

In the shoes of teenage asylum seekers

The organization Youth Center of Epirus hosts a facility Agios Athanasios (Άγιος Αθανάσιος) since august 2020 and volunteers help at the facility because the pandemic crisis them change and adapt work to the situation.

I arrived at the beginning of this project and we build it slowly from September until today. This new program gives opportunity to the volunteers of Youth Center of Epirus to provide a non-formal education on several topics to these teenagers.

The facility of Agios Athanasios is located in the mountainous region of Zagori, near to Ioannina. It hosts 40 teenagers - asylum seekers from 12 to 18 years old. The place is managed by social workers, teachers, cooks, caretakers, director and others, to give these youngsters a comfortable place to live, a stable basic knowledge and a social, psychological and physical help to develop themselves in the local society and in the future.

Living in a small facility such as Agios Athanasios can be very challenging in several aspects, especially in this pandemic period and since November 2020 the lockdown does not allow them to go to the city when schools are closed. The pandemic situation makes life very difficult for these teenagers, some of them are there for 6 or 7 months and have been in Ioannina only 6 times or less. They had to learn to live in community all together with the only possibility to leave the place for very short times and for emergency. Which is why, our work is very important to them. We are here to entertain them, educate them on many interesting and essentials topics. The activities we organize allow them to interact, to have fun and to learn at the same time.

This experience is also very rewarding and instructive for us, the volunteers, because we share a lot about our culture and the teenagers share also about theirs.

The workers main goal is to provide basics needs and education to these youngsters and secondly to find relatives of them. This chance allows them to leave the facility and to build a life with a relative.

If no relatives are found, the teenager will stay in the facility until 18 years old or until their asylum seeker application is rejected. Then he is allowed to leave the place to live in an apartment with help and financial support of another program or is being sent back to their country of origin.

Since we arrived, some teenagers have left the facility, to join another asylum seekers who are older than 18, or to join a relative. For example, one teenager left to Thessaloniki to live in an apartment, and another, who is younger than 18, left to Germany to join a parent.

These teenagers have many different dreams, ambitions, or future projects. They mostly want to settle in Europe. Indeed, some teenagers shared with me that they want to go to Sweden, to England, or Switzerland. They all have very different wishes that are reflected in their future career plans.

Most of them are very sportive, and few teenagers want to pursuit this vocation, for example, to be a fitness trainer or professional athlete in football or bodybuilding.

Other teenagers are more focused on computer and gaming field and they would like to become computer developers.

I had the opportunity to speak more precisely with some teenagers and to share a bit of their background and ambitions. Two of them are twins from Yemen, and they shared with me about their experience in Greece.

After being in Athens for few months and almost in Agios Athanasios for almost six months, they left the facility in mid-March, to live in an apartment in Ioannina. They wished to leave earlier but, like every other teenager, they had to wait to be older than 16 years.

It is a real relief for them to leave and move towards a change. After staying in two facilities, they can finally pursue their life and long term goals.

Considering that they are still minors, the twins will continue to go to school and then explore a particular direction about which they still don't have a clear idea yet. They will still have the social and financial help of another program, and it will help them with their plans.

Talents

Through this volunteering, we have created a wide variety of projects all together, the volunteers and the residents of the facility. These activities have allowed them to develop different skills, to share their talents, their interests, and their creativity with us.

Some teenagers have a real talent in any activity related to art, such as painting or drawing.



They also painted and decorated the walls of the facility with one of the teachers and our help. This activity allowed them to improve their painting skills, precision and imagination, meanwhile, making the communal living place more welcoming and to their taste.



Some of them have building, creating skills. We combined our ideas with the skills of these teenagers.



The teenagers really enjoy gardening as well this is a good way to learn responsibilities and organization to take care of the plants and the garden, even if the volunteers are not there to look after it.



Creation of squares that will contain plants and a circle in the middle with flowers. And a door that will have climbing plants.

The green house.

Spiral Garden, unfinished.





Creation of ravioli with spinach and mushrooms.

As well, we the possibly to manage some cooking activities which were very interesting to perform. The youngsters really enjoyed it, and some of them have great skills in this topic.

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