

GLOBAL VOICES

“We can’t read or do sums – but we know how to build playgrounds”

Young late developers from Northern Jutland have built natural playgrounds at Romanian children’s homes – boosting their self-confidence and experience of success

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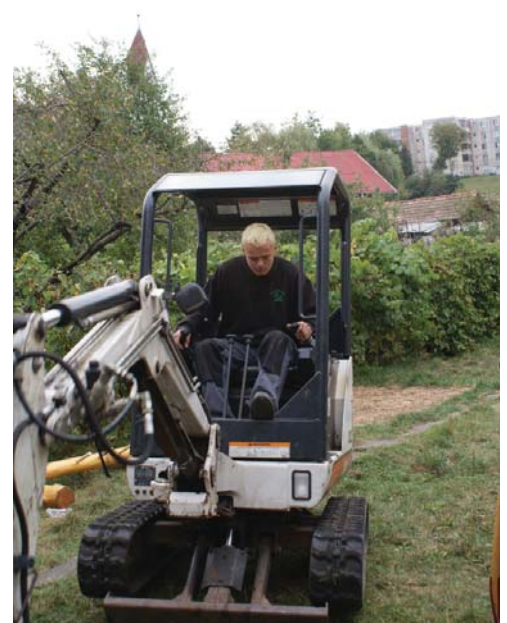
Their first steps are wobbly. In the beginning the children try to find steady footing, supported by a helping hand.

Because when physically and mentally handicapped children have been hidden away without

regard for their mental or motor development, and have never experienced balance beams or poles, monkey bars and tree trunk climbing, it is nice to have a pair of helping hands to hold onto.

The children are Romanian. The hands belong to 13 pupils, late developers from Practical Assistant Training (PAT) in Sindal, Denmark, and their specialist teachers.

Together with about 12 or so members of the trade union HK Nordjylland and the Danish



Labour Movement's International Forum (AIF), the pupils and teachers travelled to the Romanian town of Tirgu Mures in mid-September to build natural playgrounds at six children's homes for physically and mentally handicapped children.

HK Nordjylland and AIF are behind the natural playground initiative. Both bodies have collaborated with the Romanian trade union Hermes 7 in Tirgu Mures, including providing humanitarian aid to local children's homes. The Romanian trade union is the direct channel through which Danish aid is sent to the children's homes.

"We have seen that the children's homes have a great need to activate and develop the children's motor function," says AIF Nordjylland's chairman Susanne Vrdlovec, who also heads up HK Nordjylland's international work.

"It was therefore only natural that we helped to establish the playgrounds," she explains.

Since then money has been collected through the Danish Trades Union Congress' "Do Something" campaign, and PAT in Sindal, which has several years' experience in building natural playgrounds, joined the project donating materials and manpower.

"It means that the children's homes have been given much more than even we would have been able to give them by ourselves," says Susanne Vrdlovec.

Turning on a light

Back home at PAT's wood workshop in Sindal, the pupils aged between 18 and 25 prepared the playground equipment. They peeled off the larch

bark, sawed, shaped and treated the wood. And in Tirgu Mures they measured, dug, carried and flexed their muscles, turning the playgrounds into reality.

Finally they have reached their goal. The playgrounds are in use and the PAT pupils' pride in their work grows with each child's delighted smile and spontaneous shouts of joy.

"This is something I'll never forget," exclaims 18-year-old Patrick from Nykoebing Mors on seeing the children's smiling faces.

"I can't believe how happy they are. It rubs off on me as well," he says.

Earlier in the day, he and his fellow pupils visited the inside of the children's home. Here the lack of materials is clear to one and all. The toys mostly comprise random overseas donations and often do not match the age or needs of the children. Some of the children sit passively on the floor, rocking back and forth.

"I got a shock," says 18-year-old Anders from Hjørring.

"I think the children need something to do. We were told that a boy of 19 could go far if he had the same opportunities as we have at PAT. It's horrible to think that he doesn't," he says.

The playground has given the PAT pupils the feeling of having made a difference.

"It was just like turning on a light," says 18-year-old Jesper from Klim in Northern Jutland.

"It felt dark inside the children's home. But when the children began using the playground it was as if a light came on," he explains.

"We may not be able to read or do sums but



we are masters when it comes to building playgrounds,” says Jesper, clearly proud to have done something worthwhile for the Romanian children.

Confidence booster

“There’s no doubt the experience has changed the pupils,” says PAT principal, Conrad Andersen.

The challenge of driving the more than 2,200 kilometres from Sindal to Tigru Mures in lorries and buses to build the playgrounds has boosted the pupils’ confidence.

“And boosting the pupils’ confidence is part of our educational brief, which is why the Romanian project fits in well with our goals,” asserts Conrad Andersen.

As an autonomous institution, PAT can participate in this kind of project without first having to seek permission. The project has thus cost the company more than DKK 200,000 over and above the money collected.

“Luckily we have a budget that allows us to take part in a project of this kind. In return our staff and pupils gain a fantastic experience of success while we as an organisation learn more about the size of the tasks we can take on,” continues Conrad Andersen.

“Of course we have to use this success and others like it to draw political attention to working with late developers,” he points out.

For it is PAT’s experience that local authorities are tightening their purse strings. Late-development funding is not as forthcoming as it once was.

“Whereas the local councils used to award grants a year at a time, they now only award them every six months. And the authorities make gro-

wing demands for detailed project descriptions and documentation,” says Conrad Andersen.

This is why the institution’s involvement in the Romania project can focus attention on working with late developers.

“If the youngsters go through the local councils’ own systems they will never have the kind of experience or success they had in Tigru Mures,” says Conrad Andersen.

The plan is to return to Romania next year to see how the playgrounds are doing. A trip that might be combined with a similar playground project in neighbouring Hungary, where PAT already has contacts.

Inspiring

“It’s very inspiring to see how PAT works,” says head of the children’s home in Tigru Mures, Maria Kalaktroni.

“I hope one day we’ll be able to do the same thing in Romania and have the same possibilities for helping children and youngsters with learning problems,” she says.

Maria Kalaktroni is a trained paediatrician and formerly managed a large children’s home with 214 children.

“Every member of staff was responsible for between 14 and 20 children. It was impossible to do a good job,” she explains.

Eight years ago, the big institutions were split up into smaller units.

“About half of the children were taken in by private foster families. The rest were sent to small institutions housing between 12 and 18 children under the age of 18,” continues Maria Kalaktroni,



who currently runs nine small children's homes in Tirgu Mures.

But despite the fact that conditions have significantly improved – and there are now two adults to every six children – a number of problems persist.

In particular, it is the material shortage that limits their work with the children.

"It ends up being childcare for the most part," admits Maria Kalaktroni.

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"We haven't had the chance to activate the children or develop their motor function. The children had no idea what to do outside, and inside they spend most of their time watching television," she says.

"The new playgrounds can help to stimulate the children and improve their motor function. We hope this will lead to an improvement in the children's overall development," says Maria Kalaktroni.

"But we lack trained staff," she points out.

In Romania there is no formal training in social education and none of the staff at the children's homes run by Maria Kalaktroni have therefore received proper training.

The next step is for the National Federation of Social Educators in Nordjylland and the Danish Labour Movement's International Forum to create a two-year training programme for the staff at the children's homes in Tirgu Mures.

The project will be implemented with the help of Danish educational institutions and is expected to get underway at the beginning of 2009.

Steen Timmermann works as a journalist at HK Nordjylland.

