**February 2010:**

The air is biting cold as we walk up the icy path to Lyceum “Nicholae Iorga”. My old friend Sandu, now 19, is sitting with a handful of teenage boys who are making jokes and hitting each other in the back of the head, Three Stooges style. They are all wearing bomber jackets and skull caps. This is Moldova’s uniform. Some have bags and some have athletic pants on and I comment on how much each of them has grown in the past two years. We call the 24-hour security guy (I use this term loosely) who sends his 5-year old down to the school to give Sandu the key so that we can get into the school.

There are no lights on in the school. Nor is there heat. It might actually be warmer outside but the walls of the school protect us from the wind although I can’t say the same for the windows. We walk down the dark hallway which has gone unchanged in my two-year absence. It is brutally cold in the hallway full of windows and I’m glad that we’re moving because otherwise my hands and toes would be as numb as my face. And that’s obnoxious.

My “office” where I stored the gis looks virtually untouched with the exception of some new windows that were donated by some Baptists from England. These windows were sitting collecting dust and will probably continue to do so for the duration. An attendance list with my handwriting is in the same place by the window where I left it, and all of the donated gis appear to still be there. Sandu makes one of the bigger kids let me use his gi since I didn’t bring mine.

We go into the gym which has some new paint on the floors but otherwise looks just the same. The gym is lit by one jury-rigged street light and the walls sparkle with condensation. It’s like a giant refrigerator in there. We get the mats out and they look like they’re still in great shape. No new rips and with the exception of some extra dirt and a piece of gum on one of them, they look like I just left them yesterday. I can still see my breath as I get out of my nice warm clothes and I shiver as I put on the cold gi over my long underwear.

It reminds me of when I first introduced the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu program 4 winters ago although then it was a bit warmer. Only by a bit though.

**Building a Program:**

I was assigned to the small village of Burlacu in the Cahul region in the Republic of Moldova for a two-year stint after my 10-week training as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I was pissed. I had in mind before I came out to Moldova that I would be assigned to work in a city or at least an accessible small-town. In fact, I had grown up in a big town, had lived in Detroit and was familiar with city issues. My previous job was as a “counselor” at a boy’s home in Motown. My intentions were to share my wrestling and BJJ knowledge in my new city in exchange for doing some judo or maybe even entering in a Sambo competition here and there.

Instead I got Burlacu. Crappy little Podunk Burlacu that is impossible to find even on Google Maps. There would be no Sambo for me. Once my language got a bit better I found that there were no mats at the school. The gym teacher said that he would try and get some mats from the nearby village so that I could do some wrestling if I wanted. The promise went unfulfilled as would be the general rule for future promises.

I was trained as a “Health Education” volunteer in the Peace Corps so my main job was teaching kids how to be clean, respect others and generally maintain healthy lifestyles. I didn’t have any experience with this in the States but I did have plenty of experience with sports, especially grappling. I figured that teaching Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu/submission grappling as a side project would probably fit in with my general job description but again, I had nothing to grapple on.

I decided that the school officials might not be much of a help to me and I set out on my own. I was able to get my mats after hounding people in the US for money, going to the capital and buying some. I couldn’t afford many but at least I got enough for my purposes. I eventually set up a program with kids in the village. Initially I wanted to start an adults’ grappling club but the only ones who showed up were kids. This was new to me. I had to figure out how to make the lessons functional as well as fun so I learned to incorporate games into the lessons. I also needed some gis. Although I come from a wrestling background I understand that grappling pedagogy can be supported in many different ways with the use of a gi. Especially when submissions are your main focus.

Somehow I worked my magic and after sending out an email to about 6 recipients who were randomly selected from an internet search, describing my program and what I needed, I received a number of replies. Luckily one of the recipients was the legendary Lloyd Irving who miraculously read my email and even more miraculously forwarded it on to his people. Less than 20 minutes after I sent out the email I got a call on my cell phone in my village in the middle of nowhere from a guy in California who wanted to donate 10 gis. Maybe five minutes after this a guy from Italy called and said that his friend had some gear that he wanted to donate as well. I got a few more calls and a lot more emails.

It was amazing to me how closely knit and generous the grappling community could be. In the end I received more than enough gis and other equipment. I stayed in touch with Sharon (one of Lloyd Irving’s students) as well as a guy who worked at a t-shirt company who wanted to design t-shirts and send them to me for my kids. Sharon was a huge contributor and sent me anything that I needed and I still have no idea how she did it. The t-shirts were awesome and original and I knew that I could use them as incentives for my students.

I decided that the t-shirts (which read “Burlacu Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu”, with an original design) would have to be earned by taking a kind of a belt test. Since I wasn’t qualified to give out legitimate belts and I didn’t want my kids to arrive at an established program somewhere saying that they had a brown belt or something and then getting crushed by white belts, they had to earn a t-shirt instead. They had to know the basics of the Gracie Jiu-Jitsu point system, the lineage (Maeda-Carlos Gracie-Helio Gracie-Royler Gracie-Saulo Ribeiro-Me) as well as various fundamental sweeps, guard passes and submissions. By the time I left, over 15 kids were able to pass the test and proudly wear their t-shirt.

**Building Legitimacy:**

I had to build some clout. I had to show that there is a good reason to stay fit and learn to defend oneself. Otherwise nobody was going to believe in my program and they were going to write it off as some Jakie Chan, movie-star fighting. This is when I heard of the “Opening of the Season”. The Opening of the Season is a sports festival that is held every year in the village when the village of Burlacu competes against neighboring villages in various events to celebrate the beginning of soccer season.

Events included soccer (of course) volleyball, basketball… and wrestling. The idea was great. In the wrestling competition there would be 3 separate divisions; little boys, teenagers, and the men’s division. No weight classes. Single elimination. Winner takes all. What do you win? The winner of the little boys gets to take home a rooster to their proud family. The winner of the teenagers gets an enormously large rabbit. And for them men, the winner gets a sheep. Not just any sheep. The strongest, most valiant of all the men in the village gets to feed their friends and family with a ram, the most manliest of sheeps.

So I sat and stomached some soccer and volleyball competitions as I waited around for them to announce the sign-up for the wrestling competition. When it was sign-up time there was some dispute as to whether I could enter or not since I was not from any of the villages, let alone the country. Eventually it was decided that I was now part of the community and I was allowed to vie for the respect of the village and the legitimacy of the program. We all drew numbers to see who our first opponent would be.

I drew Petrica, a bean-pole of a fellow and a heavy smoker from our village. He sucked. Having wrestled in college I wasn’t nervous about being able to perform despite not being in wrestling shape. I was a little nervous about the weight differences though. At about 180 and 5’9”, I was a small fry in the village wrestling competition. Petrica was about my weight but he was at least 6’3”.

I took him down with ease. He managed to wriggle off the mat which apparently wasn’t illegal. Actually, I had a hard time deciphering what was legal and what wasn’t. There wasn’t a point system. Or a time limit. The “referee” (gym teacher) arbitrarily stood the wrestlers up at inconvenient times, and the matches more closely resembled a non-point-scoring judo fight or freestyle wrestling match where you had about 20 seconds to pin your opponent depending on the mood of the ref at the time.

I decided to take my time and wear my opponents out so I wouldn’t have to struggle to pin them in a few seconds and get winded. Petrica was the exception. I took him down a second time and quarter-nelsoned him to his back for the pin. Everyone was watching. There were kids who climbed up the basketball hoops, on the nearby jungle gym, and even the volleyball nets to try and see the competition. Everyone cheered. It must have been pretty amusing to see the American who can only speak broken Romanian rolling around with the unwashed.

I got to rest for only a couple minutes before I was to start my next match with a guy from a neighboring village who looked like he ate steroid burgers and threw cows in strong-man competitions. He was about my height and probably 20 pounds heavier than me but the body-fat content difference between us was very much lopsided.

He was strong. When the ref blew the whistle he pushed me into the crowd and if they would not have been there I would have surely fallen on my ass like a punk. I definitely had to wear this guy out. I ankle-picked him pretty easily and let him struggle on the ground for a bit. We were stood up again and he muscled me down. I didn’t try to stand up and stayed on my base. This happened again and I put my chin on my hand, looking bored for show. The little kids liked this.

This dude would not wear out. But his wrestling sucked. He tried headlocking me to my back but I rolled through and he wound up on bottom. The ref blew the whistle. I had won my second match. The ref warned me not to put pressure on the neck next time. I don’t know why. He was obviously unfamiliar with the sport because it’s hard to win without pushing someone somewhere. This isn’t soccer.

Now I was in the finals. I was up against a monster. I had been warned about this guy when it was still cold out and I was asking about the competition. Mr. Sabie had been winning this competition hands-down for the past 10 years or so. “So he must be old”, I said. “But he’s big”, was the response. “He is over 2 meters tall and over 120 kilos!”. So? I use feet and pounds to measure things so I have no concept of how big this guy is.

Oh shit… that guy?! That guy is Mr. Sabie? This guy looks like an out-of-shape Hulk Hogan with no moustache and a haircut. The match started and as I was locked up with him I could tell that he had done some wrestling in the past as opposed to my last two opponents. He probably trained in the Soviet Army as most of the old-school dudes from the village did. He wasn’t quick, but he was strong. Damn… that was always my strength too.

He came at me strong and took me down a couple times. Luckily, I was not down by any points and he was using a lot of energy. This turned into an epic battle. We fought for almost 20 minutes. In the beginning he was schooling me. Take-down after take-down it looked like I was being crushed. But there was no score board. And he was getting tired.

Now it was my turn. I did a high-crotch single, picking him up and slamming him. This drew some cheers from the enormous audience that was now surrounding us. I couldn’t get him on his back. He stalled out on his belly with his elbows tucked in. I had to try something else. I did an inside trip which landed him on his back. I moved to his head and the ref blew the whistle for us to stand up again! What the hell? This became the theme for the next 10 minutes as each time I got close to pinning him, we had to stand up again.

Now I was tired too. I kept going though. I knew for a fact that college wrestling practices had to be more hardcore than the broken-down Soviet Army training. Right? But they wouldn’t let me win. No ref was going to allow the 10-year-and-running champ lose this match. And he wouldn’t give up. I most certainly wasn’t going to give up. Now I was taking him down effortlessly and throwing up my hands in the air when I got on top because I knew the whistle was coming soon. The ref made a proposition. We would share the prize. The championship. The ram!

I felt that by this time I had made my point. I wasn’t trying to take anyone’s pride. I definitely didn’t want to take their food. I shook hands with Mr. Sabie and both our hands were raised. The crowd didn’t like this. They wanted a winner. But they were also happy that the marathon fight had ended so they didn’t question the decision.

During the awards ceremony, Mr. Sabie was given the ram. With his head hung low, he walked up to me, shook my hand and gave me the live ram which was hog-tied by three of his four legs. I immediately put the ram down on the ground because I had never handled one of these things before. Everyone laughed at me. They showed me how to put the ram on my shoulders and I carried it home with me after an afternoon of drinking. The ram, in its foresight saved all of its urine for the victorious trip home and it pissed all over me.

Mr. Sabie and I had a picnic with the victorious soccer team and our friends the next week. He was still bitter but the point had been made. The next time I had practice, I had some more participants. Sandu came to every practice that he could. Sandu got very good and was easily giving me a run for my money by the time I left the village in the summer of ’07.

**The Future of the Program:**

My t-shirts are still being worn by the kids who earned them even though they are two sizes too small by now. A whole new generation of Moldovans knows what Brazilian Jiu-jitsu is. They took the test and even today still understand the object of BJJ and the point system. I had to remind them about the lineage, and explained to them that I had been training with someone besides Saulo since I didn’t live by him anymore. This was confusing but they accepted it.

Sandu is bigger and stronger now. Rolling with him I’ve noticed that he’s incredibly strong, more athletic and my back is bad. Just short of 30 I feel like an old man. But this is a good thing. Like I said, there is a new generation of fighters in a village far away, in a country that nobody has heard of. These are forgotten people. Just like Helio Gracie and countless others were thirsty to show that this fighting style needs to be respected, these kids are thirsty for more too. I love my village now. I have a second home there. It’s not the city that I wanted but it provided the community that I needed. Many things in life happen like this.

It may always be cold in winter. The new windows may never get put in. But some things are different now in the village of Burlacu, region of Cahul in the Republic of Moldova. My former 8th graders (now 10th graders) could flex half of the men’s teams in the States; men’s teams with running water and flush toilets. I’m obviously proud of my village and their accomplishments. They couldn’t have done it without other helpful people. So thanks to all of you anonymous and not-so-anonymous helpful folks out there. And who knows, perhaps a new breed of slightly bigger, cleaner and more healthy fighters will be choking dudes out in a gym near you. You never know.