

Youth exchange 2014, Slovenia

What should be the common thread of an international youth exchange, where the majority of participants are between 13 and 18 years old, are coming from three different countries and mostly from socially de-privileged environment and don't speak foreign languages? For most of them, this will be the first time to participate in an international activity.

Skills! - we all have them, and no matter how old we are, we enjoy learning when we are internally motivated.

In summer 2014 Slovene Philanthropy, Association for promotion of voluntary work, prepared in the frame of Erasmus plus programme, an international youth exchange under the title »Let's skills exchange« in cooperation with two other youth organization; Asociacion Culturay y de Jovenes "Ajoval" from Valdehornillos, Spain and Netzwerk Spiel/Kultur Prenzlauer Berg from Berlin, Germany. Between 28th July and 8th August 23 young people and 7 youth workers spent fantastic time in a small village Zapotok, located 20 km far from Ljubljana, capital city of Slovenia.

The main purpose of the youth exchange was quality spent time in a cross cultural environment, co-created by young participants. Our aim was also raising an awareness of skills that everyone has and learning how they can be improved, used and shared with others. Youth exchange was focused on non-formal and informal learning, active participation and the acquisition of social skills.

Methods and activities we used supported a creation of safe and stimulative environment in which youth workers could give many tasks and responsibility to young people and provide them with a support so they could carry out their own ideas. The group was formed through variety of social games. Agreements for living together were set by young people. They created colourful posters with day by day program. During the next 3 days participants discovered surroundings and met with neighbours through teamwork games. We lived next to meadows full of herbs and forests inhabited by bears, so local hunter took us into the forest and instructed us about safe behaviour in bear area, while local herb-ladies showed us which herbs are good for making all kinds of healthy teas. Gradually, the group strengthened and youth workers slowly moved in to background, while young participants were getting more and more independent. Participants were split into smaller groups, according to their wishes. In groups they exchanged and learned skills in the fields of music, theatre, creativity, circus, photography... We presented our achievements on a multicultural event in a small town Vipava, home town of some Slovenian participants. During the event our participants performed a musical concert, a theatre show and a cup-song. After the show young participants mixed with audience and showed them how to make bracelets, walk on stilts and slack lines, perform all kinds of circus tricks, how to play different musical instruments, make body painting and colourful hairstyles ... Together with around 100 visitors we made a fantastic multicultural – creative play day. In last days we reflected what we learned through the 14 days, celebrated all personal and group achievements and discussed how we can use new competences in our lives.

What else can we celebrate?

Growing of self-confidence and self-esteem of young participants – youngsters started to open up and trust their own creativeness, share their thoughts and skills with others, lead different activities and **communicate openly in their mother tongue, as well in foreign languages**. They realized that foreign languages are not just a school subject, but useful skill for communication with their peers from other countries.

Sharing the responsibility and becoming independent, which meant that 23 young people spent 10 days without cooks and cleaners. Together we prepared delicious food, kept the kitchen clean and made a big house cleaning when it got too messy.

Conflict management which was based on morning and evening activities. Each morning, after breakfast the whole group met in a circle. We went through the daily programme, discussed open topics, celebrated achievements and in cases of conflicts we searched together for solutions. After we played a game or two for a good start of the day. Every evening we split into national groups, where participants were able to share their feelings in their mother tongue and discussed what was happening to them through the day. In both circles we encourage them to share their feelings, emotions and needs, so that group was able to respond to that.

Respect and friendship between the participants and celebrating diversity during cultural evenings through food, games, music and dance.

Ferdi, 16 years old, Slovenia

This was my first youth exchange and at the beginning I imagined that it will be just like vacations with parents by the seaside – boring. But after first few days I realized that this is something totally different. I started getting new friends and I was excited with the programme. I joined a group with German youth leader and learned how to breath fire. This was something I did for the first time but not the last.

Karl Konrad, 18 years old, Germany

I'm now participating on the 4th youth exchange. Again I learned a lot, improved English and learned some Spanish words. I developed new social skills because I was not only participating on workshops but also leading some of them. I really wish to take part on such events in future.

Lucia, 16 years old, Spain

This is the second time that I'm a part of a youth exchange. I'm so very impressed with Slovenian nature and the place where we are staying. I learned some new Slovenian and German words and improved my English which will benefit me in the future. I made good friends and I'm sure that I'll return in Slovenia if I'll have a chance. Maybe as a EVS Volunteer under Erasmus+ programme.