

#Saniting, the power of the communities on your way back to emotional balance

Nicoleta Bunduc^{1, +}

¹ #Saniting, Romania

Abstract. *This article is meant to emphasize how the power of the communities can help people in need re-establish their emotional balance and how volunteering projects can be catalysts for this cause. Our volunteering project, #Saniting, has the role to raise awareness and funds in order to build an emotional balance support center in Iasi, Romania. The project has presented until now the real stories of 16 people who have faced hard times and changes in their lives and managed to re-establish their emotional balance. These stories underlined the idea that people are social beings who need the company of others, friends or specialists in mental health, especially in times of sorrow. The main characters of these stories opened up their hearts, letting me and my colleague, Oana Nechifor, videotape them and taking pictures of them, as they told us what they have been through and how they have managed to continue with their lives. Many of them started Non-Governmental Organizations, helping other people to face similar situations. Ten of these stories were published in a book, many of the main characters were present at the release event and they immediately got to like and know each other, so a Facebook group was created and they have kept in touch since there. The project had the honor to receive the Award **Social Project of the Year 2018** during a Volunteer Gala organized in Iasi, Romania.*

Keywords: saniting, communities, emotional balance, storytelling.

JEL Codes: D83, I10, I31, L31, M14.

1. Introduction

#Saniting started in 27th of October, 2017, as a desire to intertwine various life experiences through storytelling and to create a community and an Emotional Balance Support Center. We started looking for people who have faced situations like paralysis after an accident, disabilities, cancer, divorce, loss of a child or a parent, alcoholism, emotional or physical abandonment, fostering, parenting a child with autism, bankruptcy, single parenting, immigration, and others.

We have presented them the idea of the project and we have invited them to participate and to tell us their stories, so other people who are having or will have a similar hard time could learn from their experience. The project underlines the idea that we need each other in order to carry on with our lives, and that in times as these people lack money and self-confidence, so it is even harder for them to re-establish an emotional balance. An Emotional Support Center instead, could offer free-of-charge support groups,

⁺ Nicoleta Bunduc is Founder of #Saniting project, Iasi, Romania. Author of “10 povești: #Saniting” (“10 stories: #Saniting” in English translation). Website: www.saniting.com (Romanian version), www.en.saniting.com (English version). Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/sanitingproject/> Telephone: +40 753 783 334 E-mail address: nicoletabunduc@yahoo.com

workshops, and gatherings, and all these would ease the pain, the loneliness and the confusion which we often feel when we are having hard times.

We, meaning myself and my friend and colleague, Oana Nechifor, responsible for the photo-video part, have created a website for this project, www.saniting.com and an English version of it, www.en.saniting.com, we have interviewed 16 people until now, and we have written the stories and published them multimedia on the website.

Finally, we published ten of these stories into a book. We continue the project by publishing one story every month and planning efficient methods of fundraising for the Emotional Support Center.

The website reached by far 15,000 unique visitors, a quarter of them being from outside the country.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Background research

The research was the first step we took in order to publish the stories we were keen on. We have started to tell our friends and family about our project, we have written to psychologists, psychiatrists, and different Non-Governmental Organizations and on different social media pages, groups and accounts, and asked for recommendations, if somebody knew people whose life stories would be a match for our project and if they could put us in touch.

Also, we directly asked our friends or acquaintances who have been through hard times to participate in our project. We contacted the people we already knew and the ones who were recommended to us via email, telephone, social media pages or personal accounts, blogs or we asked them to participate face to face, depending on the case.

In order to make sure that they are the right people for our project, we researched their background, their social media accounts or pages, their appearances on the Internet, searching by their name on Google, their blogs, the reviews people have written about them, the way they have evolved since they faced the sorrow. We proposed to those we considered to be appropriate to be part of our project and once they accepted to give us an interview, we moved further to step number two, arranging the interviews.

2.2. Setting up the interviews

A part of the interviews took place in libraries, restaurants, offices, clinics, schools and at the interviewee's home. We agreed on a date and time and we asked for permission to come and record in those places. We used a Canon 6D DSLR, with a 35 mm lens, and the sound was recorded with a lavalier microphone on a Tascam recorder, depending on the place where we took the interview.

Other interviews took place online, through Zoom meetings, an application that allowed us not only to see and hear each other but also to record the interview and to download it at the end. We chose this method since the interviewees were from different cities of Romania, at a large distance, and we could not meet them in person. We asked them when we could meet online and we installed the application prior to the interview, so the interviewees could get used to it.

2.3. Planning the questions

After the research phase and setting up the interviews, we planned a set of questions we considered to be essential, but we have also listened carefully to what the interviewees had to say and we added questions or changed one of those planned, depending on their answers.

2.4. Conducting the interviews

At the beginning of the interviews we arranged the camera in a fixed position and we asked the interviewees to look at us, and not at the camera. In this way they would not be intimidated by the camera, they could eventually forget about it and they would have the experience of a dialogue with an open heart, more than the one of an interview.

During our meetings we followed a chronological timeline, starting with questions about their childhood and returning to the present, so we could get a clearer idea of the way their experiences have shaped them and why today their stories could be inspirational for other people.

At the end of each interview, we wrote down a draft of the reportage that we would eventually publish, to create the red line and to emphasize the value of the story, while we still had it fresh in our minds.

2.5. Creating and publishing the multimedia reportages

After taking the interviews, we devised the reportages in a multimedia form, meaning they were a mix of written information, video inserts and photos that we took or received from the personal archives of the interviewees.

We chose to subtitle the video inserts directly in English since the stories were translated from Romanian into English and published also in the English version on the website. We also decided to do this because most of our public knows English, so should they be unable to listen at that very moment to what the interviewees were saying in the video inserts, they would at least be able to read the subtitle.

The video inserts were uploaded on the project's YouTube channel and the links were embedded in the reportages on the website, while the photos were uploaded directly on the website. We used WordPress to publish our reportages and we enabled on the website the usual functions such as "Comment", "Like" and "Share" below the reportages.

After publishing the articles, we sent the links to the interviewees, so they could see the result of our meetings and forward the stories on their social media accounts or pages or on their websites or blogs.

2.6. Storytelling techniques

Our reportages are in the literary journalism style, a nonfiction form that combines narrative techniques with factual reporting and underlines the persona. The whole story is a sort of biography only that it is presented from the narrator's point of view.

The structure of the articles was standard, formed by chapeau (a type of introductions that summarizes the most essential information about the main character of the story), content (following the chronological timeline) and conclusion (returning to the present).

We presented the main characters' experiences, what they learned from there and how the times of sorrow shaped them into new people, some of them being able to enjoy life again, even if in a different way than before. People now willing to live, despite the fact that once some of them only wanted to die, and were no longer able to see at that point the meaning of their lives.

Moreover, we alternated the narration with the quotation, in such a way that readers would be capable of focusing on the main characters, and not on the narrator, and to extract their own life lessons.

3. Book release

3.1. Book release in Iasi, Romania

The book entitled "10 povesti: #Saniting" ("10 stories: #Saniting" in English translation) was released in Iasi, the second largest city in Romania, on 5th of October 2018, at the Palace of Culture, in the presence of

Cezar Elisei, director of the Adenium Publishing House, seven of the people whose stories were published in the book, from three cities of Romania, and the public. I and my colleague, Oana Nechifor, told them how this project changed us in the past year, how we learned from their stories different life lessons and how joyful we are that through this project a community was created. In this community, we found people who were glad to tell us their stories, but also people who read these stories and who appreciated our volunteering project. The event was more like a support group gathering than a book release, although that was the very first time we were all in the same room. And that was once more a proof that stories have the power of healing and that being together in different painful situations can save our lives.

3.2. Book release in Bucharest, Romania

The book was also released on 2nd November 2018 in Bucharest, the capital of Romania, at the Artera Art Gallery, in the presence of Cristina Bobe, the owner of the gallery, of four of the main characters and the public. Although it was the second event, we felt the same emotions and excitement as the first time. And we were more than thrilled to see how happy were the four main characters to see each other again and to tell to the public why they accepted to be part of this project and what were the most important steps in their emotional recovery. The speeches were recorded by Olivian Breda and were published on #Saniting's Youtube channel.

3.3. Ten inspirational stories: reviews

Mircea Serediuc – Meeting life at the last floor – Mircea's story, also known as Tzury, is that of an emotionally abandoned child who traveled inside and outside his heart so that he might learn who he really is. Tzury was well raised by his parents, only that he felt the lack of their presence a lot, being raised by his grandparents in his early childhood. He lost his father after he got sick and it turned out his father was in huge trouble. He let Tzury and his mother to cover his debts and to fight for keeping the house he had mortgaged the house without any of them knowing about that until he got sick and died.

Also, Tzury was obese and lonely, and he wanted to kill himself, but he turned out to be a TEDx and public speaker, Android developer and volunteer in Kenya, Indonesia, and Mexico. He traveled to more than 20 countries and got rid of the extra pounds. And finally, he got engaged. His lesson was that he belonged, he belonged to himself.

Liviana Tane – A mother's love is the strongest force – Liviana's story is the one of a single mother, who lost her partner after a ten-year relationship, a short time after their baby was born. She also lost her job as a news station editorial coordinator and her house, during the financial crisis of 2008. The business she invested in after a few years did not work, so she lost all her money and some other money she had loaned, again. Liviana suffered two episodes of depression and the only thing that saved her life back then was her child, who needed her to keep him safe.

She turned out to create The Writing School, teaching people how to write, and she also created a writing agency for businesses. She started traveling "Around the world in 100 books", following the writers she loved in the countries where they lived, and she is planning to publish a book. After her child, reading and writing were her way of staying alive. Her lesson was that when you do not find your place in this world anymore, you create one of your own.

Alexandru Luchici – A journey that still goes on - Alexandru's story is that of a young man who at the age of 21 got paralyzed from the shoulders down, after diving into the shallow waters of the Danube's Delta. His dream was to become a tour guide, so he went there with some tourists, to present them the beautiful

surroundings. He used to be an active young man, climbing the mountains, but in 2006 his whole life changed. After a long and hard recovery period, he received a gift from his brother, a joystick named Quad Joy that enabled him to work at his computer, using his mouth to move the joystick.

He created a blog and started to write about him. He discovered that there are many other people in his situation and he managed to get new friends. Further, he founded the “euRespect” Association, helping people with disabilities to cope with their situation and to evolve, and announcing the authorities about the problems that he had encountered as a wheelchair user, asking for solutions and changes. He graduated from the university and got his master degree, and he got hired as a graphic designer after he learned by himself how to do that. His lesson was that impossible is nothing but a word, where there’s a will, there’s a way, and we can always learn from nature how to renew our lives, no matter how hard it gets, and to be happy about the little things in life.

Cerasela Soficu – The courage of saying No to an abortion and the miracles that followed afterward – Cerasela’s story is that of an unmarried young woman who got pregnant and refused both to abort her child and to raise him in a toxic environment. She did not plan to have the baby and her ex-boyfriend did not ask her if she wanted one. She believes her ex-boyfriend wanted to force her to marry him in this way, but Cerasela chose to raise her baby on her own, to protect him. She knew how it feels to grow up in a family where everybody fights, and she did not want the same for her baby since the father of her child was a game addict and her relationship with him was going very well.

Although she had no job at that time and her parents were very mad at her for being pregnant and refusing to marry the father of her child, Cerasela had the courage to believe there is always a way to go on, even if it seemed she was going against the stream. She got close to the Church and got help from an organization and a community of religious people, her boy is going to kindergarten now and she has a full-time job as an accountant. She is also keen on helping abandoned children. Her lesson was that her baby came to change her and transform her into a more responsible and independent person, a strong and faithful woman.

Carmen Ghercă – An autistic child, a change for the whole world – Carmen’s story is that of a woman who gave birth to an autistic child 21 years ago when doctors knew nothing about this diagnosis and would not give him any chance of evolution. One doctor advised Carmen to abandon him and give birth to another child. She was enraged, she felt guilty and powerless, depressed and confused. She had a hard time accepting the diagnosis and understanding her boy’s different way to communicate and learn since he was nonverbal. The moment she faced reality was the very moment she started to believe in her boy’s future and in herself.

With her husband’s support, Carmen did everything she could to prove the doctors were wrong and furthermore, she started helping other parents who have children with special needs. She loved her boy and she gave birth again, to another child, and she has been since then a volunteering president and vice-president of ANCAAR Iasi and FEDRA, two organizations for autistic children and adults. She travels to various countries to see how the autistic persons are treated there and how they are supported by the government, and she is determined to make some changes in Romania, so the autistic adults might receive more support and care just like she witnessed abroad. Her lesson was that more than anything, people with special needs need to be loved and that she was capable of doing things she never would have thought possible, without having an autistic child.

Cosmina Grigore – Cancer, the disease that brought her back to life – Cosmina’s story is that of a young lady, wife and mother of a girl, diagnosed five years ago with breast cancer when she was 27 years

old. With a career in Communication and Public Relations, a busy life, two divorced parents and a relationship with her husband that was going down, Cosmina hit the rock bottom, feeling dead on the inside, and being really sick. Her task now was to stay alive and her stubbornness helped her do that. Cosmina refused chemotherapy and started taking care of herself, eating and sleeping well, treating herself with large doses of vitamin C and other alternative therapies, loving herself and her family.

Cosmina lost her breast and her father who was also diagnosed with cancer, but she won her life back. She is a patient coach now, nutritionist and Pilates instructor and she founded Imunis Association, helping people with cancer all over Romania to better understand their disease and their solutions. Cosmina believes that the difference between a patient with cancer who survives and one who dies is what they choose to do with their psyche and their emotions. Her lesson is that cancer came to heal her and to teach her that she has the power to transform the pain, all of us have this power.

Bianca Brad – A parent of an angel and a smooth flight – Bianca’s story is that of an actress, Miss Beauty Princess Romania, and mother who gave birth to a stillborn little girl, 11 years ago. Her baby, Emma Nicole, suffered from Tetralogy of Fallot, a heart malformation. Because of it, the girl was smaller, and she spanned round more in the amnion, which caused a knot in the umbilical cord. Emma Nicole stopped living with only a few days before her scheduled birth and Bianca found about this when she was at the hospital, doing the last check. Bianca went from enthusiasm to despair in a moment, and although Emma Nicole was her second child, Bianca only wanted to die. She spent months looking for ways to end up her life, without being considered selfish. She reached the point when she desired to have cancer and her relationship with the father of her children was over.

Instead, she ended up speaking in public, at a TV show, about her pain, she read a lot about losing a child from some books she found abroad, since there were no such books in Romania, she wrote on her website about her experience and in only two days she received more than 1500 messages from parents who had also lost their babies. She founded the E.M.M.A Organization, in the memory of her little girl, she got back to her partner, she has organized a lot of events for the parents of *angels*, as she calls them, and a support group since then. Her lesson was that God had other plans with her and the prayer of serenity was the one that she obsessively told, day by day, so she could remain alive. She has a special relationship with her baby girl, even if she cannot see or touch her, and she believes that swallows represent the souls of the past away children. At the funeral mass, a swallow entered the Church and she would not get out until the end of the mass. Since that moment swallows pass by Bianca’s house, reminding her that love goes beyond death.

Paul Fron – A struggle with alcohol, a lesson of an open heart – Paul’s story is that of a national champion in Athletics who went from being a physical education teacher on being an alcohol addict and almost losing his family. He had lost all his dreams, his money, being repetitively admitted into the Psychiatry hospital and realizing that his friends were present just as long as he afforded to offer them free drinks.

He ended up at the Alcoholics in Recovery Clubs Association (A.C.A.R.) and the help he received there brought him back his life and family. He learned how to cope with the pain differently thanks to drinking, and he made room for real joy. His lesson was to open up his heart, he attended the support groups and he made new friends, real ones, celebrating 10 years since the last drink.

Sorin Focuță – Brittle bones, the heart of gold – Sorin’s story is that of a man who suffers from Lobstein disease, an illness also known as brittle bones. He cannot move, a fracture at his right arm, when he was 16 years old, left him unable to do that very much. He stood in bed to fix his bone, and so he remained, it’s been 30 years since he lies on his back, with his arms wide open. The doctors gave him few chances of

survival, best case scenario he would have lived until his full age, but God had other plans with him too, since he is still alive. And not only alive but genuinely happy, as he remembers he was even when he could walk or play and his bones were fractured.

Although he lies in bed, Sorin manages to use the laptop he received as a gift with a stick and works for his friends, helping them to install something or proofreading documents for them, without accepting any money. He lives with his mother and he points out that he has never desired to have something that he could not. His lesson was that happiness is everywhere, in every condition, you just have to see it, as he sees it when chickadees and grosbeak come by his window.

Livia Frona – A piano seen with the heart – Livia’s story is that of a 13 years old girl who was born without sight, but who has countless trophies and national awards from different music competitions since she has started playing the piano. She was born prematurely and her retina has not had enough time to develop. One night, her mother had a dream, a divine inspiration telling her that Livia has to play the piano. Her mother listened to that and Livia proved the inspiration to be right. During a TV show where she was invited, Livia received a gift, a trip to Austria, Salzburg, at Mozart’s memorial house. She got to touch his piano, and that is one of her very vivid memories.

Despite the fact that in Romania there are no music scores in Braille, Livia’s mother got some from Italy and translated them for Livia’s teacher, and this is how Livia managed to play the songs. Her dream now is to study at the Music Conservatory, and her teacher’s dream is to see her singing on a scene in Vienna. Livia’s lesson was one of faith, she believes that if people would have more faith, they would be happier and peaceful. She has always had faith in herself and she considered herself to be a normal child. When she plays the piano, though, her art goes beyond normal, there is no noise, there is only the wonder of peaceful sounds.

4. Conclusions: The Social Project of the Year 2018 Award

On 6th November 2018 #Saniting won **The Social Project of The Year** Award during a Volunteer Gala organized by the Student’s House of Culture (The Ministry of Young People and Sports - Romania) as a recognition of its value and effects.

After releasing the book there were many people who wrote to us and told us how much this book has helped them and how wonderful they found the idea of building an Emotional Support Center in Iasi. We will continue this project, by publishing an inspirational story every month and by implementing fundraising campaigns in order to build the Emotional Support Center. People who want to support this project and who believe our dream is possible to accomplish can access our donation section on the website: <http://en.saniting.com/donate/>

5. References:

[1] N. Bunduc (and Oana Nechifor for the photo credit), “10 Povești: #Saniting”, Adenium Publishing House, 2018, ISBN 978-606-742-309-9.

Manuscript received: 22 November 2018

Manuscript received in revised form: 6 December 2018

Manuscript accepted: 10 December 2018