

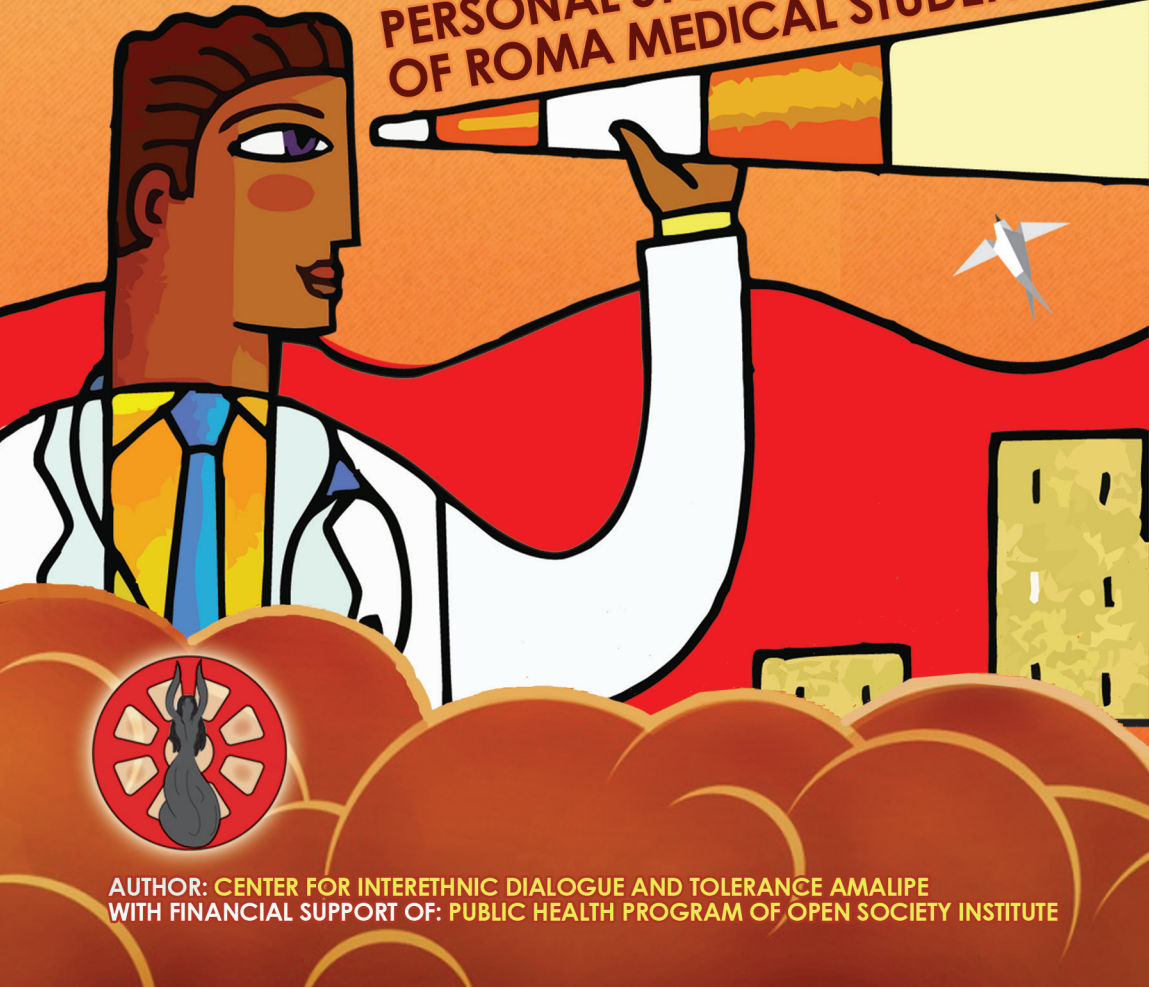
CENTER



AMALIFE

# WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE...

PERSONAL STORIES  
OF ROMA MEDICAL STUDENTS



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WITH FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF: PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAM OF OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE





## **SUPPORT PROGRAMME FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS AND SPECIALIZING MEDICAL DOCTORS OF ROMA ORIGIN ADVOCACY TRAINING**

The 2009 Scholarship Programme for Roma college and university students allows young, educated and highly motivated young people of Roma origin to develop further their knowledge and professional skills in the field of health care.

In 2009 which is the pilot year for the Programme in Bulgaria, supported were total of 23 medical college and university students. In the second year, this number increased to 57. In 2011/2012 academic year, 80 young people were supported in their medicine or medicine related studies and in 2012/2013 this number was 77. The number of the students participating in the Programme in 2013/2014 is 64.

This is a complex programme which makes it different and unique compared to all other scholarship programmes because it features a few main elements:

- Scholarships for students in higher education medical schools, vocational schools and colleges, as well as for specializing medical doctors, the scholarship covering the tuition fees and the living costs;
- Student mentoring by supervisors/mentors;
- Training both scholarship students and mentors in advocacy;
- Presenting the programme to the public and its promotion;

By implementing the Programme, the initiators, i.e. Roma Health Project of the Open Society Institute in Budapest and the Scholarship Programme of the Roma Education Fund in Budapest in close cooperation with the Open Society Institute in Sofia, aim at improving the quality of the health care provided and overcoming discrimination in the health care system by introducing role models who are motivating the young Roma people to pursue a career in the health care system.

A partner in the Programme through all these years of its implementation in Bulgaria has been Amalipe - Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance which is in charge of the advocacy component, the major event of it being the advocacy training summer camp. Each year it gathers all the students participating in the Programme.

Responsible for presenting the Programme to the public is Intelday Foundation being one of the partners for Bulgaria.

The most significant element in the entire Programme we reckon to be the **ADVOCACY TRAINING** which takes place in the form of a summer camp in picturesque settings near Veliko Tarnovo where the students spend a whole week of training in the Roma integration problems, the healthcare issues and the healthcare reform.

The advocacy training is important for consolidating the bonds of these young people – future medical officers for health - with their communities. This

will allow them after their graduation not simply stay in Bulgaria, but also work to improve the health status of the Roma community and ease its access to quality health services.

One of the biggest problems of the Roma intellectuals is that after getting a Diploma and a good status in society, these Roma intellectuals prefer to hide their ethnic origin. In this connection the advocacy training deals with issues related to the Roma identity, history, culture and traditions.

All of these young people have had their difficulties, but also achievements in the learning process. In this edition, we would like to share with you these stories personally told by the students. In many of those personal stories you will see that each of those people got motivated by something or somebody as a role model. We firmly believe that most of the young people will follow the good example of the students who have shared their stories with us.

*“One of the most serious problems related to the access to quality health services of the Roma people is the very small number of medical doctors, nurses and Roma people in general, involved in the health care system. This results, on one side, in lack of confidence in the system itself by not recognizing close people as being part of it, and on the other side, this is one of the reasons for the prejudices towards the Roma people existing among those being a part of the health system.”*

**Deyan Kolev, Chairman of Center Amalipe**


*“For a week before the start of the academic year we invite the students near Veliko Tarnovo for an advocacy training summer camp where we try to prepare them for what is expecting them, for the things they are going to face at university. In other words, our aim is to turn them into advocates for Roma health care. Our job is to succeed in making these people stay here because they are a great potential for Bulgaria and not only prevent them from leaving the country after their graduation, but also motivate them enough so that they go back and work for the benefit of their community.”*

**Teodora Krumova, Vice-Chairperson, Center Amalipe**

*“We are strongly supporting the students and motivating them to take up some extra activities not directly and not necessarily linked to their university education. But we would like them to do some work for the place they come from or at least the place where they study. The job of the medical officers and the health care workers is as a whole often very close to the work of the social workers. That is why it is an advantage for the students to get to know in details the problems of each community and also the various Roma groups. This is because if a doctor has his or her practice in a Roma neighbourhood, he or she by all means shall have to face also the social problems of the people there.”*

**Momchil Baev, Healthcare Programme Coordinator, Center Amalipe**

**WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE...**  
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**YOAN PANAYOTOV**  
19 years old, from the town of Sliven



**WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE...**  
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- This year I applied at Varna University and I was enrolled in the specialty that I've always liked - medicine. Ever since I was little, I was influenced by my parents because they are both medical professionals but I was especially influenced by my

*father who is a general practitioner. I liked to listen to him and see how he works and gradually with each passing day, I began more and more to like this profession. So the moment came when I decided to apply for this specialty without ever being forced by anyone. It was my own decision and I'm proud of my choice.*

**-Have you encountered difficulties so far?**

*-Difficulties - Everyone nowadays encounters difficulties regardless of what level, whether in the family, school, daily life, etc., but everything is resolved according to the desire.*

**-What kind of a student were you, what was your favorite subject?**

*-As a student I liked Chemistry, respectively I had the best results in it, while I wasn't so good at Biology. I have participated in various school competitions, not because of the awards and diplomas but for the thrill and to find out for myself what abilities I have.*

*My classmates always liked me because I am sociable and more or less we have common interests, either during lessons or in some extracurricular activities, we were constantly together. We even prepared together for the exam for university enrollment. Ever since I was a little boy, I've never felt anyone treating me differently because of my origin.*

*Now it really is a big problem in Bulgaria but I think it all depends on the person and their character. It is not right to put all Roma with the same brush.*

**- In what environment did you live? Mainly among Bulgarians or Roma?**

*-Definitely among Roma. My family and I live in the Roma neighborhood in the town of Sliven which is mainly inhabited by Roma. Only in school all other student were Bulgarians.*

**- From Which Roma group are you?**

*- I'm not really sure, I guess I am from the "mixed". :)*



**-Do you speak Roma language in your family, do you observe old traditions?**

*-We don't speak Roma language. We understand a bit of it but we don't speak it at home. My grandmother occasionally jokes with us in Roma language but that's all. Nevertheless, we observe all Roma traditions as much as Bulgarian traditions. Bango Vasil – the Roma New Year is the most common holiday among Roma. On this day, 13 to 14 January, the family gathers around a table full of traditional dishes and welcomes the New Year. The "Survakane" with cornel twigs is present in both Bulgarian and Roma celebration.*

**-According to you, what is the way of integration of Roma? Is there such a way?**

*-Yes, I think there is. Over time, many people seek to establish and expand this path. We just need the desire and perseverance.*

**-And what are your expectations of the university?**

*-I am excited and I expect something good to happen during the time of my studies. All this preparation over the years and my overwhelming desire to be a medical student can be utilized.*

**-Do you think that there you will meet people who can discriminate you?**

*-Yes, I've thought about this. Many people have told me that most likely I will meet people who will provoke me with their comments on the Roma community but I think it depends on the person, as in the case it depends on me myself. If I do not give occasion, no one would "mark" me as a person who is not one of them. If early in the beginning I show that I am sociable, good-minded, not prejudiced and if I don't isolate myself of them, everything will be fine. Even if there is someone who does not accept me, and tries to turn the others against me, I will just not pay attention.*

**- What are your dreams?**

*-That is an interesting question. My biggest dream now is to finish my education at the medical university and specialize somewhere abroad, for example in France.*

**-Do you consider coming back to Bulgaria after the specialization?**

*- Yes but I think to stay longer. I want to gain more experience and improve my French.*

**- How would you influence other people from the Roma ethnic group to follow your path to education, nevertheless if they choose to study medicine or another specialty?**

*-By telling them about me and my story. Once I tell them how I got here and what advantages there are in education, they will also want to try. They will ask me questions like: "How did you get into the university? "How did you escape from the impact of discrimination?". I will tell them the truth. When there is a will, there is a way.*





I am a second year student at the Medical University of Varna, specialty nursing.

**- How did you come to the decision to follow a career in health care and why exactly nursing?**

*- That is my dream ever since I was little, I knew that it is almost impossible to come true, and not just me, my parents were also with this opinion. There was just no way, I had limited information and opportunities at my disposal. That was the situation until some friends told me about Amalipe, an organization whose support proved decisive. Without their help I would have been doing something else, not in the field of healthcare.*

*I believed in myself and in my abilities and I decided that I would succeed. So here I am now in the second year of study. In the process of study I met other young people like me - Roma students who have had similar problems but thanks to the great motivation and desire to succeed, they did it. The meetings during the camp for advocacy in Veliko Tarnovo with other students, who are also successful, had encouraging effect on me.*





They are from Radomir and they are 11 brothers and sisters. Among them there is no one who is not educated. Four of them have chosen healthcare.

- *I'm Desi. I study the specialty of medical and social care in Sofia. I am 30 years old. I study at the Medical Col-*

*lege Yordanka Filaretova.*

- *I'm Iskra. I also study the specialty of medical and social care. I am 26 years old, I am from Radomir and I study in Sofia.*

- *I'm Lyuben Georgiev, I study the specialty of medical and social activities at the Medical College Yordanka Filaretova. These are my sisters.*

- *My name is Daniela. I am a nurse. This year I graduated from the Medical University in Sofia.*

**- How did you choose the medical specialties?**

- *Desi: I chose medical and social care because I want to work with people who need help. I've always seen people's attitude towards our people (Roma), how they are treated and my desire was to somehow help Roma. I chose this specialty because I like it very much. It is widespread with its objects of activity. I really like what I study and I can be useful for people and myself.*

- *Lyuben: I chose this specialty because I went through many tribulations and know what the situation is for the Roma, how Roma are treated in hospitals and this motivated me to study in the specialty of medical and social activities with which I can be useful for our community and not only to it but also to all people who need our social policy.*

- *Daniela: I chose this specialty because it was my dream. Ever since I was little, I wanted to deal with activities in the field of medicine.*

**- Tell us about your tribulations in the process of education and how did you come to higher education, what motivated you?**

- *Lyuben: I was motivated by my sister Daniela. She was the first student in our family and she influenced me. She told me about her growth at the university, about her friends and the joy that she experienced there as a whole. We all were happy for her. This is where my desire comes from and my will to develop my abilities, just like my sister did.*

- *Iskra: It seems that we all followed the good example of our sister, who first began her study in the field of healthcare. Now we give a good example to our younger brothers and sisters, one of them recently finished high school and most likely he will choose higher education in health-*







care, too.

- Desi: Among us - all 11 brothers and sisters - there is no one who has not gone to school and remained uneducated. This is why I believe that the younger will follow our example and put their efforts into higher education, too.



- I am currently a third-year student in the specialty of medical and social activities at the Medical College Yordanka Filaretova. I am doing dancing and football as extracurricular activities in my free time.

**- What made you choose this specialty?**

-In principle in the beginning I wanted to study at the National Sports Academy. After some consideration I decided that I do not know what I would do with a specialty from there and I changed my mind. I wanted to do something to leave a trail behind. It may sound like a cliché but I feel good when I'm useful to people, and with this specialty I feel useful, I know that one day I will help people in need.

-Generally I am a modest boy and I do not like to boast much, I was brought up this way ever since I was little. My parents are now both retired.

**-Do you receive support from them, since you continue to study and develop?**

-Parents' support is very important. I receive it always and under all circumstances. If I had not been encouraged by them, now I'd surely be married and with no education;

**-Have you got an example to follow, a person whom you admire?**

-Yes, Dimitar Berbatov. I like this person not only as a football player, I like that he helps many children.

**-What do you think about Roma integration? What would contribute to its development?**

-You as an organization largely contribute to its development with the motivation which you give us. Recently, I can see a change. You are an example for us, and we are an example for the rest of the people in our communities.





A student in the fifth year in the specialty of medicine in Pleven;

*-In the neighborhood where I live people are called Millet (Muslims), older people are offended if you call them Roma. Some of them speak Turkish, others speak Roma but the young, including myself, speak neither Turkish nor Roma.*

**-And what holidays do you celebrate?**

*-My mother is a Christian Roma and my father is a Muslim and at home we celebrate all Christian and Muslim holidays starting with Ramazan Bayram, Christmas, Easter and others. This is very nice because my brother and I have always enjoyed the family gatherings and the gifts we received, ever since we were children.*

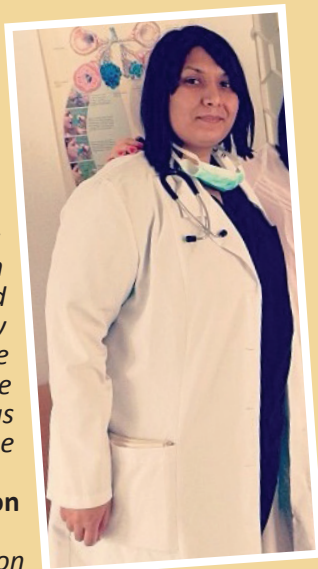
**- How did you decide to study medicine?**

*-It may sound strange but I always knew that I will study medicine, perhaps from IV grade. I remember an incident, when I was small, my brother and I were playing Musketeers and then I injured my hand by cutting. We went to the hospital to get help for my hand and from there I took a syringe to play with, I always knew I wanted to study medicine.*

*I am grateful that my parents have always supported me. I'm not like most students who attended preparatory courses (organized by the Open Society) in order to be accepted in the specialty of medicine. My parents paid for private lessons, so I prepared to be enrolled in the specialty of medicine, and then they encouraged me to study and not to stop my progress, to learn new languages or to attend courses. They always told me that education is the most important, perhaps because my mom has only primary education and my father has secondary education. Probably because no one from the family continued their education, so I am their hope.*

**- How do you think you can contribute to the integration of Roma?**

*-I can say that we have no problems with the integration of Roma in the town of Knezha. Most of my Roma peers*





whom I know are currently students although there are some of them who are married and have children but they are less. The problem is that they choose fields such as tourism or economy and then it is difficult to find self-realization. But we have another neighborhood in the town where there is a problem with early marriages. I personally want to give a good example to young people around me in my town to follow their dreams for self-realization, which will only happen through education.

**- Do you have a dream and what is it?**

- Yes, I have a dream. In the first place I dream of specializing in the field of internal medicine and becoming one of the best doctors in this field. One day I want when people hear about a doctor in internal medicine to think of me as a good specialist. I also dream that the wind of change comes in our community and that after 20 years we do not have to talk about integration and education of Roma!



I am currently a student in the IV year in the specialty of obstetrics in Sofia.



**- From which Roma group are you?**

- I'm from a group of the so-called "Tsumani" and at home we speak predominantly Bulgarian. Sometimes my parents talk in Roma but they communicate in Bulgarian, too.

**-What was your path to education ... difficult or easy?**

- It's hard to tell, I've had both difficult and easy times. For me it was harder in high school because I come from a small town where everybody knows everybody. I had a problem with the negative attitude of some teachers. How can a Roma girl have ambitions, they thought; Perhaps there was a problem because I put more efforts in Biology and Chemistry but they were important for my enrollment at the university.

**- Well, did your classmates discriminate you? Did your parents think to stop you from school?**

- I've never experienced any discrimination from my classmates either in primary or in secondary education, also at the university. No, they have never stopped me. On the contrary, my mother wanted me to enroll in higher education and to study. They support me in this endeavor.

**- How did you decide to study medicine?**

- I think my mother somewhat influenced my decision on this. When I was little, she used to talk to me about it and over time it became my dream.

**- Do you want to contribute to the integration of Roma and how?**

*- Of course I do! It's not easy to happen. My colleagues and I in the Program are united and we all work for this to happen.*

**- Do you have a dream and what is it?**

*- Everyone has dreams! I've somewhat achieved mine... My dream was to start this education because it is what I want to do and it happened. Everyone strives for the highest degree. Now I am finishing Bachelor degree then I am considering applying for Master's degree. While there are people who support and motivate me, I will always strive higher.*



Studies pharmacy at the Medical University in Sofia, fourth year of study.

**- How did you choose to study medicine?**

*- Even in school I was interested in Biology and Chemistry. Originally, I*

*intended to study technology of perfumery and cosmetics but so far the implementation of this specialty is poor in Bulgaria and my father was the one who influenced my choice for pharmacy. My parents didn't stop me from school and they didn't try to impose their views on my developments in life. It was my choice to finish the Mathematics School in Sliven, and subsequently to turn to medicine in Sofia. My father was the one who guided me, not the one who stopped me or pre-defined my decisions.*

**- Were there any cases of discrimination by your classmates or teachers over the years?**

*- No. Even now, at the university, when I mention my origin, I have no problems with that.*

**- Do you want to participate in the Roma integration process of and how would you do that?**





- The first step must be related to education and schools. I think only the educated person has the right mindset to choose and build their lives.

- **How did the Scholarship Program in which you were involved helped you?**

- The Scholarship Program helped me build my personality. In 2011 I enrolled to study at the university and that was the first time I participated in a training camp for advocacy. Until that moment I did not know many things related to the health system, the social system and the health policy implemented towards Roma.

- **If you do not receive a scholarship, will you have the opportunity to continue your education?**

- Yes. If I need I will work at night and study during the day. It will be difficult but I have colleagues who do it. I will be neither the first nor the last to work and study at the same time but I will finish my education.

- **Do you have a dream and what is it?**

- My most cherished dream is to be appreciated here in my country and to have the opportunity to live here and contribute to the commonwealth of this country. I do not want the circumstances to make me leave. I want to raise my kids here. I also have a dream that every Bulgarian, regardless of their ethnic origin, can walk proudly with her head up in this country and be appreciated.




**WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE...**  
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**MIROSLAV ANGELOV**  
29 years old from Sofia



**Student of Medicine in Sofia Medical University.**

- Miro, tell us about your path in education. What difficulties did you go through

all the years at school and then at the university, and tell us about your success of course?

- I always knew I will work in the field of health care and my dream has always been to be a doctor, ever since I was little, and I have sought to achieve this dream in all ways I could. It was hard for me because I graduated from the gypsy school in my neighborhood, then I had to go to another school, and then I



had to sit for an exam for enrollment at the university. Shortly before the exams my mother died and then my motivation was lowered but then I found some power within, so I showed up for on the exams for enrollment at the university and I was admitted at the medical college Yordanka Filaretova in Sofia, from where I graduated with excellence and after my graduation, I worked for some time in my specialty as a lab specialist. Then I attended a course for enrollment at the university, organized by the Health Problems of Minorities Foundation where I received good preparation for the university enrollment exams. I wanted to study medicine. So I applied on a general basis and I was accepted for medicine in three medical universities.

I chose to enroll in Sofia and now I'm in the fourth year of study. I have always had difficulties but difficulties have always attracted me and they have given me more motivation. Now we also experience difficulties during our course of study but this is the path of a future doctor. Our motivation increases because we know that in the future our education will help the health care system which is not only for the Roma community but for our society as a whole.

**- How did Center Amalipe help you so far?**

- We have been friends with everyone from the Center for years, We've known one another for a long time – from the time when the camp for advocacy was organized, which is part of the Scholarship Program for young Roma and students in medical universities and colleges. We work well together. They do their best to understand us, to help us when we have any difficulties. The trainings help us get to know our culture, understand a little more about Roma and accordingly gain practical knowledge which we can apply as professionals in the community and in the general practice and in society. I've always been on friendly terms with Center Amalipe and I am thankful to them for being responsive, communicative and always for the benefit of society.

**- What are your plans for the future and your career?**

- In the future I intend to complete my education successfully, at the moment I'm doing well thanks to the Scholarship Program. I hope to specialize in cardiology when I complete my education as a physician, and obtain a Master degree as a specialist. Then I see myself not as a doctor in an office but as a doctor who works among people and shares their problems, and generally I want to have dynamics. A different life, good development and practice in Bulgaria.

**- What gives you motivation to continue developing?**

- My motivation is rather personal. It is related to the fact that the great majority of people suffer the scourges of cardio - vascular diseases and in general the perspective to be close to people, to work with them, listen to them and be part of their lives and stories, and the sense, the inner motivation that I can help them, these are all major reasons for my motivation.





Dental medicine student at the Medical University Sofia second year of study.



- Before my education in dental medicine I graduated from the Medical College Yordanka Filaretova. I have a brother and a sister.

**- From which Roma group are you and which holidays do you celebrate at home?**

- I am from the group of the "Kalaidzii". As for the holidays, it depends on the family. Personally, my family love to celebrate Bango Vasil and St. George. Then the whole family gathers around the table and we are happy to be together.

**- What difficulties have you encountered on your path to education?**

- The most important thing for me was the support from my parents and the fact that my education has always been their priority. Despite the lack of financial means, they always did their best for my success in life. To be honest though, as soon as I entered the high school, the other students began to discriminate me. Mainly they mocked the color of my skin and if someone claims that Bulgarians are not racists, I can deny that straight away. For few people of Bulgarian origin, the ethnical origin really does not matter.

**- How did you choose dental medicine for your specialty?**

- Ever since I was little, my parents wanted to provoke my interest for medicine. To this end, they used to buy a variety of doctoral kits for me to play with and finally it really happened. At first I thought to go into medicine but later I changed my mind

**-And what is the choice of your brother and sister?**

- My brother, unlike me, does not intend to apply for medical specialty but this year my sister was enrolled for the specialty of assistant pharmacist and I'm very proud of her.

**-Have you got a dream?**

- Yes, it is quite extensive and yet, with a little effort I am convinced that I can do it. I want to learn three more languages - English, Arabic and Russian, and after my graduation, I am planning to enroll for oral surgery. I mostly dream to work in Dubai because I like the country - there are interesting customs, traditions, and more exotic climate there. I want to open a clinic there and after I become famous I want to contribute to our community with everything that is within my power.





**Fourth year student in the specialty of nursing, from the Roma group Millet;**

**- Do you speak Turkish or Roma at home?**

*- I cannot say that we speak Turkish or Roma but a combination between the two. In fact, everyone speaks a different language, be it Roma, Turkish, Bulgarian, or some combination of all three.*

**- For the period of your education, did you encounter any obstacles and did your parents support you?**

*- Fortunately, my mother and my father have always supported me, whatever happens. My only obstacle to study at the university was the lack of financial means but thanks to our close relatives I had the opportunity to be enrolled for higher education and shortly thereafter I was approved for the Scholarship Program for Roma medical students, by which I now continue my education. I am now at the final of my education. I had set a goal to get to at least a Master's degree but now that I reconsider my goal, I would like to enroll for Master and to continue my education. For me and my family these are the most important things.*

**- How did you choose to study nursing?**

*- In my family there is already a nurse and she is an example for the whole family. Everyone says that I am following her footsteps but I liked Biology and Chemistry ever since I was little and I always knew I wanted to study something related to medicine.*

**- Tell us something about yourself.**

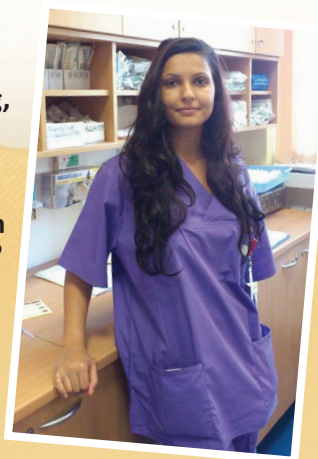
*- I got married last year. At that time I had about a year and a half to finish my education, until obtaining a Bachelor's degree, and despite the expectations of many people, my husband never stopped me from my university education. On the contrary, for him my education is as important as it is for me.*

**- Have you had friends who have interrupted their education because of a marriage?**

*- It's no secret that more and more girls in our community marry early and then they become housewives who only take care of their children and do not work. I did not have friends who really got married so young but I've heard of similar cases in my village.*

**- What do you think about Roma integration?**

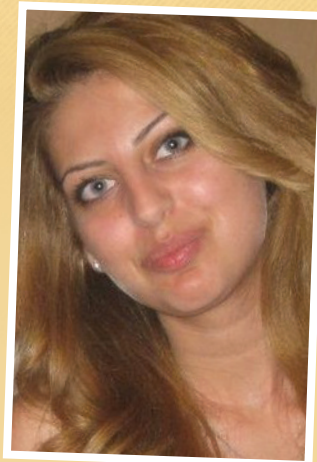
*- I'm sure there is a huge progress. Many Roma girls and boys enrolled in medical universities. A great increase in the number of Roma graduates is seen, which makes me very happy.*







**Studying pharmacy for the third year at the Medical University Sofia;**



- **How did you decide to study pharmacy?**  
*- I think one needs to develop in what they are talented the most. If someone studies something that they don't like, their knowledge will be highly perishable, and there will be no pleasure in education, it will feel like one is studying in vain. Biology and Chemistry were my favorite subjects from the seventh grade, when I started studying these subjects. It was always easy for me to study Biology and Chemistry and I studied them with pleasure, this is why I had the highest results in these subjects - I never had a lower mark than five.*
- **Have you ever encountered discriminatory attitudes towards you from your classmates and have your parents ever stopped you from school?**  
*- My parents have supported me all the time not only in my education, but also for all important decisions I take in life. Fortunately, I'm not exactly an example of a victim of discrimination. Even when someone offended me, it was in elementary school and with children's naive jokes.*
- **Have you got any friends who married very young or against their will and therefore were left without education?**  
*- Yes, many of my friends got married as early as in the tenth grade, and they already have children. Some of them were willing very much to continue their education but their parents led them to most recent wedding and so they remained without high school diplomas.*
- **How did the Scholarship Program help you?**  
*- My involvement in the Program was a dream come true. When I went to Sofia, I did not know anyone at all and I did not know anything about the city. People from the Program I met were those who helped me fit there and I know that in hard times I can always call them and talk to them. They are willing to listen to me even for the smallest problem. The financial aspect helped me a lot, too. Surely, without the scholarship, many of us would not have had the opportunity to continue their education.*
- **How would you contribute to the integration of Roma?**  
*- More and more Roma are integrated because they have the most important - desire for education. If somebody has no desire for something, they will not do it. So I am very happy seeing this progress. It is also nice that many young people are willing to study, and people of all ethnic groups put their efforts to*

provide them with this right - Bulgarians, Roma, Turks, Jews, etc.

**- Have you got a dream? What is it?**

*- I have many dreams! :) Most of all I want to finish my education successfully, to learn four languages - English, French, Spanish and German. Mainly I want to work with children because integration and education is starting from childhood and this is the moment when they need help and guidance. In the future, I have another dream and that is to create a family.*



**Nurse and health mediator,  
mother of one child;**



**Tell us about yourself, where did you grow up, what difficulties did you encounter in the process of education?**

*- I grew up in the village of Medkovets and there I finished my high school education. Then I worked as a health mediator and in the Social Assistance Directorate as a social consultant. I have a lot of experience as a health mediator - almost 5 years of experience. I have worked in the Roma community and not only there but also with every person who needs help.*

**- While you were at school, did you have any problems there?**

*- The school where I studied was mixed. I wasn't in a segregated school, in the so-called Gypsy schools. In my class we had Bulgarian children and children of Roma origin. The interesting thing at that time was that people were not so divided. So at that point I had no problems with my Bulgarian classmates and generally I did not encounter any problems of this kind at school.*



**- And what happened in later years in terms of integration? Did you have any difficulties and problems?**

*- The difficulties I encountered were rather related to the work that I used to do because I worked in the Roma community and I have been trying to prevent conflicts and to protect the rights of Roma, at the same time I had to teach them what their duties are. One does not only have rights but also duties that must be observed. Then one is not accepted particularly with the door open, no one wants to hear about the problems of Roma, it is not that important for anyone. One must convince the institutions and people that this is a problem and someone can possibly help. It really takes a lot of efforts and a lot of time but when one is working with perseverance, they have success on both sides. Things happen even though it is difficult.*

**- Why did you choose to be a mediator? What made you go for this?**

*- I work in the field of social care. There, one part of the population is mostly of Roma origin. People come for social assistance benefits given under Art.9 of the Social assistance law. I had one year of service, I had some experience. Then I was invited for an interview and I decided to try, although this profession was not developed, it was not a government policy but only an idea, a project in which few people believed. We are the people who performed field work and we were those who believed in it. We worked without offices, without any working conditions. We went through Roma neighborhoods, we measured the blood pressure of the people and we organized prophylactic medical exams.*

**- Tell me about a memorable event that stands out in your memory?**

*- Two things have ever stricken me - the and I see that some of the children are not at school. In our area there are not many families like that but there are some. It cannot make you stay indifferent, although it is none of your obligations. You cannot stay indifferent. It's always shocked me. I always talk to parents. I seek ways and possibilities for such children to return to school. I have also received many alerts from school that children do not attend classes. I turn to their families, asking why. This has always touched me.*

*Also, when it comes to sick people who have no access to health care and who cannot afford simple access to a health professional, not to mention highly specialized medical care and expensive medical tests. The system is organized in a way that leaves them in a vicious circle. Once I visited a baby who was not 40 days old, it was registered but it had health problems and did not eat. As I walked inside, the conditions were very bad, though it was the least I could notice. This child was left without care, it looked so bad, it was very weak and it needed constant medical supervision and monitoring. Then I had to call the GP and inform the social services. We called the emergency and I had to*

*one is when I visit a family*



convince that woman that the child should be taken to the hospital, otherwise it would not survive. Another thing that makes me angry, are children who are abandoned. We always try to find a way for the children not to be left without care and to be in a family environment even with their grandmother and grandfather. We have helped many such people to be accepted in the homes of their relatives. Many people in the Roma community believe that there is no such option and they believe that Child Protection is an institution that can only take your kids, but it also may support you not to leave your child in an institution and deal with this problem.

These are the things that impress me. There are a lot of cases. The problem is that people do not understand, they are not familiar with all these problems and they think they do not need to be aware. They are afraid because they have perceived it like that ... they have been raised in a way to believe that these people will not help and they could do harm - institutions will harm you, society will harm you. And thus they believe that the institution is a scary place. An institution is a place that can inform you, that can help you, and this should be the goal of each institution. So you can have a position of a citizen.

**- How did Center Amalipe help you over the years?**

- During these years Amalipe organized a camp for advocacy for medical students and we participate in it every year. For me, these trainings are very important. All these people who are gathered there, who have come away from all the stereotypes, all Roma issues; These people are educated at universities and it is unique to gather so many people together who study medical specialties and continue to teach them to use their capacity, their ideas. We receive practical training. We visit the neighborhoods and work as volunteers and we give an example to people, we do not only help them but we also give them an example that we have come to the university, that we are successful and we'll be back to help them. These trainings also provide many meetings with people from different governmental organizations and institutions. We obtain information about health care reform in our country and in the world, and this gives us a very broad picture of the situation in which our country and of the problems with which we have to fight, because we will become a team and we will work together in the future as we work now. This is how things can change. These trainings help a lot to all.





Student in the third year of the specialty of medicine at the Medical University - Sofia.

- Tell us about your personal story, your path in education and the difficulties that you have encountered, as well as the success that you have achieved over the years.

- Hello! Education has always been of highest priority in my family. I have had learning habits ever since I was little. Since kindergarten I remember that my grandmother taught me to read and write. I entered the first grade at school fully prepared. I am following the good example of my mother, she completed higher education. I remember that when I wanted to play with her, she had to study her lessons. I was maybe 3-4 years old. At that time I lived with my family in the family house. My mother is the only person in my entire family that has higher education. The relatives from my father's side are not educated and they are not integrated so much. They live in a neighborhood that is mixed, in the Roma part of the neighborhood. The majority of them do not have even secondary education. I went to school with great desire. There was a nice atmosphere there. I wanted to have friends there like any child does, but maybe I encountered some difficulties in communication with them because they did not accept me. I remember the first day at school. I sat on the first desk in the middle row, next to a girl. We got acquainted, we enjoyed it for a couple days but on the third day, she decided to move to another desk and she sat in one of the back seats, because I was a gypsy.



- Did you overcome this difficulty? Was there anyone to help you with this?

- I feel silly when I remember these moments. I've talked with my family, they even came to school. This continued maybe up to the fifth or sixth grade. People around us are really very bad sometimes because there are only few of us and since I was the only one there, no one accepted me. And even when we had to play a game in the classes of physical education, they would not catch me by

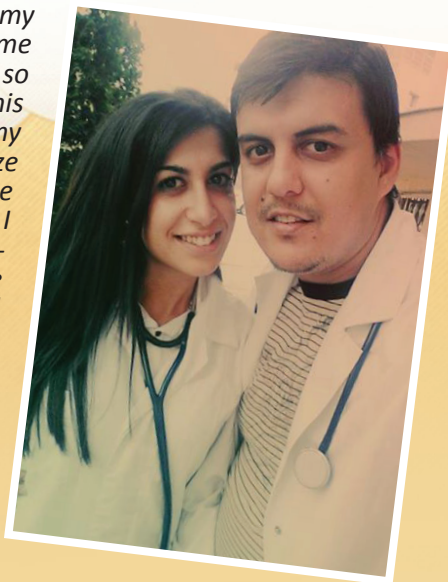
the hand. I was sad because I was different for my age, at least at that time. I used to write my home works, I painted at home but I did not go out so much with my peers. And in fact it was.... This created difficulties in communication with my peers on psychological level at that time. I realize it now. Other people in our neighborhood, the girls at my age were different and somehow I was not interested in them and we had no common topics of conversation, even though we were 7-8-9 years old. They were of a very good social status, I cannot say that they were people from the ghetto; they were wealthy, even more wealthy than us because we were not a wealthy family at that time.

I have had many incidents of that kind at school, expression of discrimination and hate. I have often been insulted and hated by everyone. I talked to teachers then, but nothing happened... It has always been interesting to me ... a child at 7-8 years of age. How does a child

at that age realize that there are differences between people? That's too bad because ... I understand all people have some (guilt or something) to some extent, but to create hatred in a child who is 7-8 years old, it speaks of the family environment in which such children grew up, which I think is very wrong. If people want our community in Bulgaria, the nation as a whole, to live well and to have progress, we

must be responsible and tolerant to each other and we must have a desire for common development. Besides individuals, we are social people and we cannot live only for ourselves, regardless of what we are. Yes, I'm a gypsy and I grew up with Bulgarian education. I observe some Roma traditions or something, yes.

I look at both sides very objectively, I think so, but people may not realize that. Everyone is concerned for themselves only; everyone tries to smash the other. Just then, when nobody liked me ... we fought and had so many conflicts at school ... Even once I remember that I had been accused at school that I stole a phone and it just happened the following ... the girl which sat together with me on the same desk maybe for about two years, forgot her phone and I put mine, and hers in my school bag, then a huge scandal arose as if I had stolen it. I was in the fourth grade. The mistake was not in me but the reaction of the teachers was very interesting. Now that I remember the situation, I





can realize that. Then I had no impression on what the relationships between people were. Sitting next to someone, you are children, you communicate and suddenly someone thought that you ... This can happen even today. At the university I have many Bulgarian friends, I communicate mainly with Bulgarians, and only with one boy of Roma origin.

**- Tell us about the successes you've had. After finishing school, how did you decide to study medicine?**

- I decided to study medicine before I finished secondary school. I was at the end of the 11th grade and I decided it very spontaneously in about two hours. I was intending to study tourism in Denmark and work as a stewardess because all my family lives abroad and I live here alone. I do not know how, but really in about two hours I decided that I shall study medicine. I remember it was during a weekend and next week I started to attend lessons in Chemistry and Biology. In the 12th grade I started to learn more seriously, and before that I did not deal so thoroughly with these subjects. I graduated from the School of Mathematics and Sciences, profile German with Informatics and Mathematics. But this is how it should have happened since I was admitted after only a year of serious preparation. It happened.



Third year student in the specialty of nursing in Varna.



**- How did you decide to become a nurse?**

- A friend of mine guided me, we were together at high school. She told me about the training course, she told me everything about it and I decided to try.

**- Did you encounter any difficulties, any personal experiences in the process of education?**

- Discrimination - in elementary school, but then at the university – no. Students were surprised of us and they thought we were foreigners. We speak Bulgarian, my friend and I, and they think we speak Gypsy language. They say, "Excuse me, what language is spoken here?" And I answer "Bulgarian" and they go "Hmmm...all right, all right."

At the penultimate exam, half the time of the examination the professor "loved all Gypsies" ... such words cannot be used currently, and after his speech, he

looked at me and said, 'Girl, what is your origin?' And he started to ask me about everything else, but not about the exam.

**- How did you decide to participate in the Scholarship Program, how did it help you and how would you have done without it?**

*- I decided to participate... At first I did not think anything would happen, but then I saw that there are other people who study and give us an example, so I was encouraged by them. If they stop the Program, I will not have the opportunity to continue and complete my education.*

**- How do you identify problems of Roma, around the place where you live and how can they be overcome?**

*- The way of thinking of older people needs to change because they want to marry their children early but the children do not want this. The way of thinking of young people has already changed about this.*

**- Would you like to participate in the integration of Roma and if so, how will this happen?**

*- Yes, of course, we need to integrate because we are some of the most uneducated people in Bulgaria. Not all Roma are bad, as we are shown in the media, there are good and bad people, as in all other communities.*

**- Do you have a dream and what is it?**

*- My dream is to be able to finish this specialty that I've started and to raise my kids in the future who will also be educated and will live equally with the others.*







**Bachelor's degree in nursing at the Medical University of Sofia. Now she studies Health Care Management, born in Vladimirovo village, Boychinovtsi Municipality.**

**- How did you choose to study medical specialties?**

*- Ever since I was little, my dream was to continue to study, but since I was married and I didn't have this opportunity, it was hidden deep at the bottom of my soul.*

*- I'm from a Roma family and I can say that I experienced a happy childhood but I married soon after I graduated from the the French high school in the town of Vratsa. I bore my two children and so being engaged in their upbringing, I gave up my dream. Later, when I found out about the Scholarship Program of Open Society for support of students of Roma origin, I applied there, hoping to be approved. They supported me and kept supporting me throughout my education and I came to a Bachelor's degree.*



**- Did your parents ever want to stop you from school?**

*- No. They did not. That was my desire. It happened this way. I was 19 when I got married and I did it of my own desire.*

**- Have you been a victim of discrimination or unequal treatment?**

*- No. So far I have not encountered such problems, perhaps because of the light color of my skin.*

**- How did you find out about the Scholarship Program?**

*- I actively participate in the life of our village. I knew about the general programs of the Open Society but I never got involved because I just do not like being a teacher. The Deputy Mayor of Boychinovtsi Municipality informed me about the Program which started in 2009 and I immediately signed up.*

**- Would you like to participate in the process of Roma integration and how?**

*- Yes, I wish we Roma were like the whole Bulgarian society. I wish there was not so much unemployment and there was not such discrimination. Accordingly, if people had enough money, I think they would not live in such poverty and they will be integrated into society.*

**- Do you have a dream and what is it?**

*- I have a dream for my children to obtain proper education and become worthy citizens of Bulgaria, and I dream of this to happen for all Roma.*

**- How did people from your neighborhood accept you when you started studying?**

*- Unfortunately, in my neighborhood (I do not live in the ghetto, I live in a normal neighborhood) stereotypes played a role on my development. At first I heard reproaches, even with nonverbal behavior people showed me their negative attitudes - how*

*come I will leave my children and I will go to study. There were phrases like "Is she crazy?", "How will she study at this age?" It is not accepted for us Roma to start an education at the age of 38. For them, a 38-year-old woman should stay at home in the kitchen, with her children.*

**- How did they treat you after you were successful in life?**

*- Now the attitude and the change is complete, I can say that people call me for any medical services, which proves and shows that they appreciate me and am valuable both for Roma and Bulgarians. Everyone enjoys my success. Criticisms stopped. They saw that I walked my way with dignity.*

**- Are there people who followed your example and began to study higher education?**

*- People at my age, no. From the village, except my son, who is also involved in the Scholarship Program, there are four girls now who are also students and study for nurses and midwives. So my example is followed.*

**- Is your family proud of you and your son that you are both successful students?**

*- Yes. During all these years I can say that my family - my husband and children played an important role. The very graduation, I can say it was the tip of the iceberg. There were cameras, pictures. My family was with me for which I am thankful to them.*





A 4th-year medical student at the Medical University in Varna.



- I am a student of Roma origin, my mother is a Roma and my father - Bulgarian. I am saying this because I believe that this is just another proof that there is continuity between the various ethnic groups. This is a proof that marriages between spouses of a different ethnicity do exist and that love is strong enough to overcome differences.

**- Tell me your story. What about your childhood, your education. How was your relationship with your classmates and parents?**

- Since early childhood I was always an outstanding student. I earned top grades since I was good at learning. This was bringing joy to my family-my mother was extremely pleased and so was my father. At that time we lived in a village in the country and when I finished the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my parents asked me if I was willing to continue my education or if I reckon this to be enough. And I did want to go further. My mum's desire was that I end my studies and help her with the housework so that she can get a job. I was, however, very insistent on going on since all my friends were at school. My mum was not working as she was taking care of us. She is a very caring person and would give us her complete attention which prevented her from getting a job. That was the reason for her desire to persuade me to leave school. Ending my studies would allow her to get a job. However, I didn't change my mind. I was crying and they finally let me apply in the gymnasium school in the nearest town which was 20 km away from our village.

I applied and I was admitted for majoring exactly in the subjects I wanted, i.e. Biology and Chemistry. I was the first student admitted into this class, ranked first in the first admission cycle. Still, there were many things in my way not allowing me to continue my studies in this town. Again my mother insisted that I should stay home. But my desire was so strong that I was ready to face anything

at all. This is how I came out with the proposal to go away and stay with my grandmother who lives in the other end of Bulgaria. I could face it going there, far away from my family, putting up with the fact that it would not be the majors I wanted. I simply wanted to study. I had great demands to myself and respectively great expectations.



And my parents did so. They sent me away to stay with my grandparents. Later, they moved in with us because we have always been a family with a strong emotional attachment to each other. What happened after?.....Well, I have always thought this to be the end of my education-12th grade, secondary education, in any case better than the 8th grade which is lower secondary. This is how I put my mind at rest. Then when I was in the 12th grade, I heard about Biology and Chemistry university pre-admission courses organized by the Ethnic Minorities Health Problems Foundation.

I was extremely happy because becoming a doctor has always been the dream of my life. This dream was my big impossible dream. This is the same as with those people whose lifetime dream is going to the USA, the Moon, flying an airplane or seeing this and that wonder of the world, but still unable to achieve it. Unattainable - this is what I thought of my dream. My dream was born while watching Dr. Quinn the Healer, then ER and other such ones which held my passion for medicine.

That motivated me a lot and I applied for attending this course. Being very self-critical, I did not believe that I would be admitted. But, yes, I was anyway. Then, I didn't believe that I would be admitted as a student. Well, yes, I wasn't, at least not the first time. Things did not work out for me the first year although I was very close. I was not lucky enough. Meanwhile, I enrolled on the programme of the College in Sofia. I studied there one year but didn't give up from my dream. I kept attending courses for another year and finally I was there. I was admitted into the 3 universities I had applied for. I enrolled myself in the Medical University in Varna. But my enrollment was also exciting. There were more difficulties to come. The university admission ranking list was out at 1 a.m. one Friday in July. The list came out with the wrong heading. The enrollment deadline was Monday including. If by chance I had failed to open this file, I would have probably known the results on Monday when it would have been too late.

Then, it turned out that my parents did not have at that time 450 BGN and were unable to pay my university fee. We had to borrow this money which was sent to us in the last minute. By that time my father and I had already left for



Varna and were waiting in front of the ATM. I withdrew the money, paid my fee and enrolled myself literally in the last hours left. But I was officially a medical student and those were my happiest moments in life. It was very hard but I was able to achieve my dream. My happiest time! Things for me always happen the hard way! It has been very difficult for my family to get me to where I am now. For my parents education has always been a priority.

My father is somehow indifferent while my mother's desire is to see me studying no matter that she is likely to give up in the face of the smallest hardship even. This was the case when I was in the 8th grade, then 12th. I remember that when I was in the 12th grade, she suggested that I end my studies, but then seeing my desire and later getting to know more about the pre-admission courses and the scholarship programme, she was extremely happy. I am unable to describe the excitement which came over me after realizing that I am probably the only one, not simply a Roma child, but a child in general, who is studying medicine in town. At present, there might be more of us, but at that time I was the only medical student in town. My brother has a job and also supports me. The scholarship programme is also a great help. Without it I wouldn't be here now.

**- What are your plans? Would you like to participate in the Roma people integration? If yes, how?**

-Who doesn't want to integrate Roma people? Even Bulgarian people do. As a whole, integration is a very complicated and long process...However, I think that it shouldn't be so long and so much complicated. In my opinion, integration has its roots in education. Because if you don't have education, you don't have a job, if you don't have a job, you don't have money, and if you don't have money, then you don't have anything at all.

No matter how mercenary it sounds, nowadays if you have no money, you are unable to achieve anything at all. If you have money, you have a job, you do work for living. If you have those, people will respect you, they will be ready to listen to what you say. If you study, you will be able to talk properly, to read and write properly, to express your thoughts and your opinion in general. When this opinion is properly presented and resting on facts, no one will reject you, absolutely no one, even the extreme racists, seeing you are smart and are able to respond to every comment they make. Even they will admit there is a smart person standing in front of them. Only in this way you can express your opinion and this opinion can be considered, this is how you can take decisions and be a complete person. I believe that the focus should be there and all efforts focused on education from very early age. More people would go for getting married very young, then come the social welfare benefits, etc. Well, I think that the key isn't there, it is in education.

Moreover, this should be financially supported since people from the older generation do not have the financial possibility, people who currently have children-school and university students, they are unable to support them as they didn't go to school, don't have a job, don't have sufficient funds. I mean

that if financial aid is directed here and also some efforts are invested, the coming generations will not need welfare benefits. I personally believe that I am in support of this process no matter that this is only a drop in the sea. When I have the chance, I always try to motivate the Roma children to study, I speak to their parents, tell both the children and their parents about the Programme, my attitude and also about the importance of having a proper education and how this can boost someone's life. And in future as a doctor I very much hope that I would be able to help in many more aspects -such as health education, organizing medical exams, etc. At this stage I cannot be more specific since I am still not sure what field I will be specializing in. But definitely I will be supportive.

**- Do you have a dream and what is it?**

- I have two dreams. One is, let me sound a bit romantic, world peace. I would love to see people understand each other, love each other or at least respect each other. Nowadays this happens rarely. Personally talking, my dream is to become a doctor. I managed to make the first step on my way but it is hard. As I already mentioned, things for me happen the hard way, meaning that nothing has ended. My dream is to graduate and become a good doctor so that I am able to help people. I would love to see the grateful eyes of all those relatives of the people I was able to help.





*What is a dream? A vision for the future, that captures your entire heart and at the deepest level, your spirit and soul. Open your mind up to the awesome power of your creative imagination.*

**This book tells the personal stories of students of Roma origin who study in different medical universities in Bulgaria. They share the difficulties that they had in the process of education but also the successes they have achieved. Some of these are feel-good stories, but others are rather sad... Nevertheless, all those show the great determination to education and success of group of young people who chose their future to be devoted to healthcare. What were their motives and good role models you will find out in the narratives of the students themselves as well as their desire to be the role models for the ones to follow them.**

**The book also gives information about the Roma health scholarship program for university students and the advocacy training organized annually by Center Amalipe. During the week-long program the young people worked on developing crucial skills for their future work of people who will bring tremendous change in their community. This is why we called them The White Swallows!**



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