**PRESS RELEASE**

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Association for Culture, Education and Communication (ACEC)

**First year of the European Roma Spirit Award 2016 knows its Laureates**

The nominations arrived from 23 European countries who decided to participate in the first year of the European Roma Spirit Award (ERSA) 2016 - an international award giving presentation of activities, projects and individuals that support integration of Roma in Europe and bring effective and functioning solutions to the issues faced by the Roma community. We received a total of 65 nominations of exceptional individuals, organizations and projects.

The laureates of the European Roma Spirit Award 2016 were chosen by an International Jury of Experts on Monday, October 10, 2015. The members of the Jury included **Ms. Ethel Brooks** (Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences), **Mr. Andrzej Mirga** (Roma Education Fund), **Mr. Michael Kocáb** (activist, Czech Republic), and **Ms. Mirjam Karoly** (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights). The Jury was chaired by **Ms. Věra Jourová**, European Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality.

The European Roma Spirit Award 2016 in the category of Non-Governmental Organization was awarded to a Romanian Agency for Community Development “Impreuna”for implementation of the “What do you want to be when you grow up?" project aimed at improving educational achievements of Roma youth.

The Roma Education Support Trust (REST) from Great Britain was presented the award in the category ofCompany, Organization and/or Employer for implementation of the program “Every Child Matters: Ensuring High Quality Education for All” improving the quality of education of Roma students.

A Slovak town of **Spišský Hrhov** won the award in the category of Municipality. According to the member of the Jury, Ethel Brooks, Spišský Hrhov “*can be an example for the whole Europe*”. Its Mayor, Vladimír Ledecký, started the municipal company shortly after being elected in 1998 and employed the local Roma. Thanks to this municipal company, the whole town flourished. “*Inhabitants of our town understood that if all people contributed to solving our issues together, all of us would benefit,*” says Vladimír Ledecký, the Mayor of Spišský Hrhov.

The sculpture of bronze hands holding a beating heart was also awarded to Sampicha Souleiman from Greece in the category of Personality. Ms. Souleiman is from a town of Xanthi (population 7,000) with more than 3,000 children. In the local Roma settlement where she grew up, Ms. Souleiman establishes kindergartens and schools so the children and their mothers could receive the education which herself could not have at their age. “*I was one of those children forbidden from going to school and I was married at the age of 14 against my will. I used my experiences to help the children so they would not have to sell the flowers in the streets to make the living and they could reach a better future through education,*” says Souleiman.

The Award in the category of Media was presented to our neighbors from Czech Republic for the news portal Romea.cz bringing fair and balanced information about Roma and for giving space to Roma in media.

A special In Memoriam award was given to **Dr. Ján Cibuľa**, the first Romani physician in Czechoslovakia, founder of the International Romani Union and a Nobel Peace Prize candidate. “*This extraordinary Slovak citizen significantly contributed to the improvement of situation of the Roma minority and its official recognition,*” says the author of the Roma Spirit award idea, Ms. Ľubomíra Slušná-Franz, President of ACEC.

The gala ceremony of the first year of the European Roma Spirit Award 2016 took place on Monday, October 10, in the Great Hall of the Slovak Radio thanks to the support of the Prime Minister of the Slovak Government, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family of the Slovak Republic, the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for Roma Communities, and with support of all other enlightened sponsors and donors.

The gala evening was hosted by Emma Smetana, singer and news anchor from the Czech Republic. Accompanying cultural program included performances by exceptional Sendreiovci music band and girls from Čercheňora choir, Solo Quartet of the music producer Slavo Solovic, and talented band of Chalani z chatrče. The program was also livened up by the fashion show of the beautiful dresses created by Monika Vontszeműová. The dresses were modeled by beautiful women including a musicianSilvia Šarköziová and her daughter Vanessa, singer Gitana, and first violinist Barbora Botošová. A well-known Slovak director Nikita Slovák was the director of the gala evening.

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*The Association for Culture, Education, and Communication is a non-governmental organization which aims to create understanding, support international cultural exchange, broaden education and create opportunities for the future continuation of mutual communication.  In its educational activities, ACEC focuses on preparation and implementation of programs for socially disadvantaged groups, especially focusing on Roma minority in Slovakia.*