

THE LEGACY OF HELEN L. RINKER ASHLEY

Changing Lives, Half a World Away





2012

2017

For the people of Voditsa, Bulgaria, it would seem as if an unlikely angel from a distant land has adopted their village and made its development her mission. Yet for Helen L. Rinker Ashley, it was inevitable that Voditsa should become the beneficiary of her philanthropy.

Helen's parents, Atanas and Elena Penev, lived in the little village of Voditsa until they emigrated to the US around 1912-14. To pay tribute to her parents' homeland, Helen bequeathed a portion of her estate to fund much-needed infrastructure and education projects in the village.

"The projects undertaken so far show how donations can change lives in a community," said Ted Hart, President and CEO, CAF America. "That is exactly the purpose envisioned by the creation of the Helen Rinker Ashley Fund."

<<< The repair of the mechanism and of the entire clock tower house took more than 6 months and over 130,000 leva donated by the Helen Rinker Ashley Fund.

MAKING AN IMPACT

In 2008, Helen's lawyers contacted CAF America and explained her desire to provide financial support for improvement projects in Voditsa. Together, they created a donor advised fund (DAF) to be financed from the sale of her property and other assets upon her death. After Helen passed in 2009 at the age of 93 and her estate was settled in 2011, the monies available for the Fund provided by the estate were precisely \$1,467,284.70 USD (which is equivalent to 2,610,543.43 Bulgarian Lev (BGN)).



The Centre's main programmes work towards training and spreading the spirit of entrepreneurship among children and adults.

Through 2019, the Helen L. Rinker Ashley Fund has provided over \$1.15 million USD (\$2.04 million Bulgarian Lev (BGN)) toward more than 15 critical projects in the two areas Helen specified as her priorities: infrastructure and education. From rebuilding nearly every community building in the village, to adding closed-circuit TV cameras in public areas for security, to installing a new water supply system, to rebuilding and repairing the clock tower that was damaged by an earthquake some four decades ago, Helen's gift is improving the quality of life in Voditsa and making a difference where it is most needed. The Fund has also financed cultural events (giving birth to the local folk dancing festival), teacher training sessions, and new computers for the elementary school.

Since its inception, the Helen L. Rinker Ashley Fund has made a profound impact on the lives of the people of Voditsa, which some 200 residents call home. Voditsa is located about a 3 ½ hour drive east of the Bulgarian capital of Sofia, in the direction of the Black Sea. It is one of the regions of Bulgaria most in need of infrastructure and other financial support. The guidelines Helen established for her legacy gift demonstrate just how closely connected she was to the needs of this distant village.



The renovated school and schoolyard in Voditsa, one of many projects financed by The Helen L. Rinker Ashley Fund. ^
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One of the most recent and perhaps most far-reaching initiatives enabled by the Fund was the creation of The Rinker Center for Entrepreneurship and Training, dedicated to promoting education and life-long learning while fostering entrepreneurship and business development across Bulgaria.

Making these essential improvements possible required culturally significant and sensitive communication, coordination, and due diligence. CAF America first informed the village residents that the fund had been established, with a representative traveling to Voditsa to make the formal announcement in person. Since the tiny village lacked its own non-profit community, and to ensure all cross-border regulatory requirements were met, CAF America partnered with the BCause Foundation (formerly known as the Bulgarian Charities Aid Foundation). Working together, BCause and CAF America ensured the fund's use and disbursement remained within regulatory compliance, with BCause managing the implementation of the improvement projects locally. CAF America advised village residents on the types of projects that could be financed by Helen's fund – assuring the community's needs were met, while working within regulatory constraints. When Ted Hart visited Voditsa in 2017 for a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the renovated clock tower, it was evident that the combined efforts of CAF America and BCause had proven successful in putting Helen's legacy gift to work for the village.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Helen's choice of Voditsa as the recipient of her legacy gift may seem surprising at first glance. After all, there are many worthy causes close to home. But given Helen's strong family ties and her continued connection to her parents' homeland, it was only natural that she would choose this little village as the beneficiary of her generosity. The memories of her niece Ann Lewis Schuh, niece Margarita Bobeva, and cousin Madeln Cholakova form an image of a woman who was strong-willed, passionate, generous of spirit, and committed to family—a woman who cared deeply about her ancestry and heritage.

Helen was born on February 22, 1916 in Jenks, Oklahoma, the rural town where her parents Atanas and Elena had settled. Most likely they had left Bulgaria to flee the Balkan War and to seek better economic opportunities. "Here they were living poorly," recalls Margarita. "I remember their cottage. It was in the center of the village, but it was small and shabby."

Helen's father had visited America first to prepare for the family's move, then returned to Bulgaria to bring his wife and son Ganyo to their new country. Atanas and Elena also had a young daughter, but the border authorities considered her too ill to leave the country, so she stayed behind with Atanas's brother.

Atanas, Elena, and Ganyo emigrated through Philadelphia, lived for a while in Iowa, then bought land and settled in Jenks, drawn by the large community of Bulgarian immigrants there. To preserve their Bulgarian roots, Helen's parents spoke only their native tongue at home, which is why she spoke the language almost fluently herself. "I remember hearing her speaking Bulgarian surprisingly well, with just minor inaccuracies. We definitely didn't need a translator," Margarita recalls.

As a young woman Helen married Fred Rinker, and together they ran a shop in Jenks that serviced TVs and other appliances, as well as a leather manufacturing shop. She did not have children, though her brother Ganyo had a son, Gus. Helen's cousin Ann Lewis Schuh recounts that her father Gus was originally named after Ganyo. "The family tried to preserve their Bulgarian names and Bulgarian origin,



Helen's brother and her older sister, who had to be left behind in Bulgaria. The photo was taken just before the family departed for the US. (Family archive)

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Helen's father Atanas, mother Elena, and brother Ganyo soon after arriving in the US. (Family archive)



but the US authorities have not permitted to name an American child with such a foreign name and my father has been renamed Gus," Ann says.

THE POWERFUL TIES OF FAMILY

Though she lived her entire life in the US, Helen stayed closely connected to Bulgaria and Voditsa in particular. During a trip to Bulgaria in 1974, she asked if the family needed support and if they would want to send one of Helen's nieces to America to live with her. She also bestowed her relatives with generous gifts, Margarita says. "I still remember how she took off her wristwatch, an incredible watch, and gave it to my mother," she recounts. "My mother wore it almost to her last days."

Helen continued to demonstrate her generosity and a love of her ancestry in many other ways—bringing a distant nephew to the US, covering nursing expenses for an elderly uncle from Bulgaria who was living alone in the US, and making charitable donations to assist the people of Voditsa and the region, often attempting to do so anonymously.

In 2002 a man who presented himself as "Uncle George" visited the hospital in Popovo, a larger town near Voditsa, and inquired about their equipment needs. The timing couldn't have been better, as the hospital was experiencing one of its toughest years financially, according to its accountant. A donation of 45,000 Bulgarian Lev soon followed— it was a gift from Helen. Today the hospital entrance displays a plaque commemorating Helen's much-welcome donation toward the purchase of new equipment.

Helen's niece Margarita believes this gift was Helen's way of thanking the hospital for its kindness to her. Arriving for her 1974 visit with a broken arm, she went to the Popovo hospital to have the cast removed and to have other medical check-ups done. She expected a large bill, since her health insurance didn't provide coverage in Bulgaria, but the staff cared for her at no charge.

"Every time I went to the hospital and saw the thank-you plate, something was shaking in me, my eyes filled with tears," Margarita says. "But the plaque states that this is a gift from Helen Ashley, and I only knew her as Rinker. Years later I found out that it was the same Helen of my own kin." Helen had remarried after the passing of Fred Rinker, taking on the surname (Ashley) of her second husband.



A plaque of appreciation for Helen's equipment donation welcomes visitors and patients at the Popovo hospital. (Photo by Juliana Koleva) ^ ^

In 2003 Helen came to the aid of Voditsa again through the same man who had made the hospital donation, known only as Uncle George. He asked the director of the elementary school what they needed, and two new computers arrived soon after. Ann Lewis Schuh remarked on her aunt's generosity in an obituary she published on Ancestry.com in 2011, in which she stated: "She did a great thing by helping out the kids of Voditsa village. What a great legacy to leave behind."

It is a testament to the strength of family ties that Helen Rinker Ashley bequeathed a portion of her estate to fund a better way of life for the people of her parent's homeland, thousands of miles from her own home. In the words of her niece, Madlen Cholakova, "Such is our family—for good or for bad, we can never break away and forget our roots, our origin." In remembering her roots and paying tribute to her ancestry, Helen has touched the lives of the Voditsa residents in ways they will not soon forget.

BEYOND VODITSA

Tinosaur

<https://tinosaur.org>



Tinosaur offers tools and aids for conducting multidisciplinary training combining physics, mathematics and computer science in a curriculum with strong practical focus and elements of entrepreneurship. The platform develops STEM skills in adolescents and enables teachers and students to build and program their first smart devices on their own, capable of performing a number of commands and tasks.

The project took part in the accelerator program in 2018/2019 and since 2019 The Rinker Center for Entrepreneurship and Training has been supporting them.

Meteo.Rocks

<https://meteo.rocks>



Meteo.Rocks is developing and producing meteorological equipment. The idea covers the design, production and sale of a wide range of meteorological stations at an affordable price. Their biggest success so far is the fact that they are providing meteorological equipment for the Bulgarian Antarctic Institute.

The project took part in the accelerator program in 2017/2018 and since 2018 The Rinker Center for Entrepreneurship and Training has been supporting them.

Delishu

<https://delishu.bg>



Delishu is a cultured cashew product with live probiotic bacteria. Only one pack of Delishu consists of 58 billion Lactobacillus Bulgaricus, 65 billion S.Thermophilus, and 2 billion Lactobacillus Acidophilus. The revolutionary probiotic content of Delishu exceeds multiple times the content in most of the dairy products and at the same time its useful ingredients are perfectly assimilated by the organism due to the lack of lactose, thermal processing and gluten.

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ABOUT CAF AMERICA

Since 1992, CAF America's core mission has been to facilitate domestic and cross-border giving by Americans to validated charities across the world.

Through donor advised giving and our industry-leading due diligence protocols, we enable our donors to make strategic, cost-effective, and tax-advantaged gifts while reducing the risk, reputational exposure, and administrative burden associated with cross-border giving.

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