with the campaign against racism. Bobo, 13, got to meet his football heroes.



Cleaning up football



When Valeriu launched a campaign against racism in football, hate crime cases dropped from 80 a week to zero!

It's time for the match at Romania's biggest football stadium, and 30,000 spectators are sitting in the stands. Several million watch the match on TV. As usual, one team's supporters sing chants during the match, like 'We've always hated gypsos', and they wave banners that say: 'Death to gypsos'. Tens of thousands in the crowd sing along. Valeriu wonders if they ever think about how it really feels for Roma children who love football. He decides to do something to tackle racism in the world of football.

Football against racism

It's been many years now since Valeriu started the campaign Racism Breaks the Game. He got both the

Romanian and European football associations on board. All major football matches started with a short film against racism and antiziganism (discrimination against Roma). Sometimes children from Ferentari and other ghettos got to go out on the pitch with the players.

"I was nervous, but it was fun," recalls Bobo, 13, who got to shake hands with famous players and wave to tens of thousands of spectators at one match.

Activities were also organised at sports clubs and at children's and young people's matches to tackle racism and antiziganism. Hate crimes in football have plummeted from 80 a week, to zero. Successful football players

from the Roma community no longer keep their background secret like they used to, to avoid being attacked and subjected to hate crimes.

Football against violence

Now Valeriu and his friends are continuing with the campaign.

"We want to fight against racism and antiziganism, but also domestic violence, which affects women and children. Many of the men who beat their families are at the football stadiums, on the pitch and in the stands." 🌐



At football matches in Romania, the spectators used to shout racist chants about Roma, until Valeriu launched his *Racism Breaks the Game* campaign.



On an old banner, football supporters paid tribute to a mass murderer who killed many Roma.



The children of ghost alley

Toto, 10, skilfully picks his way between the piles of rubbish on the street and jumps over puddles and broken bottles. He gives the grey, starved-looking people standing and sitting on the street a wide berth. They look a bit like ghosts, and many often call Toto's street 'alley of the dead'.

Toto knows that when adults drink and take drugs, they can get angry and afraid over nothing. It's best to keep your distance. His stairwell is dark because all the bulbs are broken. Water drips from the roof. The walls are covered in graffiti, and in the corners there are used needles discarded by drug users. There are no handrails to hold onto. Someone has unscrewed them long ago and sold them for scrap.

Cleaning for mum

When Toto opens the door to his flat, his two sisters are cleaning. Andrea, 13, is wiping a table and Ana, 16, is scrubbing stains on the wall.

"When mum returns, she should find the house cleaned so that we can start again from scratch," says Andrea, rubbing harder.

"When's mum coming back, Andrea?" asks Toto.

"None of your business," says Andrea. She sounds angry, but really she's sad. Mum has been in prison for over four years and she has three more years to serve. She's asked to be released early and is waiting to hear from the prison authority.

"I'm hungry," complains Toto.

"I'll make soup", says Ana and explains that she can't at the moment because she doesn't have a hotplate.

Makes a hotplate

After a while, Toto's Uncle Sile arrives carrying a large white block of plaster that he puts on the floor.

"I'm starving!" whines Toto.

"Easy, easy," replies Ana.

Uncle Sile takes out a knife and starts cutting deep slots in a zigzag pattern on the top of the white block.

"I'll fall asleep asleep by the time you make this soup," says Toto. He watches as Uncle Sile pokes a coil into the slots and then plugs one end of the coil into a wall socket. Soon, the coil in the white block starts to glow a hot orange-red. The hotplate is ready and Sile places a saucepan on top.

Takes drugs

While Ana stirs the soup, the door opens and several young men enter the room.

"I'm not having junkies in the house anymore," shouts Ana angrily, but no one listens. Everyone knows that their mum is in prison and

that the children are living on their own. The men sit on the floor and on the sofa and start filling their needles with drugs. Uncle Sile does too.

"Relax. I can give you some," says a teenage boy to Ana. She shakes her head.

"Leave me alone."

Toto sits on the sofa and watches as the older boy sticks a needle in the crook of his arm and leans back. When his eyelids start flickering, Toto

knows the drug has begun to work. Ana has taken drugs too before, but she's trying to stop now.

Andrea has gone out, but now she comes back and gets upset at the sight of all the people.

"God help us make sure you all go to prison," she says.

Andrea leaves the flat while Toto curls up on the sofa and falls asleep.



Toto's uncle makes a simple hotplate in the flat. There is no running water or a toilet.



Many people used Toto's flat to take drugs, because the children were living there without any adults.



Toto was about the same age as this boy when he first met Valeriu.

Stays in prison

According to Romanian law, Toto's mum can be released after serving two-thirds of her sentence, but in prison they don't think she regrets what she did enough. She has to stay in for longer.

Most people sentenced to prison for selling drugs are themselves drug addicts, women and teenagers. They only earn a little money which goes to food for the day and

the drugs they take themselves. The criminal gangs that make the drugs and earn millions never seem to get caught. Instead they build beautiful houses and buy expensive cars. Some of the money is spent on bribing the police and politicians, so they can go about their business without being disturbed. Lots of people in Ferentari have a good idea who's running the drug trade, but they wouldn't

dream of snitching to the police. It would put their lives and the lives of their children in danger.

Meets Valeriu

One day Toto's cousin says: "Come and play football." Toto has heard that a man is organizing football training in the sports hall next to school, but he's never plucked up the courage to go.

Valeriu is a man in a woolly

hat and tracksuit. He takes one look at Toto's plastic slippers and quickly digs out a pair of football boots for him from a huge pile of shoes on the floor.

Toto starts going to football practice every week. He gets a top and tracksuit bottoms to play in too. After a while, Valeriu asks if he'd like to come to homework help too, at what is known as the *Alternative Education Club*.





When Toto starts going to football training, he only has a pair of plastic slippers to play in, but Valeriu gives him real football boots and a tracksuit.



Toto at the age of 10.

The council has stopped collecting rubbish in Ferentari, and the families have nowhere to get rid of their rubbish. Some of the adults tried to clean up at first, but now everyone has given up. The rubbish attracts rats, which spread disease.



Toto doesn't want to at first. He's never been to school and he's ashamed that he can neither read nor write. He can only count to nine, although he's ten years old. But in the end he goes and Andrea joins him.

Different kind of school

Valeriu and his friends borrow a classroom at the school in Ferentari in the afternoons and on weekends. A colourful sign on the door that says *'Alternative Education Club'*. They've made it look nice inside, with pictures on the walls and paper chains hanging from the ceiling. Every week, Valeriu's friends from the city come to help the children learn to read, write and count. Some are teachers, but most of them have other jobs. Some are lawyers, bus drivers, IT technicians or nurses. Before they came to the club, most of them didn't know anything about Ferentari or the poverty here. Some are so

shocked they never come back. But most of them return, week after week.

"It feels like we're a family," says Toto after a while to Valeriu.

At the Club, the children also get to draw, play music and do drama. A dancer from a famous street dance crew teaches them hip-hop styles like locking and popping. It's hard to keep up at first, but Toto works really hard, both at home and during the dance sessions. While the others lose the tempo, Toto listens to the beats and in the end can copy the teacher's movements perfectly.

Starts school

Toto starts school as well, but he is often late to class. Ana is back on drugs, so Andrea doesn't want to stay at home. She sleeps over at friends' houses and Toto often lies awake at night because he feels lonely and afraid.

"Sorry for being late, miss,"

he says when he arrives at the classroom one morning.

The teacher is used to it and asks how he is doing.

"I couldn't get up. . . I was dead tired, miss . . . I didn't sleep at all."

Before Valeriu and the Education Club started working at the school, most teachers knew nothing about the children's lives in Ferentari. When they turned up late or fell asleep during lessons, they were told off and punished. Many children left school because they were so unhappy. But now Valeriu explains the situation to the teachers and they understand that the children try to do their best. Toto's teacher pats him on the arm and gives him a piece of paper with clocks, asking him to write the time they show under each one.

"You work it out," she says kindly. "Don't rush this time."

Police take Ana

Toto is at school when the police turn up at his home and bang on the door. They shout:

"Police! Open up!" Then they break down the door and rush in.

"Everybody get down! Down!"

Ana and the others throw themselves down on the floor. The police put handcuffs on them, shove them down the stairs and into a car outside.

When Andrea comes home, a man is sitting inside on his own.

"Your sister got arrested," he says.

Andrea and Toto are now left on their own. Ana has to stay in prison for a while. The police try to get her to say she has sold drugs but she refuses. Late one evening, she is released and comes home.

"Will you start doing drugs again?" asks Andrea anxiously. Toto gives Ana a hug.

"Welcome back, Ana," he says, and suddenly starts cry-



Toto and his sister Andrea don't like it at the children's home at first, but after a while they feel more at home.



At the *Alternative Education Club*, Toto learns to read and write for the first time.



When Toto's big sister Ana, 17, gets sick, she doesn't have the energy to either clean or look after herself.



Toto, 17

- Favourite things:** Drama and making films.
- Worst things:** Racism. Injustice.
- Misses:** My family.
- Trusts:** My friends.
- Sad:** When I miss my family.
- Dream job:** Actor.
- Looks up to:** Valeriu. He's like a dad to all of us.

ing. "How did you get out?"

"Stop crying. . . I won't do drugs anymore," says Ana. She promises that no one will take drugs in the flat again, and that she will take care of Toto. She looks tired and her clothes are hanging off her skinny body.

"Why have you lost so much weight?" asks Andrea.

"I eat what I can," is Ana's curt response.

Dreams of a job

Ana wants to work as a chef and gets help from the Education Club to apply for a place on a professional course. She gets an interview and the woman from the school asks how old she is.

"17."

"You're underage, we need one of your parents to be present."

"My mum's in jail."

"I see. And your father?"

"He doesn't care about me," says Ana, who hasn't had any contact with her dad.

"To take this course you need a parent's consent, OK," says the woman apologetically.

Ana goes home, sad and disappointed. Soon she starts taking drugs again.

Moving to a children's home

Valeriu thinks it's too dangerous for Toto and Andrea to live at home any longer, and that they should move to the children's home in Ferentari. Andrea doesn't want to. She remembers the last time she and Ana lived in a children's home, before Toto was born. She felt awful that mum didn't want them anymore. It was Uncle Sile who got mum to take them back home.

When Andrea talks to her teacher at the Education Club about it, she starts crying. Crying won't solve anything, says the teacher.

"Be strong. Be stubborn. That's how our lives work. Do you understand?"

"I do," says Andrea, and gets a big hug from the teacher.

Andrea and Toto move to the children's home. It is run down and there are lots of rules, but they get food every day and no one takes drugs or shouts at them. After a while, Toto starts to feel at home. Ana comes and visits sometimes. She borrows the shower and changes her clothes. Every time she looks thinner and more tired.

Ana is sick

When Ana suddenly stops visiting the children's home, Andrea goes to the flat, which is dirty and untidy. Ana doesn't have the energy to do anything. She just lies in bed. She cries and says her siblings have abandoned her.

"We left because we couldn't live like this anymore. . . ." explains Andrea. She reminds Ana that when she came out of prison she promised to start school and work.

"None of that happened. Don't you want to go the hospital at least?"

Ana finally goes to the children's home with Andrea. She talks to an adviser there, and Andrea listens to them behind the door. The adviser asks Ana when she started taking drugs.

"I was 13," she replies.

After they talk some more, the adviser rustles her papers and says:

"Your test results came back. And unfortunately you are HIV positive."

Andrea is sad, but not surprised. Toto is too young to understand, but she has suspected for a long time that Ana was sick. HIV spreads easily when drug abusers share needles. HIV is not fatal. There is effective treatment available and it helps to lead a healthy life. But life is so hard in Ferentari that HIV often quickly develops into the deadly illness AIDS.

Toto competes

The dance teacher at the club has entered Toto into a big hip-hop dance competition.





Toto is making his own film about life in Ferentari.



The poster for the movie about Toto's life, *Toto and His Sisters*, hangs on the wall at home.

➤ The judges come from Italy, Denmark and the US. Toto is nervous and fiddles with the number attached to one of his trouser legs, 227. Suddenly they call him from the stage: "Time for the last dancer in the popping final, number 227!"

The spotlights shine right into Toto's eyes. He can't see the audience, but he knows that Valeriu, the dance teacher and his friends are there. The music starts, and Toto moves with short, rolling movements. He tightens and relaxes his muscles, so it looks like his body is shaking from electric shocks. And he wins a prize – second place! His friends cheer while Toto stands on the podium and gets a medal round his neck.

"Well done, kid! You're a born champion, hear me?" says the dance teacher after-

wards. "You're the best. Don't you forget it . . ."

Keen to help others

Toto is now 17. He and Andrea stayed on at school. Ana is still struggling with her illness. Mum is out of prison, but they rarely meet. Toto lives in a group home in Ferentari with six other boys who can't live with their families either.

"It's OK here," he says. "But I miss my family sometimes and then I get sad."

There's a poster on the wall for the film *Toto and His Sisters*. It's about Toto's life in Ferentari and was made by a famous film director with the help of Valeriu and others from the *Alternative Education Club*.

"At first it was weird having someone sitting in a corner filming everything we did, but

after a while I didn't think about it anymore."

Toto and His Sisters has been shown at film festivals all over the world and has won many awards and rave reviews.

"It feels strange to sit in a dark cinema and hear people crying when they see bits of my life. It made me understand more about what I've been through. Afterwards, people often ask questions and ask for my autograph. Then I usually ask them to write their names too and a message on my shirt, as a memento. I've got three shirts like that at home now, covered in messages!"

Own film

Toto is now making his own film about Ferentari.

"People think that all the people who live in Ferentari are thieves, that we're too lazy to work, that we only want to

take drugs and like living surrounded by dirt and rubbish. But it's not true. Of course drug users want to stop, but it's really hard. People do want things to be clean and tidy, but there's nowhere to get rid of the rubbish. In the end they just give up."

Toto says that most people want to work, but that no one wants to employ people who live in Ferentari.

"It's happened to my friends, even to those that left school with top grades. It's especially hard if you're dark, because there's a lot of racism aimed at us Roma."

Toto thinks people should visit Ferentari and see how it is with their own eyes.

"Talk to us instead of listening to lies and prejudice. We're people just like you." 🌐

Toto still dances, but mostly for fun. Today he's more interested in acting, drama and making films.





Toto and his friends in the Playhood theatre group.



Many people recognise Toto at the theatre festivals from the film, and ask for autographs. Then he asks them to write a message on his shirt as a memento. He has three full shirts at home now!



Playhood's new play *Home* premiered at Romania's biggest theatre festival.

Theatre for life

When Toto and his friends premiere his new play at Romania's biggest annual theatre festival, people stand up in the auditorium and applaud. Some are wiping tears from their eyes.

Toto started doing drama with other youngsters at the *Alternative Education Club* in Ferentari. With the help of Ionut, a professional actor, they started writing their own plays inspired by their lives in Ferentari. Last year they formed the theatre group *Playhood*.

"The new play is called *Home*," says Toto. It's about four teenagers at a juvenile detention centre.

In a series of brief scenes, the play tells us how the boys end-

ed up in prison. It's about poverty, parents unable to take care of them, lack of education and, of course, silly mistakes and making the wrong choices.

"It's also about dreams," says Toto. "About the fact that everyone has dreams that they're trying to achieve." The leader Ionut nods and says that the play shows how important it is to accept and trust one another. That lots of people have to work together to achieve their goals, even if the odds are against them.

Ionut doesn't come from Ferentari himself. He often encounters prejudice about the area and the young people living there.

"Some people ask me: 'How can you work with those people?' But most are positive, although they are surprised when they see teenagers acting out scenes about drugs, teenage pregnancies, racism and discrimination. Sometimes they ask whether the young people can really understand such things.

We know they do."

Importance of humour

"We tackle lots of difficult things, but we always use humour too," says Toto. "We're teenagers after all, so it shouldn't be too serious. I think people learn a lot from watching our plays. I can also see that they're happy for our sake, and their happiness and compassion makes me happy too." 🌐





In other parts of the city of Bucharest, it's quite common to see graffiti containing bad words and prejudices aimed at Roma, for example. But in Ferentari, the children have painted their own graffiti wall with hearts and bright colours.

There aren't many places to play in Ferentari. Many areas of the neighbourhood have been taken over by homeless people and drug users. But the children still manage to find ways of having fun and getting some exercise.

Street games

French skipping

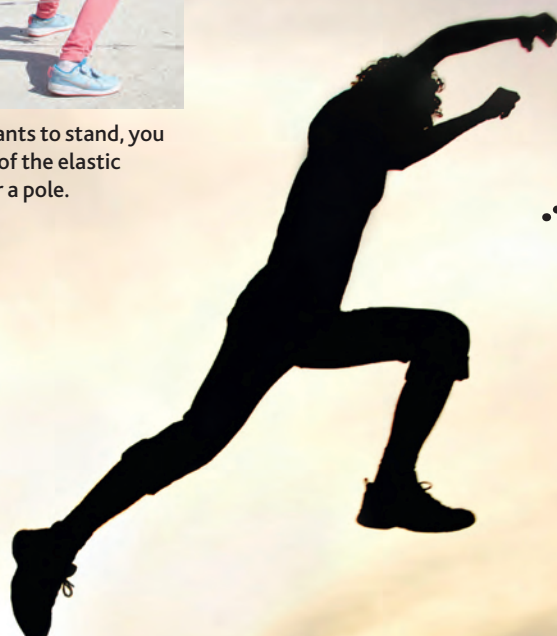
"All you need for French skipping is some elastic and bouncy feet," explains Zana, 12. Tie the elastic to make a ring. Two people stand inside and stretch the elastic round their legs or body. The person whose go it is jumps in and out in different ways. If you manage to do a movement, the elastic is moved higher up, for example from the knees to the waist, or just under the armpits.



The elastic is moved higher and higher every time you do a movement. The higher it goes, the harder it gets of course!



Tip! If no one wants to stand, you can tie one end of the elastic round a fence or a pole.



What's parkour?

The parkour and freerunning movement started in a suburb of Paris in France, and quickly became popular in high-rise areas where children and young people didn't have access to nice play areas or big gymnasiums with advanced equipment. Just like skateboarders, who use the street environment, people who do parkour move freely around the city jungle. They do tricks, run and jump on roofs and park benches, asphalt and high walls. The idea is to get about as efficiently, smoothly and quickly as possible, negotiating obstacles and solving problems on the way. Parkour and freerunning is now practised all over the world. Many combine it with acrobatics, climbing and balance training. Give it a go, but be careful!



Ionut grew up in Ferentari.
"The worst thing is when people in the area get into fights."



Asphalt as a gym floor

Ionut, 18, has been doing parkour and acrobatics for several years together with his friends in Ferentari.

"We learn from one another and by watching YouTube videos," he says. "Sometimes we film ourselves using our mobiles and upload tricks, so others can see what we're up to."

Ionut likes parkour and acrobatics, but in the future he would rather be a singer, perhaps a big star like Justin Bieber.

"I'm happiest when I'm singing," he says.



Your body is your equipment in Ferentari, which doesn't have any advanced gymnasiums.



"It takes time to learn stuff."
You have to expect to get it wrong loads of times!"

Wilderness between the high-rises

Rica, 13, was born and grew up in a wild, green area, criss-crossed by narrow rivers, just outside the city of Bucharest.

Long before Rica was born, his dad Gica left the poverty of rural Romania and moved to Bucharest with his horse and cart. As he was entering the city, he noticed an area of wilderness that lay hidden behind the grey concrete. He built a little house for his family and moved in.

City expands

As the city grew, the grey high-rises came closer. Suddenly there was rubbish in the water and the grass. Old tyres, plastic bags, cardboard boxes and cans, even a fridge. Many blamed the rubbish on the Roma families that were living in the park. But actually it was the people in the city who thought it was convenient to chuck their rubbish in the area of wilderness.

Area becomes a park

One day, the area was discovered by a group of environmental activists. They are

overjoyed to find that 100 different species of birds and animals, including turtles and otters, were living so close to the city. But the area was under threat from poaching, illegal fishing and rubbish. After four years, the environmental activists managed to get the Romanian government to turn the area into a protected park. Lots of people now wanted the Roma families to move out. Gica refused.

"I'll never leave my home," he said.

In the end, the environmental activists realised that Gica could help them and they made him a forest warden. He is the only one who can live in the park now, and protect the animals and their natural habitat.

"Mum and all the children and grand children sleep in a flat in town," explains Rica. "But we visit dad every day. When I'm there, I miss things like running water and heating. But in town I miss the peace and tranquillity of nature." 🌍

9:00 a.m Good morning!

"We get up much earlier on school days, but on the weekend we get a lie-in," says Rica. His big sister never got to go to school. She got married and had children when she was a teenager.

"Things are different now," she says. "My daughter and my younger siblings will go to school first."



9:30 a.m To Ferentari

Today it's homework help and then football at the Alternative Education Club in Ferentari.



Artificial area gone wild

It was Romania's former dictator Ceaușescu who wanted to build an artificial lake in the area where the park is now located. The dictator was killed in the 1989 revolution, and the half-finished project was forgotten. But the water spread of its own accord and turned into a vast water delta. Wild animals were drawn here, and rare plants and

flowers began to grow. Some businessmen wanted to build high-rise flats and factories on the land. Some say that people set fire to the forest to destroy the area so they could build. But the wilderness was turned into a protected park instead.



Rica, 13

Lives in: A flat in Bucharest and in Vacaresti Park.

Likes: Football and music.

Loves: My family, our dogs and cats.

Wants to be: A forest warden like dad.





10.00 a.m Homework help

"When we first started coming to the Club, we'd never been to school before," says Rica. "Valeriu and the other adults did all they could to teach us to read and write, but it was difficult. Now it's going better. I learn something new every day."

1:00 p.m Time for football

"After homework help, everyone runs to the sports hall. There's football training for girls and boys."



3:00 p.m To the wilderness

Rica and his siblings take the bus and walk through the city to get to the wilderness. The last part of the journey is by the family's boat. It's got caught up in the reeds!



4:00 p.m Finally home

The house that Rica's dad built all those years ago has been patched up and fixed many times.



Still rubbish lying around

After all the years Bucharest's inhabitants spent throwing their rubbish in the park, it's going to take a long time to clean up. But Rica's mum does what she can.





4:30 p.m Fetching water

The park has a well with clean water. Rica's younger brothers fetch water for Gica, who is getting older.



5:00 p.m Checking the pigeons

Rica sees to his pigeons and feeds them corn and sunflower seeds. He and his dad have some 60 pigeons, and sometimes they let them out. "They always come back, unless they get caught by a hawk."



"We have three dogs and ten cats. Some of them have been best friends since they were little. I miss our dog Leo, who was run over by a car when he ran out of the park."

The rabbit doesn't like being picked up!



5:30 p.m Chopping wood

Rica fixes wood for dad's fire, so he can keep warm at night.



6:30 p.m Evening football game

Valeriu comes to visit in the park and plays an evening game of football.



8:00 p.m TV time

When Rica gets back into town, he puts on the TV, although he prefers listening to music. Soon it's bedtime, and then he longs for the silence of the wilderness.



Dario longs for home

Dario was four when he moved to a children's home for the first time. At the time, his family was living in a little wooden shack built right on the pavement, with no heating, toilet or running water.

Dario's mum tried to look after her children, clean and make the place look nice. But it was difficult when nine people were squashed together in one room. Dario's dad was no help. He drank, took drugs and even beat his mum. Sometimes rats, spiders and other animals got in through cracks in the walls and roof. In the end, the youngest children had to move into a state children's home in Ferentari: a grey, square building behind a high fence.

"It was horrible," recalls Dario. "We never got to go out and play. It felt like a prison. Everyone was angry, particularly one woman with glasses.

She was always shouting at me when I ran in the corridor or talked too loudly. I was really scared of her. Some of the children escaped, climbed over the fence and disappeared. But I didn't dare."

Wanted to go home

Dario missed his mum and cried every day.

"I was always asking when mum would pick me up, and every day the adults at the children's home said: 'She's coming tomorrow'. They lied to stop me crying, but it would have been better if they'd told me the truth. I just got more disappointed and sad."

Sometimes Dario's mum visited the children's home

with sweets and biscuits.

"She knew how horrible it was and didn't want to leave us there. She used to ask to borrow the shower, because we didn't have a bathroom at home."

After a while, Dario and his siblings were moved to another children's home in

Ferentari, which was more of a daycare centre. It meant the children could go home sometimes, like on weekends and holidays.

The state children's home in Ferentari is surrounded by high fencing.





Dario, 12

Lives in: A children's home in Ferentari.
Loves: My family. My dog Poofy.
Likes: School, drawing, football, drama.
Misses: My mum.
Sad: When I see all the abandoned dogs in Ferentari.
Looks up to: Valeriu. He has a big heart.

“It was a thousand times better,” says Dario. “The adults there were kinder and we were allowed to play out in the yard. Sometimes I took food from there and gave it to mum.”

The club helps

When Dario started school, he went to the *Alternative Education Club* every afternoon and on weekends. It was there that he met Valeriu, who helped him with his homework and took him to football training.

“The adults at the Education Club gave us lots of time and were good at explaining things. It helped me catch up in school. I even won a prize for being one of the best pupils in the class! But suddenly my hearing got bad. I had always suffered from ear infections since I was little. Sometimes there was gooey yellow stuff coming out of my ear. Valeriu took me to the doctor, who said I might go deaf.”

Lots of children in Ferentari

On the weekends, Dario sometimes stays with his sister Lacrima and her children.

“I'd like to live here all the time, but they only have a small place so there wouldn't be room.”

get sick from dirty water and infections. Some have even lost their hearing or their sight because of illnesses that could easily have been treated with medicine. But many parents are afraid that the authorities will take their children from them if they ask for help. It's happened to several families. Some doctors also demand extra payment on top of the usual fee for medicine and health care, even though it's illegal to do that. Parents from Ferentari are poor and can't afford to pay any extra.

When Dario started complaining about his hearing at the Education Club, Valeriu



Dario gets help with his homework at the *Alternative Education Club* and is now one of the best pupils in the class.



Football is the best thing, according to Dario. His favourite player is called Messi.

realised they needed to act fast. Dario finally got to see a doctor and after a lot of nagging from Valeriu, the hospital agreed to operate. His hearing was saved.

“I managed to get it done because I happen to know the right people and I know how to go about things,” says Valeriu. “If Dario’s mum had tried to get him an operation, it would never have happened. It makes me angry that families in Ferentari don’t get the same care and help as others.”

Mum falls ill

One day when mum came to visit the children’s home she looked unusually grey and thin.

“Mum said she was ill and couldn’t come and visit as often. She’d put a scarf round her head, because her hair had started falling out,” says Dario. “By the time the family had a party together on New Year’s Eve, she’d lost all her hair. But she was still happy, because everyone was there together, listening to music and having fun. I didn’t sleep a wink that night!”

A few weeks later, Dario was on his way to the children’s home from football training.

“It had been a good session and I was happy. When I went passed the carwash where my dad works, he saw me and waved for me to come over.

‘Your mum is dead’, he said. I was so sad. I wish I’d found out in a better way.”

Wishes for a time machine

“I wish I had a time machine, so I could go back and make everything better. Not just in Ferentari, but in the whole world. If I got to decide, no child would have to live at a children’s home. They’d be with their families instead. I would get rid of all the rubbish and drugs, so people would be nicer to one another. Maybe I can do that when I’m older and do the same thing that Valeriu does, to make life better for children.”



Dario’s favourite toy is called Kendama and it comes from Japan. It was invented hundreds of years ago in Japan and consists of a wooden ball on the end of a string on a stick with three cups and a spike. The aim of the game is to catch the wooden ball on the spike or in one of the cups. After lots of practice, Dario is now an expert!



District making children ill

Dario was in danger of losing his hearing after suffering from lots of untreated ear infections. Many of Ferentari’s children get very ill because they are undernourished and get lots of infections, which are made worse by the piles of rubbish and dirty wastewater on the streets. A lot of the children have a constant cough and difficulty breathing because of asthma and the lung disease tuberculosis. Others accidentally prick themselves on needles discarded by drug abusers, and they become infected with hepatitis or HIV. Ferentari used to have health centres, but they closed a long time ago and it’s a long way to the nearest doctor’s surgery. Many parents don’t ask for help because they’re afraid that the authorities will take their children away. It’s happened to several families. And most don’t know that children in Romania are entitled to free health care. Some doctors try to cheat people and demand money for treatment. Valeriu and the *Alternative Education Club* explain to the families in Ferentari that they are entitled to health care and medical treatment, and give them information about what they can do to stay healthy. But Valeriu says it’s not enough, because the environment in Ferentari is dangerous for the health of both children and adults.

