

ALEX MĂRMUREANU - "I like everything in America"

Hollywood's "Heart Doctor"



The "City of Angels", Los Angeles, has lately become the place where Romanians are living "the American dream" with their eyes wide open. Romanians from the worlds of literature, cinema and medicine are writing success stories in the Land of Promise. One such story is that of the famous "heart doctor" Alex Mărmureanu ("Dr. M"), as he is called by his colleagues, who specializes

in heart and lung surgery. Growing up in the healthy air of Băile Govora and with a genetic heritage in the medical field (his parents and sister are also doctors), Alex Mărmureanu studied medicine in Craiova, then, in 1990, he went in search of the American El Dorado, furthering his studies in New York, after which he settled in Los Angeles.

An exceptional professional and charismatic man, he is also highly appreciated by Hollywood stars - Leonardo Di Caprio, Bruce Willis, Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty, Steven Spielberg and Sylvester Stallone - with whom he has made lifelong friendships and who have also benefited from the services of the "heart doctor". His medical expertise has made him well known and highly regarded, and he has been a guest on major TV channels in the US, where he has shared his expertise.

The following interview proves once again the creativity and the ability of Romanian specialists to assert themselves, to have brilliant careers abroad, where they are appreciated and where they can show off their knowledge and native talent, and who are also a credit to Romania. I would like to thank Dr. Mărmureanu for taking time out from his very demanding schedule to chat with me at his residence in Hollywood...

"Medical school in Romania is very, very good"

- You graduated from Craiova Medical School. Did your training there help you in your successful career in the United States? How did you come to hit the road?

- My parents being doctors, I was instilled with this "bug" of medicine in my family, and as a result, I attended the University of Medicine in Craiova. The medical school in Romania is very, very good and helped me a lot in America. The courses are serious and the medical practice in the hospital

is very special. My practice in Romanian hospitals helped me a lot when I arrived in the States. Once again, I repeat, the medical school in Romania is very good, it has very good staff, first class doctors, unfortunately, the equipment there is not up to the level of the one here in America.

- You arrived in the United States in 1990. What happened next?

- That's right, I arrived in 1990, with the idea of practicing medicine at the highest level... and I succeeded. Today I'm a surgeon specializing in heart and lung surgery. I have an office at UCLA, and I work with three other major hospitals in Los Angeles. When I arrived in the U.S. I had to take some differential exams, which were not easy, but I was determined to succeed and I passed them with flying colors. I did my residency at New York University, which has one of the best surgical programs in the U.S. I was one of the first foreigners to be accepted there. Then I went on to Mount Sinai, also in New York, where I furthered my studies and completed my residency, and then in 2000, I moved to Los Angeles, where I am still...

- What are the qualities of a successful doctor in the US? How did you manage to become one of the most highly regarded surgeons in Los Angeles?

- As a doctor, and especially as a surgeon, in the United States you have to be very focused on your profession. Be very dedicated to the profession. You have to be available all the time and answer the phone at all hours of the day and night. My phone is open 24 hours. Then you have to be kind, take care of patients and make yourself liked. Then you will be respected and appreciated. And, last but not least, you have to have talent and aptitude, to "have a good hand", as they say in Romania.

Tennis with Bill Gates

- What does a 'typical' day in the life of a surgeon look like?

- No two days are alike. I can't say that I have "ordinary" days, but rather days with a different load. In general, I wake up at 6 o'clock every morning, get to the hospital around 7.30, where I usually have two or three surgeries a day. Sometimes I even go to two hospitals a day and I'm in the operating room from the morning until four in the afternoon. After the operations I have visiting hours, where I meet the patients I have operated on, and I get home in the evening around 10 o'clock. Sometimes I even get home at midnight. That's the scenario, and it repeats itself.



- Are you also involved in the treatment of broken hearts and love afflictions?

- Heart surgeries are not easy, with our patients we enter strongly into the sentimental zone, they expect from us not only skill, but also the guarantee of success. But yes, sometimes a broken heart can end up on the operating table.

- You're an athletic, sporty guy, you've played tennis at home, and here in the States, you play tennis with Bill Gates, with whom you have a beautiful friendship...

- Indeed, I am friends with Bill Gates. We won a doubles tennis match together in a tournament in Palm Springs, near Los Angeles. He's an extraordinary guy, very intelligent, brilliant, as the Americans say, and very mellow, very quiet and pragmatic. He's easy to talk to. He is also a very generous man who, with his wife Melinda, has donated millions of dollars to good causes.

"Work, work and hard work"

- What hobbies do you have besides tennis?



- In addition to tennis, which I play whenever I have time (I belong to a tennis club, "Riviera Country Club"), I love skiing. In Romania, I was a lifeguard in Predeal and a ski instructor in Sinaia, where I participated in university championships. I have a house in Mammoth Lakes, a winter resort near Los Angeles, where I go skiing whenever the weather permits and, from time to

time, I also go to Alaska, where I helicopter ski. In Romania, I also liked rallying very much, and I brought the "bug" here to America, where I race for Porsche and Lamborghini.

- You have two children. Did you give them the medicine bug?

- No, they're not "infected". My son, Nick (age 25), is an officer in the US Navy. My daughter, Alexandra, is a big soccer fan. She played soccer at one of the best-known universities in the US, where she won three national championships and, for a short time, also played for the Romanian National Soccer Team, where she had a great experience and a very nice collaboration with her coaches and teammates. She really enjoyed Romania, where she is very happy to return from time to time.

- How are you with Hollywood celebrities?

- Here in Hollywood, people take care of their physical aspect, they go to the gym, they dress very well and they pay attention to detail. It's important to have a good upbringing, to be polite, well-

mannered and to keep in good physical shape. I have many friends in the movie world, because I live right in Hollywood, and I have many patients with heart conditions... but also broken hearts (laughs). I attend a lot of charity events where I meet them and we have common hobbies - racing cars, tennis, skiing, and parties.

- *What advice do you have for young Romanians who want to pursue a medical career in the US?*

- I warn them that it is very difficult... but not impossible. It takes a lot of dedication and, although, as I said, the medical school in Romania is very good, I advise them to study US medical textbooks, to be mentally and academically very well prepared, because the competition is very high in the US. Work, work and a lot of work... is the key to success.

- *Do you still get to go back to Romania?*

- Unfortunately, I'm rarely in the country, I'm very busy, but I really enjoy seeing my native places. Two years ago I was in Romania with my daughter and four years ago with my son. I have been to the Prahova Valley, Sibiu, Bucharest and, of course, Băile Govora, my native place, a very beautiful settlement with very open and kind people.

- *Plans for the future?*

- I'm very happy with my life and I don't want to make long-term plans. "Carpe diem," say the sages. And, for now, I'm living in the moment. (laughs)

Viorel Vintila