

The Nyilas Misi Talent Support Association

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1. Brief history of the Association and the goal of its talent support programme

The goal of the programme is to give a chance and encouragement to study to as many underprivileged gifted Transylvanian children studying in Hungarian as possible, and to help them finish at least secondary school education with a GCSE. The programme has been initiated by university teachers from both Transylvania and Hungary. The idea comes from János Péntek who called attention to the high number of wasted talents and the worrying situation it generates at a conference held in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár) on June 1, 2002 and it was Ms Katalin É. Kiss, a linguistics professor from Budapest, who actually looked for and found the solution in early 2003. Through her advocacy, the Hungarian Baptist Aid¹ espoused the issue and integrated it in its existing *Adopt me! programme*².

In the first year of the programme applications were administered by the Cluj-Napoca office of the School Foundation³ (managed at that time by József Somai). Based on the experiences of the first year we decided that the programme could be operated more efficiently by institutionalising its Cluj-Napoca office. That was realised in 2004 when the Nyilas Misi Talent Support Association⁴ was established, and since August 2008 the entire programme has been operated by the Association, also managed by József Somai.

Since 2010, László Sólyom, former president of Hungary, has been the patron-in-chief of our programmes. He was also present at first national Talent Day in Cluj-Napoca held on March 26, 2011. The Association was among the initiators of the Transylvania Talent Support Council established in the autumn of 2010, and it has its representatives in both the National and the Transylvanian Council.

¹ As it reads on the website of the Hungarian Baptist Aid "Our mission: to support those in need, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, religion or colour ... and to aid and rescue those in disasters" (at <http://www.baptistasegely.hu/node/>, date of download: May 12, 2011).

² Available at <http://www.fogadjorokbe.hu/report.php?id=42>, date of download: May 12, 2011

³ A Romanian legal entity setting educational, scientific, cultural and social objectives.

⁴ Available at www.nyilasmisi.ro, date of download: May 12, 2011.

Summing up the data of the past nine years: by the end of the 2011–2012 school-year, the Association collected and forwarded to the supported students approximately HUF 380 million as allowances.

2. Programme supporters

Talent support programmes are based on a large number of individual supporters. Taking into account the past nine years, an average of 352 allowances were extended annually with the help of 700 supporters.

Naturally, the number of our supporters varied from year to year.

Private individuals who joined the programme as supporters share the belief that there is no greater value for a community than the talent of its children and there can be no greater loss than letting it get wasted. Only this intellectual power can ensure the future of the Hungarian society in Transylvania. Those who have stood by us unselfishly believe in the power and value of human talent. It is no accident that among the supporters there are many teachers, scientists and researchers, and there are entrepreneurs and enterprises and also a lot of low-income pensioners, public personalities and politicians who know that actions visible to others speak louder than the most eloquent words. They have trust in the children they support and also in us, the intermediaries. This mutual trust is what holds us and keeps us together. The majority of the supporters are Hungarians living in Hungary or in a farther country, and we don't have any information regarding their ties with Transylvania. Even if they have no roots by ancestors, their commitment makes them real Transylvanians.

Our 12-month support year is aligned to the school-year starting on the 1st of September and lasting until the end of August. It is possible to become a supporter mid-year, too, as there are always students whom we could not include in the programme on account of the lack of supporters. As supporter contracts are concluded for one year, we expect our supporters to pay a monthly minimum of 5 000 forints, or equivalent, for a year.

Generally there are two supporters contributing to one supported allowance, each paying HUF 5 thousand a month. It is also possible, however, that a single supporter agrees to pay the full amount of one or even more allowances. 10% of the support is spent on the operating costs of the Association; therefore, the net monthly amount of the allowance is HUF 9 000. Supporters may establish a scholarship themselves. In that case, the scholarship can either bear the name of the founder or of some company or it may be of a memorial nature.

Supporters may decide for themselves whether they want to get in contact personally with the families whose children they support. We consider it really important and recommend it to our supporters to maintain a personal relationship; therefore, we send them the photo and the address of the children assigned to them. The Association is in continuous contact with the supporters, and informs them at least once a year about the actual school results and social situation of the beneficiaries, and also update them on the activities of the Association every two months in an electronic newsletter. Supported student are obliged to give regular account of their school results; their academic progress and family situation is monitored by the staff members of the Association via family visits. The social situation of the students makes it especially important to have a direct support system as this way the supporters can also act as mentors, get involved in the life of the children they support and give highly regarded advice to both the students and their families. Direct relationship is ensured by assigning students to supporters and, in addition to the mail address of the assigned student, each supporter receives a letter of general introduction including a description of the financial and social situation of the student's family. Staff members of the Association are continuously available to both the students and the supporters providing assistance and maintaining personal correspondence. Until a supporter makes a decision about having a direct contact, letters from the supported student are forwarded by the Association. Upon request, our colleagues help supporters establish a relationship with the assigned student. They read the students' letters and intervene when necessary. (There are cases, for example, when young people need additional support to carry on with their university studies, so their grants need to be doubled.)

3. About the programmes of the Association

There have been around 900 students participating in our programmes since September 2003. Although most of them received allowances for 4 to 5 years, there are some who have been receiving them for eight years now. The number of those taking the maturity (secondary-school-leaving) exam keeps increasing year by year, verifying the objectives of the programme. So far 450 supported students have taken the maturity exam.

The Association has four priority programmes: (1) the Talent Support Programme as core programme – providing allowances to talented, but disadvantaged secondary school

students; (2) the Friendship Programme; (3) Talent Points; and (4) the Ady Endre Scholarship launched in 2011 and administered by the Association.

3.1. The Talent Support Programme

Until the 2011–2012 school-year, our core programme primarily supported disadvantaged talented children living in rural diaspora areas. For the academic year of 2012–2013, students living in towns may also apply for allowances as more and more families with gifted children living in urban environments have financial difficulties. Eighth grade is the earliest time to receive the allowance which – unless the situation of the students concerned changes – continues till the GCSE. Although studying in Hungarian is a precondition, the programme does not differentiate by religion or ethnicity.

Funding is awarded through calls for applications. Calls are announced once a year, at around the end of the school year, usually in May. The call for applications as well as the application form and the form for describing the student are continuously available on the website of Nyilas Misi Talent Support Association for information purposes.

Parents/guardians of verifiably gifted children may apply if the child concerned studied in Hungarian in the previous school year; is multiply disadvantaged, and the financial situation of the family does not allow further education; the per capita real net income of the family must not exceed RON 400 (\approx 100 EUR) per month; and the parent must agree to make every effort to ensure further schooling of the child in Hungarian in case the allowance is awarded.

Applications are evaluated based on uniform criteria by the Grant Board consisting of teachers. Favourably evaluated applications serve the basis for the contract to be concluded between the Association and the parents (guardians). In the contract, the parents or guardians have to agree, among other things, to spending the whole amount of the allowance on the schooling of the children.

We do our best to find new supporters for applicants left without, or only with one supporter. The Association is self-sustaining; its financial resources are linked to committed supports. Therefore, students participating in the programme will only be paid the maximum allowance amount if their supporters have transferred it or some additional sources were found in time to substitute the missing support. The full amount of the allowances is HUF 120 000 annually; in case of delay or loss of funding, the Association tries to ensure the provision of at least the minimum annual amount of HUF 60 000. There is an allowance-

browser on the website of the Association where allowance transfers can be monitored, so the supported children can track all their allowance transfers at the same place, and check if the support due has been transferred to their bank accounts.

Our core programme covers the entire Transylvanian region and also includes children from Moldavia studying in Hungarian at school. Since 2007, local teachers have been involved in the programme as mentors. They agreed to act as intermediaries and contact points, and to supervise the progress of supported children in the fulfilment of the criteria.

3.1.1. Application criteria

Every spring the call for applications and the criteria are announced both in the media and in the schools. The application form requests information on both aspects and in addition to requiring official documents to prove the economic situation of the family, it attempts to grasp abilities, talents and diligence as expressed in their complexity. Schools (teachers, form teachers) describe the students and their school and extracurricular activities and performance in detail. Students are expected to prepare a handwritten self-introduction. In its evaluation, the board gives separate scores for each factor contributing to the disadvantaged situation: being an orphan or half-orphan, severe illnesses of the parent(s) or the child, unemployed parent(s), parents forced to commute, costs of rent or dormitory.

According to our application guide, parents/guardians may only apply if the verifiably gifted student in question studied in Hungarian in grade 7, 8, 9 or 10, and/or will go to a class in the following year where the language of teaching is Hungarian.

The terms and conditions and their justification is phrased as follows:

1. The financial situation of the family does not allow for further educating the child; per capita net real income does not exceed RON 400 per month.
2. The parent agrees to make every effort to ensure the further education of the child in Hungarian at least until the maturity exam.
3. Only those parents may apply for the allowance whose children achieved at least an average result of 8.5⁵ in the previous school year.

During the last decade, the number of village children continuing their education in secondary schools decreased, and this trend will result in the exclusion of children of families living in an unfavourable environment struggling with financial problems from education, and a large number of gifted children will be lost due to the lack of opportunities and support.

⁵ In Romania school marks range from 1 to 10, where 10 means 'excellent'.

In case the continuity of the donations offered for the purposes of the programme allows that, a child will receive a maximum of HUF 9 000 a month, coming usually from two supporters who can personally monitor the progress of the children they support. The aim is to get the most talented children with a disadvantaged social background to start and finish secondary school and to continue with their education at a university. Therefore the payment of support awarded through the application procedure starts in grade 8, 9, 10 or 11 and lasts, if the criteria are met, until the maturity exam is taken.

Applications are called for by the Nyilas Misi Talent Support Association located in Cluj-Napoca and awarded by the grant board of the Association depending on the amount of the support offered and on the number of applicants based on a uniform evaluation process. Applicants are notified of the decision of the board in writing. Then the Association concludes a support contract with the winners and the payment of the annual allowance starts in September. The work and progress of the students and the financial situation of their families are supervised by the staff of the Association during family visits.

3.1.2. Talent Day

On March 26, 2011 the Association held its first Talent Day. The event gave an opportunity for children achieving outstanding results in various areas to show up their talent and to meet each other. The results of the children supported by the Association and the success of the first Talent Day encouraged us to repeat it and thus a 2nd Talent Day took place on March 31, 2012.

The students showcasing their talent on the Talent Day live in different parts of the country. Besides being excellent students of their schools, they achieve significant results in various extracurricular activities. On both occasions, the event was hosted by the János Zsigmond Unitarian College in Cluj-Napoca.

3.1.3. Charity concert

On August 26, 2010 the Cluj-Napoca Nyilas Misi Talent Support Association registered in Budapest organised a charity concert for the benefit of the Transylvania talent rescue allowance programme of the Nyilas Misi Talent Support Association in the Hungarian Academy of Science. The patrons-in-chief of the concert were László Sólyom, former president of Hungary, and his wife. More than 300 people attended the event and they contributed to the enlargement of the allowance fund by significant donations.

3.1.4. Camps

Between July 1 and 10, 2005, 29 disadvantaged secondary school students from Transylvania participated in the summer camp programme supported from Hungary in Csillebérc (Budapest). This camp provided a good opportunity for Hungarian children living in the mother country or outside its borders to make new contacts and to spend the vacation with useful entertainment.

3.2. Friendship Programme

The Friendship Programme was created upon the request of our supporters. Its beneficiaries are students who have previously participated in our core programme, but for some reason their participation has terminated. Reasons may vary: on the one hand, there are those who have finished their secondary school education and are studying at a university, and on the other hand there are students who were unable to achieve the required minimum school results or their family situation has changed, not allowing further allowance payment, but whose previous supporters agreed to continue supporting them. Beneficiaries of the Friendship Programme are predominantly university students. In the 2010–2011 academic year 82 students were receiving support under the programme, while in the 2011–2012 academic year this number increased to 87.

The form of the Friendship Programme is more relaxed than that of the core programme. As its telling name indicates, the programme is built on the friendship between the supporter and the supported and, therefore, there are no requirements to be met by the students in terms of school achievement or financial situation. However, the beneficiary has to study and to be in direct contact with the supporter, and the supporter has to confirm his/her/its intention to continue with the support.

3.3. Talent Points

In January 2009, the Association officially joined the Talent Point network of the Hungarian Talent Support Council. The decision made by the Accreditation Committee commissioned by the Federation of Hungarian Talent Support Organisations entitled Nyilas Misi Association to use the title ‘Accredited Excellent Talent Point of the Hungarian Talent Support Council’. (The deed and the plaque proving the result of accreditation were handed over in a ceremony held at the 2nd National Conference of Talent Points.)

In the second part of 2010, a 60-hour workshop was organised as part of the Talent Point programme, aiming primarily at deepening the knowledge of students in a given school subject and developing their talents in that subject. The participating nine students from Cluj-Napoca and its surroundings were allowed to decide for themselves what subject they wanted to study more intensely, entirely free of charge. Based on the students' choices, the Association invited teachers of professional esteem to perform the talent development task. They held sessions in 56 hours according to the individual development plans based on their assessment of the students' needs. In the remaining time, a talent development expert spent four hours with each selected student, measuring IQ and creativity levels, conducting life history interviews and giving career choice advice.

The programme was complemented by a personal development camp held in Torockó between August 2 and 8, 2010⁶. The programme of the camp was an integral part of the talent development effort complementing the 60-hour talent workshop. Objectives fulfilled during the programme: personal development (self-concept, identity, gender roles); improving self and peer knowledge, communication and co-operation skills, awakening and reinforcing human values (honesty, love, mutual respect and acceptance, humanitarianism).

The following are excerpts from the students' end-of-camp reports:

"I have realised what a treasure it is to have a loving family and how painful it can be to lose it. (...) From now on I will better appreciate the love and care of my parents and my siblings."

"This week was an important and unforgettable experience. I have learnt a lot about myself, about others and about relationships. I hope there will be camps like that in the future, too, so that others can also participate and perhaps that we can meet again."

"On Thursday we climbed Székelykő. It took a long time to reach it but we didn't give up. (...) It was a good lesson to learn that we should never give up our dreams because if we persist we can achieve everything we wish for."

"I have received a lot of understanding and respect."

In 2011, between February and June, the already commenced workshop activities were complemented by another 30 hours, 20 hours of which were focused on school subjects and 10 hours on career choice counselling.

In August 2010, we laid the foundations for more professional talent workshop activities by bringing together the outstanding teachers and psychologists we had requested to

⁶ A village in Fehér county 23 kms from Nagyenyed.

conduct the workshops with proven talent development experts in a two-day meeting, to give an opportunity to share their experience and knowledge.

National Talent Point workshops based on the accredited adult education programmes of the National Talent Support Council have also expanded across the borders. The National Talent Point has commissioned our Association to organise workshops in Transylvania in the capacity of intermediary organisation. By organising the workshop, the National Talent Point wished to provide a development opportunity primarily for the teachers of the Talent Points. Workshops were held on May 26–27, 2012 in the János Zsigmond Unitarian College. During the training built on the theme of *“Teaching to learn”*, 13 Transylvanian teachers could deepen their knowledge of methodology under the guidance of István Lukács, associate professor of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

Between July 11–25, 2012, 8 of our supported secondary school students interested and achieving good results in science subjects participated in a math and physics camp at the Lázberc Reservoir organised by Dr Gyula Tamás, retired teacher. In addition to expanding their school-subject-related knowledge, students participating in the camp could also improve their homeland knowledge during visits of historic sites.

3.4. The Ady Endre Scholarship

As a sign of trust, we have received a new request for 2010–2011. The Public Foundation for Education⁷ invited by the Hungarian Government to administer scholarship payments has commissioned the Association to organise and manage the Ady Endre Scholarship Programme. The type and volume of the scholarship is similar to the core programme of the Association.

The responsibilities of the Association include calling for and receiving applications, preparing applications for evaluation (organising applications, preparing an electronic database), notifying the applicants, concluding support contracts, preparing the bank transfer of payments and the transfer of scholarship money to the bank accounts of the beneficiaries. Taking into account the available budget, the Association has pronounced 197 applications from Transylvania successful, and the beneficiaries are entitled to an annual amount of RON 100 thousand each.

⁷ “The Government of the Hungarian Republic established the Public Foundation for Education by unifying and also as the legal successor of Public Foundation for Modernising Public Education, the National College Public Foundation, the Chance to Study Public Foundation, the Bursa Hungarica Public Foundation and the National Priority Social Science Research Public Foundation, enforceable as of September 21, 2005.” (Available at <http://www.nefmi.gov.hu/kozoktatas/oktk>, date of download November 9, 2011.)

The Ministry of Human Resources has commissioned our Association as the Transylvanian partner to administer the Ady Endre Scholarship announced again for the 2011–2012 academic year. Acting in this capacity we gave a HUF 100 thousand/cap scholarship to 176 students.

4. Summary

The number of students supported under the programme and taking the secondary school leaving exam is increasing year by year, thus proving the success of our efforts. The first students participating in the programme launched in 2003 took their maturity exams in 2007. A total of 450 grant receivers have taken maturity exams: 37 students in 2007; 85 in 2008; 100 in 2009, 83 in 2010; 75 in 2011 and 70 in 2012.

The 9-year history of our core programme, the expansion of our activities, continuous additions and enlargements are proofs in themselves that civil society alliance can be successful in supporting an important public issue. In the first period of our activities, quantitative development to increase the number of participants was the key issue, giving place gradually to securing the continuous operation of the Association by eliminating all elements that are against our principles through appropriate application procedures and closer relationships. This effort resulted in enhanced operational efficiency and creditability. We should also include among our achievements that many of our supporters have remained loyal to us. Media coverage of and public opinion on the programme and the Association have also been positive.

We believe that our programmes have played a part in the significant increase of the number and ratio of students taking their school-leaving exams in Hungarian in the given period. Although it cannot be directly measured or validated by quantitative data, there are indications that the prestige of the school, of education and knowledge have increased among both the parents and the students. The trust of our supporters confirms that a public issue that is important for our future can really be made a common issue regardless of political divisions and tendencies. We hope that the environment we live in and the entire Hungarian society in Transylvania will become more and more talent-friendly.