



## Everyday Heroes: When Helping Is Not an Obligation But a Lifestyle

Civil society project

**Although many have sounded the alarm, saying that today's generation Y is irreversibly lost in the world of smartphones and game consoles, there is an organisation to show us a great counterexample. In the *Be an Everyday Hero* project, students learn in a playful way what it means to be a volunteer.**

*"Make the town a better place, make people smile"* – such were the goals which the students competing in the programme implemented by the Evangelic Church of Sopron set for themselves. In the project launched as part of the *Europe for Citizens* programme in March 2015, already 17 teams from Sopron compete with volunteering activities to find out who the ambassador of volunteering will be in May 2016. We asked Péter Csizmár programme coordinator about the programme.

### **Where does the idea of *Be an Everyday Hero* come from?**

I've been a member of Rotary Club for years. This organisation helps

disadvantaged people – that's where the idea came from. We organise donations to support the families in need, help the children with their studies, even musical studies, and we also support the local kindergarten and institute for the physically disabled. At the same time, we noticed that it was hard to involve young people. That was how we first thought of promoting volunteering among students.

### **How did you get young people involved in the programme?**

We were even helped by a regulation that requires secondary school students to complete 50 hours' volunteer work before the final exam; however, it's not specified where they should work as volunteers. So they were even happy that they were offered such a great opportunity. It was convenient, because it's difficult to motivate students or convince them to do anything, especially to work. In order to make it less of an obligation, we put volunteering in a playful competition environment. The competition involved four countries;

besides Hungarian students, students from Croatia, Transylvania and Slovenia are also working to make their environments better. The team that proves best will win a one-week holiday in Croatia, besides being elected the ambassadors of volunteering. The members of the jury who assess students' work all come from the local civil society.

### **How should we imagine this competition?**

The students form smaller teams to complete various tasks, for which they get scores during the competition. Each round has a different theme, but within that, the teams can decide what they want to do. Some made cookies for the residents of a children's home, some visited elderly people, whereas others renovated a playground or organised toy donations for the children's ward at the local hospital. Currently, they are preparing for a Christmas programme with the students of Cseresznyesori children's homes and Tóth Antal School: they teach poems and songs to the younger ones, and they also prepare costumes.



In the third round, the students had to find somebody who can be a role model to them, whom they can regard as an everyday hero. One team interviewed 70-year-old Erzsébet Zsuzsanna Horváth, who decorates the altar at the chapel of a retirement home in Sopron; besides, she also visits the ill, does the shopping and redeems prescriptions. Another team visited a volunteer firefighter, but there was also someone who asked his own teacher what volunteering meant to her.

#### ***What else do you offer the students?***

Besides the team tasks, we also organise community shaping programmes for the contestants, such as a bicycle tour to the Lake Fertő region. However, before we started, members of the Wilfing Áron Association gave a road safety presentation, because we think it's important that the students should learn something new from everything. We also held an eco festival in May in Sopron, where the teams held

recycling handicraft workshops, thus gaining more scores.

#### ***What makes this programme different from any other form of volunteering?***

This programme is also innovative because it creates a competitive situation, and students like it. Besides the active volunteer work, we also organise presentations for them so they can learn even more about volunteering. We are especially glad that so many institutions and teams have applied, as thus almost every school in Sopron is represented. We also try to take advantage of the benefits of social media, in order to have a wider reach. And students do post their pictures very enthusiastically. Our quite obvious goal was to reach the parents through them, too, so the families can participate in the work together.

#### ***What can you do to keep up the motivation?***

It's hard to raise young people's interest and maintain their motivation; they need constant impulses, which is a great challenge. But the very fact that we have reached thousand of people is a great achievement. It's also greatly helped by our Facebook page, where we try to share useful information and articles.

#### ***How much help did it mean that the project was implemented in a European partnership?***

This way we could exchange experiences; we get regular feedback on what doesn't

work with our partner organisations but does work here with us. Our partners from the neighbouring countries are engaged in similar activities to ours, but on a lower budget, and therefore they can involve fewer secondary school students in their work. They nevertheless announced the competition, too, and both their open-air events and presentations are similarly structured. Each partner organised their own competitions; project planning, however, was conducted in cooperation, and the professional and operational 'staff' also meet regularly to discuss their achievements and experiences, and to design – and when necessary, modify – the programmes. It's an international learning process, from which each party will benefit.

#### ***What long-term results do you expect?***

We want many students and parents to learn about the importance of volunteering and civic cooperation at each venue, so they can assume a more active and self-confident role in the lives of their towns. We plan to continue the project even after closing. Therefore we definitely want to involve the final winners of the competition – the ambassadors of volunteering – in our future work, so they can support younger students at their schools and set a good example. Basically, we're recruiting the volunteers of the future now. •

*Interview: KRISZTINA PÁLFI*