

## **About what I find uplifting as a volunteer...**

Interview with Kinga Albert – a Key Volunteer of Menhely Alapítvány made at 18/01/2018 in Budapest

### **What do you think this program, ‘On the Road’, is about?**

When I am talking about On the Road, I have to mention another project of the Foundation called Quick Access, which has been always at the background. This is where I started volunteering. This program aims to help people living on the streets or shelters as they are the most vulnerable. Our declared goal is labour market reintegration, but it involved a sequence of training to develop their abilities and skills. Twelve homeless people participated, and there were us, the volunteers and of course the social workers, and we met them on a regular basis. Basically we spent the whole Friday afternoon, from twelve to six PM together. We also had food together, this informal atmosphere helped us to get ready for the training. This was different and new, even for the social workers of the Foundation as well, because this is not their usual situation of meeting their clients. Usually it's like a frontal office routine when you sit at one side of the table and the client on the other, and it is a formal, official contact. Here there were no rigid boundaries, we called each other by the first name, and spent the whole afternoon in a very intimate and familiar atmosphere. There were almost as many volunteers as homeless people and we spontaneously formed pairs, the same people met beyond the meetings like in a mentorship. The Friday meetings were always thematic, for example revolving around about financial skills, judiciary know-how, etc. but we always started out by professional experts who told stories and we tried to adopt their knowledge in a playful way. Like when the representatives of Morgan Stanley came, they started to talk about the services that certain banks provide, and I started to feel this tension that these information are dimensionally different from the ones they actually needed. So there were some incompatibilities, but we noted all what we learned on a flipchart. Marianna (the project managing social worker) encouraged everyone to write their comments on it, there were actually co-working groups, and the members had to stand up and present the outcomes of their group work. It was spectacular how members became more and more confident, and developed their abilities to stand up and talk in front of the group.

### **Have you participated as a personal mentor all along, and if yes, what exactly could you help with?**

I had no fix partner for the whole project, but sometimes I met clients outside Friday afternoon, and we usually just sat down, looking for jobs, or tried to navigate through computers. There were some special demands like someone wanted to learn how to use Ms Office Excel.

Sometimes we reached the limits of the institutional framework, like we had to have some training meetings because the project managers were very insistent about the boundaries and rules, and what the frames and terms of working together were, and we had to sustain these limits. Like we could not share our personal cell numbers with the participants, and we avoided meeting them outside the day centre, because only this institutional frame is secure. And of course when you spend this much time with clients, you build up a friendship and for me it was very hard to keep these professional boundaries. I did not hesitate to give my personal number, for example, which led to interesting consequences. For example several clients wanted to learn English. I am an English teacher, which is great, because some of them planned to work in catering services, so we started our lessons. There were 5-6 of them, Saturday seemed good for everyone, and we could not go to the day centre for some reason, but with the help of Kati, (another volunteer) we found a public place at Aurora street, where we could have the lessons for free. We met like 5 or 6 times, but only 4 people came at a time and it had no continuity. There was a couple around the age of 50, they looked perfectly balanced, the lady's son lived in England, maybe he didn't even know about his mom's bad situation, but they kept visiting him abroad, and they were talking about moving to England to live together. So for them it would have been a good opportunity to learn to speak English, at least on a basic level. They came many times, and at the end it was only the three of us, and it worked, and I don't know how it ended really.

The other, more unfortunate example, is about a young man, who lived on the streets persistently, in a botanical garden. We became friends, like everyone, but at one point he started to cross the boundaries. He usually sent messages asking us to call him back. He also wanted to go to the English lessons, maybe he came twice... Sometimes he called me at night to ask if he could come the next day, and I never said categorically no. I never agreed to do it, but I didn't categorically reject him, either.

**Did you have any lectures or some kind of introduction to the operation of the organization when you started it? And in what form?**

This is very interesting, looking back, after four years of volunteering for the organization, and follow the development of the volunteering supervision system.

**Can I ask you why did you choose the homeless care instead of going to a hospital to cheer up kids?**

It's hard to explain. I'm very sensitive about homelessness since I was a young adult. I used to live in Romania, there are many homeless people in Kolozsvár, where I used to go to university. I never saw one in the little town I grew up, so it shocked me. In the meantime I started studying Sociology so I could explain that the right to have a home was a basic right, and the lack of it violates human dignity. I can rationalize it now, but it really touched me that time. But in Kolozsvár I felt helpless, I was studying the fields of humanities, and there was no sparkling civil community, and I didn't find the place to make myself useful, and I felt really bad about it. And then I came to Budapest, and the problem seemed even more shocking, but the homeless care system was getting visible. One of my friends used to volunteer for Menhely before, so it seemed simply clear, that I wanted to go there too. The very first activity I participated in was the distribution of Santa's packages and it was a terrific feeling that I was invited and I could do it. Later I started to participate in food distribution, that's where I get to know Marianna, who told me about the Quick Access program, and that she wanted to rely on volunteers and it seemed like it was totally in a pilot phase, and we joined and everyone was new. I simultaneously also carried on with the food distribution for awhile, but I had to give that up as my situation changed,

**How was the training/introduction to Quick Access? Did they give a lecture or training in small groups, or did you have a personal mentor?**

A year earlier there was already a similar project with volunteers. The training was thematic, there was a guy, who worked in the HR field, he helped co-write CVs, and he held a three hour long course at his workplace and I still write the clients' CVs according to what I learned there. And there was a visit to the night shelter visit - the only thing we had been told was that we were going to go and see the shelter. I'd never been to such a place before. I went with a friend, who was also interested and we were late, and Marianna looked at us very strictly. It was absolutely appalling. I felt totally ashamed because of being late, and of course it was totally right that we couldn't go in, and that was it...

**...so the training had already started...**

Yes, she said, that it was a male night shelter, what were we doing there as a couple, and I started to explain, that I mentioned before that I would bring a friend.. And she said that the problem wasn't with my friend, but with me. And then I understood, that she is already in a role play. And she kept being in her role, we got our little package and she made one of us sit in the "sober chair" and played the whole game. Of course just the beginning was this role playing part, later she guided us through the place, we saw the whole building, it was awe-inspiring, and then we set in the social workers room to clear the air. Marianna gave us a three view-point system to interpret our impressions, the first was the rules and frames, the second the material environment and intimacy, the third were the social connections. We vented it out together, how horrible it was, and it's very interesting, I did the whole thing like two or three times and it always took us three four hours to talk it out after. That's the time when we, lay people can question the professionals about the whole thing, the care system.

**What do you think about the care system?**

For me it was a fantastic feeling to hand out sausage with mustard in a basement during food distribution, for absolutely selfish reasons, to relieve myself from incapability. But if you take a look at big shelters and the workers who work there, e.g. Balázs, who despite his genuine attitude has to be an authoritarian person, to be able to confront the people, lock them out, make them fill a sheet, ask them about their income, how much they drink, smoke, why do they not talk to their families (to absolutely not do anything with this information). Because there is no treatment there, people just go to sleep, and this is disappointing to see, that this is nothing but a shallow intervention.

**Have you seen any other shelters?**

Yes, because I work at the Red Cross now, not as a social worker, but I've visited many services all over the country. This is just a quick fix, because it won't help people to get out from homelessness. It was Marianna herself, who was the first one to tell me about this the Housing First approach and model, and for me, this is the only acceptable alternative.

**Have you seen any service like this?**

No, I haven't. I know that there are a couple of organizations who do it e.g. Habitat or the Utcáról Lakásba Egyesület (From Street to Housing Association). Actually to give someone a flat should be the first step, not the end goal. I guess they can do it in the United States, that they create an interdisciplinary team, with a psychologist, a lawyer, a doctor and a social worker, this is unimaginable here. Again, at the Quick Access, the truly important things happened when we were together. Those were very useful and great occasions.

**But later you kept meeting your client as a mentor, right?**

Yes, we wrote the CVs together, and that was great. But what's missing from the On the Road project is that it doesn't work as a closed group, new people keep joining, and there are more and more people in it. We do it like this here: Marianna calls me to come in on Saturday, to meet someone, and help them, and then I come, we do it, and I possibly never see him again. Sometimes there are some people, who return but if I can't make it for the next time, someone else takes them. Sometimes I meet them several times, and that's pretty efficient. It's not like the Quick Access, which wasn't efficient enough, but at least that group was closed, we met the same people regularly, and the main profile was more like us to be together on training, learn from each other, which was great. I spent all my Fridays there, and it was just too much to deal with someone personally, even if it happened sometimes.

**Does the On the Road project offer housing support?**

No, not just that, the job seeking too. It's about finding either rental or employment for them. But it's more complicated. When it comes to job searching, we start it with writing CVs.

**So you meet homeless people once or twice, and you talk with them for one and a half hour?**

The time duration isn't fixed. I usually spend 1,5 hours with a person per occasion. There is a man, for example, I have met him like 3-4 times, he wants to work on an assembly line, now he is cleaning, or does an odd job here and there. He doesn't know how to use a computer, doesn't have a CV, doesn't have an e-mail address, and when I ask him about his job searching routines he says that he usually browses newspapers, but never finds anything nice, or the information spreads from person to person, which is not reliable. And I am stunned, because for me it's evident to search in job search portals. It's crushing when you start showing him that there is this portal the [profession.hu](http://profession.hu), for me it's so basic. And I can tell that he has no clue about those websites, and why are we scrolling, why he has to give his personal data so many times... I know his birthday by heart, oh. And of course we start the process by creating an e-mail address for him. I tell him that we are going to be more successful if we also search for a job on the internet and for that he needs an e-mail address. And we create one, but during the week, without my help, he is not even able to login to his account. So the big question is, should I keep developing his computer skills during that 1,5 hours, so he'll be able to use his email alone, but then, there is no searching for jobs during that time. But he doesn't have the tools to do that on his own. Like I taught my mom how to use the computer, and the next day, she could practice it on her own computer, but this guy will only use it two weeks later and there's a chance that he forgets everything by then. The most important factor is to find a job for them, so you won't teach him the secrets of Firefox, you want him to leave with a reassuring feeling that he sent out at least one application, and stepped forward. So with that man, we created him an e-mail address, wrote a CV and this is always great. Marianna helped us a lot, she has good guesses, when the client doesn't remember, where/when he used to work. E.g. there is a guy, who used to work at a rubber factory. And you have no clue what people do in a rubber factory, so you start asking him about what happened there - and I really enjoy this part- when they start to tell you stories, what happened and when, but very fitfully, they leave out things or years. And you keep asking until they start telling stories, they show you on Google, how the machine they worked with looked like and the whole thing starts up. These people want to tell stories about what they did and they say thing like - it feels really bad to hear- 'that it's so good to talk to you', and "you are so understanding, you don't shout". So right after we created the e-mail address, we go to [profession.hu](http://profession.hu), and of course, there are hundreds and hundreds of job ads in Budapest. For this man with primary education, there are several options as an assembly line worker. And when I asked him about his preferences, like would he prefer a job

in a factory, or to work on a production line, or be a baker, or cleaning staff, he is stunned facing the repertoire. And then you scroll down, waiting for him to read through the options, ask him, if he wants to apply to any... you're a little uncertain, you don't want to push him, and it's a little bit hard to manage, when you think that something would be good for him, but he doesn't really want that...

**Marianna told me that you were trying to organize the other volunteers' tasks as well. Can you see the career path here at Menhely that you have run? Are there opportunities for volunteers to step forward?**

It's obvious that Marianna and Viki want to develop, standardize and stabilize this volunteer system. Marianna was always trying to delegate us, older volunteers more and more tasks, and she asked me to communicate with the others.

**So are there any volunteers whose jobs are organized by you?**

These are temporary services, when the new season started they asked me to help them to operate the trainings. I searched for materials, for practices. We organized the awareness raising program at the shelter, we talked about our experiences with the new ones, what problems could arise and the frames of the whole thing. Obviously those who apply to volunteer do not have prejudices against homeless people, but we talked about the structural and personal reasons of homelessness. I had an interesting initiative about this: there is a blog about homelessness (Homeless of Budapest), it's a page where they share their stories of homeless people, illustrated by a photo. And I chose 15 stories that show that each people have their own narratives about the reason of their situation. And it is clear that their stories are all unique, and they are not a mass of worthless poor people. Some of them are highly educated, some have become homeless because of domestic violence, some are orphans etc. We read their stories and analyse them.

**...so you are organizing the training and fill it up with content...**

..yes..

**...is there any thematic part of the training that you do by yourself?**

We all do it together, but Marianna is consciously trying to stay at the background. Of course she is the one who answers the professional questions, but during the past two years we did it ourselves. She didn't come to the awareness raising training on purpose, I did it with Regina. Two years ago a bigger volunteer group was formed, we made a close community, we talked on a daily basis, shared our experiences, and information e.g. about finding rentals. We made a closed Facebook group, and used an online surface to share information, but the former wasn't so active cause it's hard to coordinate to meet everyone and some people left as well.

**How many volunteers do you have in On the Road?**

There are 4-5 stable members, who've been doing it since a very long time.

**There are two more things...you can say pass to both of them, and I will turn this tape recorder off.**

**What do you personally think about what's happening in Hungary since the past few years in the civil community? Should I switch off?**

No, no it's okay... Of course, it's outrageous, disappointing, I wake up, and go to bed with this... But it's hard for me because I live here since 4-5 years. Before, I lived in Transylvania, I studied the field of humanities, I didn't actually get involved with the civil community deeper than my healthy curiosity let me do it. I studied literature, but I couldn't overlook the connection of literature and society, I only minded how contemporary prose responded to the issue of poverty, or to social problems. I continuously looked for poverty in Hungarian prose, but at one point I realized that this is not what I need, it's not enough, I don't want to lock myself in a scientific ivory tower. I want to deal with people, and I found everything else to be useless acts. So that's why I applied to university, to study community and civil studies, where I studied community development and organization, and it became my new profession.

So what happened in the past few years? And what can we do about it? I don't know how to be happy here as a social worker. It won't be my qualification, but sometimes the question arises in me how someone can work and be this vulnerable. I mean the low salaries, and the lack of standing up for their interests, like a strong trade union. The early childhood center's workers are able to step up, but the social workers aren't. The different institutions are being hostile and angry at each other, there is no cooperation. It's totally

disappointing to do the government's job and in an atmosphere where they keep questioning the importance of your work. If we live in a work based society, where solidarity isn't a basic value, it's hard to do anything about it.

**Maybe the last question: how do you see your future? Where to go? Would you stay and keep doing it? Or if you'd leave what would you take with yourself?**

I will certainly continue doing it, for me it's convenient to do it on Saturday mornings. I do the trainings too, I help Marianna to set up the report, I get the information from the volunteers, I sum it up and send it to her. If the On the Road continues, I want to participate in it, I don't want to leave.

**How do you have this much energy? Do you sacrifice all your Saturdays for this?**

Not all of them, but I did my last couple yes. But it was because I could meet a client regularly. We applied for about 20 jobs every week, and it felt really good, when he came back week by week and told me how many phone calls he had. It's a new experience for him to send document to outer space with a click, and he might think that "hmm this girl is sending my personal data out, but I have to trust her". He hasn't found a job yet, but we get back to it right after Christmas. It's lucky to have a client I can meet regularly, it's unprecedented to work like this, it usually doesn't happen thing just fail at some point. There was a man, who I met several times, and he did find a job, but he left it because he had drinking problems. I am really bad at detecting these kind of problems, and I was surprised when they told me that he would come again, so I went, and waited, and I called him, and I could tell that he was drunk. That's when I understood what kind of difficulties he had. There are stories like this, failures. There was once a tiny, gypsy old man, who was also searching for a job. He told me many stories about his life, his ex-wife, and his every second sentence was "I am a bull". He had serious arterial obstructions, and diabetes, and he lifted heavy bags. He didn't confess about his health state at his workplace, when he felt dizzy, he stumbled away not to be noticed by others, because he was afraid of getting fired. And he kept saying "I am a bull", and something like "this is Valentine's day, so I bought a heart shaped pillow for my significant other" and I just sat there... and never saw him again.