



We call  
our volunteers “voluntears”.  
This word was created by an accident.  
It was a typo that appeared in one of our  
photo books, and we did not notice it until  
it was already printed out. After a moment of  
initial exasperation, the word caught on  
and everybody has been excitedly  
using it ever since. .

# 6. VOLUNTEERS & EMPLOYEES

Our volunteers, or “voluntears”, as we call them, have a tougher job than volunteers in many other fields. They have to be ready at all times, they need to be able to handle a wide range of dire situations and juggle multiples tasks at once, all while keeping a cool head. Those few people who volunteer for us are like a treasure to us. We will take the best care of them so that they stay with us as long as possible!

## People over gold

Employees, volunteers and other supporters are the greatest asset of our organization! We are deeply grateful for everyone who has embarked on this exciting journey with us. We are thankful for everyone who agreed to help us fight some of our battles, overcome some of our challenges. The experience some of them made form the backbone of this book, their lives are deeply linked with ours, and with the lives of the children who turn to us for assistance. We can never thank them enough! Our team is a diverse group of individuals – people of different ages, nationalities, genders and areas of education and expertise. This helps us address a wide range of topics and challenges relating to our target group. The organization has full-time employees, as well as subcontractors and volunteers.

But for most of the time, the activities of our organization depended on volunteer work. In the first years, we did not employ any people. A few years later, we had 1 or 2 employees. These employees worked for mostly a minimum wage, compensated by the Czech Labour Office as part of their Public Benefit Project. This helped us cover not only some of the cost of labour, but also, for me as the head of the organization, this was for many years my much needed source of income. My work included not only the contact with children, their families, and the preparation of activities for them. I was also busy with various fundraising activities, accounting, the management of our website, educational activities for the public, and other social activities where I benefited from my education. It wasn't until our participation in the Norwegian and Euro-pean projects that were able to expand our team (see chart in Statistics). Our



long-term volunteers formed the core of our now official team – they were all people who helped us run our activities after their school, university or full-time jobs. We can hardly describe how happy we are that we can now employ more of these people. It helps us deliver more comprehensive and professional services to those who need them. The management of our organization strives to offer to our employees not only meaningful and rewarding work, but also a stable and dignified working conditions.

For a long time, our family helped the Roma community for free and fully at our own expense. This has put us through many tests, but our motivation and determination to create a peaceful and inclusive environment was genuine. Our work is not suitable for anyone

who needs to see immediate results and believes in instant solutions to complex problems. We know this is a long-term problem. Sometimes, it is important to slow down for a while and recharge our energy. We are constantly on a lookout for an opportunity to change things – whether on a personal level, or community level, or perhaps on a national level. In the meantime, we also need a break once in a while, both as a team, and as individuals. Because there are always too many people needing our help, almost always more than we can handle. Which is why we need to set priorities and keep track of how many hours we work each day so that we find a healthy balance between our work and personal lives. We have a responsibility toward our organization, toward God, and most importantly, toward ourselves. It is



God and His wisdom that gives us guidance in difficult times and without Him, we would probably just keep going in circles, achieving nothing significant.

The great advantage of our organization is a participation of our Roma colleagues who help us run the activities. They have first-hand experience with the environment and the problems that the community has to face. They continue to give us valuable insights and they are trusted by the local Roma community, which helps us approach even its most isolated members. Our organization has been employing the Roma people since 2015. They are involved not only in the practical tasks needed to keep our organization up and running (cleaning, maintenance, taking care of the garden...), but they also talk to the parents, accompany children to the venues of our activities, bring problems to our

attention, point out families who need help, tutor the children and do many other things.

At first, only those who liked working with children agreed to cooperate with us. They prepared regular weekly meetings, helped us organize bigger events or regular church services, and joined us on our trips and one-off events. Over time, we required more help in the organization, especially with the accounting, applying for grants, processing photos and videos, managing the website and social network accounts, helping with the maintenance and storage of our equipment... We may focus on social and educational activities, but our work is very diverse. We need the people who are enthusiastic, talkative and who have a dream and mission, but also the people who are quiet, but thorough, orderly and consistent and who help us keep things together. Whether individuals with



an analytic mind, or practical down-to-earth people, we are grateful for everyone. And we all have the same goal.

## Capacity Building and Professional Training

The staff of our organization undergo regular training, both in the form of self-study and external and internal training sessions. Our team includes students and graduates from a diverse range of university disciplines: social work, education, economics and engineering. We continuously expand our professional knowledge by participating in various courses. The team members also exchange their knowledge and experience during internal training sessions. Other activities focusing on development of the team members include regular one-to-one methodological meetings with the organization's management, where employees have the opportunity to discuss anything that happened and set goals for the future. The members also give the management important feedback regarding the methods, facilities or communication, or any flaws therein. External group and individual supervision as well as team-building events are further useful tools that help us keep going. Our team needs to be able to handle not only standard situations, but also highly challenging and unexpected situations that arise due to the problematic background of the families we work with, and also often due to the personal contact with the families, during residential events etc. It is the difficult moments that test our ability to overcome tiredness or disillusionment –



they challenge us to always remember why we do what we do.

The development of our methods and our team has been particularly effective due to the success of our project, "Capacity Building and Professionalisation of the pro-Roma organization Close Neighbour." This project was funded through a Czech Employment Programme and by the European Social Fund. Since September 2023, we have been able to focus more on fundraising and presentation of our work, which are central to securing sustainable funding.

## Cooperation with Sky High Live

The cooperation between Sky High Live and Blízký soused, z. s., stands as a testament to the power of collaborative efforts in the European Economic Area (EEA). Our partnership goes beyond mere organisational alignment; it is a vibrant "ecosystem" powered by the spirit of volunteerism. In booth organi-



sations volunteers play a crucial role, acting as catalysts for change and bridges between diverse communities. Their work not only enhances the lives of individuals but also strengthens the bonds of friendship and understanding across borders.

## The Essence of Volunteering

Being together with others is the heartbeat of a selfless act where individuals offer their time, skills, and energy for the greater good. Its significance stretches back through history, where communal living necessitated mutual aid and support.

Today, volunteering has evolved into a structured form of service, encompassing a wide range of activities from local community projects to international aid efforts. So, what if no one is volunteering?

“Volunteers do not necessarily have the time, but they have the heart.” — Elizabeth Andrew.

The essence of volunteering is beautifully encapsulated in Muhammad Ali's words, “Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth.” This perspective highlights the inherent responsibility we must contribute to our communities and the world at large. People embody this principle, dedicating themselves to causes that extend far beyond their personal gain.

Historically, volunteering has played a pivotal role in societal development. From the establishment of the first hospitals and schools to the modern-day responses to global crises, volunteers have been at the forefront. Their contributions are not limited to

the tangible outcomes of their projects but also include the intangible benefits of fostering empathy, solidarity, and a sense of global citizenship. This sentiment echoes the selfless nature of volunteer work, emphasizing that the essence of volunteering lies not in the abundance of free time but in the willingness to help and the capacity to care for others. What is your roll?

Overcoming Challenges. Volunteers often encounter various challenges, including navigating cultural differences, managing time effectively, and sometimes dealing with limited resources. These challenges require volunteers to be adaptable, resourceful, and resilient. Overcoming this not only contributes to the success of their projects but also fosters personal growth and a deeper understanding of global interconnectedness.

The rewards of volunteering are extensive and varied. Beyond the immediate impact on the communities served, volunteers gain invaluable experiences that enrich their personal and professional lives. These include the development of new skills, enhanced cultural understanding, and the formation of lasting friendships. The sense of fulfilment and purpose derived from volunteer work underscores its value, highlighting how giving back to the community can lead to profound personal satisfaction and growth.

## Revision for sensitivity and inspiration

The essence of volunteering transcends time and geography, encapsulating the best of human values: compassion, re-

silience, and community spirit. As we look to the future, the narratives of volunteers and the outcomes of their efforts continue to motivate a new generation towards action. Inspired by the belief that “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has,” we recognize the transformative power of individual actions in driving collective change.

Volunteering within the framework of EEA cooperation, showcased through the partnership between Sky High Live and Blízky sused, z. s., offers a unique cross-cultural exchange and mutual growth. For us in Norway it stands as a testament to how united efforts in service, not only meet immediate needs but also forge pathways for a more connected and understanding world.

As we conclude this exploration into cooperation and volunteer work, let's embrace the call to action to partake in volunteerism. Whether it's engaging in local community projects for vulnerable groups or contributing to international cooperation initiatives, the opportunity to make a difference is vast. In dedicating our time, we gain immeasurably more — a sense of purpose, a feeling of community, and the profound joy of contributing to a better world for all.



# Bits and pieces of life

**"The animal with the long neck - is it a giraffe or a zebra?"** A 9-year-old girl asked as we were visiting the ZOO in Dvůr Králové. We are confident that she got her answers during our summer camp in 2013, whether about animals or important matters in life. Our summer camp game was called "The Armour of God". The children played various theatre games, for which they collected various parts of the armour - the Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of Righteousness, the Shield of Faith ...

**"I'll get a stove..."** Simona replied to my question, sadly. She wanted to get a laminator from her parents for Christmas, so that she could better prepare educational aids for the children she was tutoring. Well, her parents gave her a stove...

**"We work for accommodation and food,"** we go to bed after midnight, we are up at seven in the morning, we are in a rush all day, we hardly find a moment for ourselves... We're not slaves on cotton plantations, we're leaders at a summer camp.

**"Jesus is the love of my life..."**  
When an adult Romani man sincerely gives such a testimony, when he not only says it, but also lives by it for several years, it always brings me to tears. I always feel humbled and insignificant when I see the miracles God can do... Our visit to Krašov encouraged us very much, we were once again assured that God is alive and has not stopped working miracles! Our meeting with pro-Romani organizations from the V4 countries was again encouraging, with many educated Romani people (businessmen, music and dance teachers, the mayor of the village of Šimonovec in Slovakia etc.) attending the event.

# Bits and pieces of life



**"Pavla, have you ever noticed what a beautiful world the God created?"** Well, I did, but I was really surprised when this question came from little Tony! Sometimes our work is so horrible it's hard to keep going. But sometimes, it is infinitely amazing! Either way, this job is a good fit for me, because my life has been a similar rollercoaster!

**"Fire, fire!!!"** The children shouted joyfully as they ran into the middle of the Romani Church service. We were demonstrating what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, but some of our props caught fire, which I did not expect. Pastor Emil, usually a very calm and understanding man, asked me not to do this again, as he waved away small puffs of smoke surrounding the scene. We are still cooperating with the Romani church community to this day and we are always happy to see each other!

**"You will go to jail!"** A six-year-old Mato told me when we were playing to have a phone call. He didn't even say hello. When I asked why, he replied that I had stolen something. Mato knew the business - various little things often ended up in his pocket. I started sobbing and I said I wouldn't be able to buy ice cream in jail, or bring Mato and his little sisters (he has five sisters) to church. That worked. Mato advised me to put the blame on my brother. I did not know what to do, so I took his advice. Mato assured me that I will not go to jail after all. On the same day, Mato found a box with musical instruments and started to play with them together with his sisters. I sang along. Mato suddenly said: "God likes it when we sing songs for Him." Anyone who has ever heard me sing will have to admit that Mato has great faith! My children laughed at me later at home, saying that the instruments and my singing went well together. Mato will soon have to choose his path. Will he follow in his father's footsteps (who was 25 years old but already several times in prison) or follow the voice in his heart telling him to listen to our Heavenly Father?

**"Who's singing?"** Romani songs are heard throughout the park in front of our premises. Since July 2015, the Roma Christian Church has been meeting in our organization. Their pastor, Milan, was an employee of our organization and participated in our activities, such as playing guitar with the children and teaching them to sing. Our Roma children know Milan, and some of them attend his church services. It is not easy to be religious in our society, which is rather atheistic and sceptical. And for our Roma children, this is doubly true.

# Bits and pieces of life



**"You have to watch out for yourself, nobody else will do it for you!"**

I shouted at the kids as they were enjoying themselves at the St. Linhart Rope Centre near Carlsbad. This is where we took the children at the end of our summer camps. Everyone loves it, but they need to be reminded that despite all the security measures, they need to watch out for their own safety and double check everything. It is an important lesson about responsibility!

**"Petr hasn't gotten a disciplinary note in two months!"**

Kaja got his first A in reading (he's in third grade), and Sara says she wants to work when she is older. She won't live off unemployment support! We are happy when our children make progress! There is still room for improvement of course, we still have many challenges ahead of us, but thank God for every step in the right direction!

**"Phone tutoring?"**

Due to the pandemic, we had to cancel many of our regular activities. We tried to switch to some available options, such as phone tutoring or tutoring via Facebook. Once again, we had to reconcile ourselves to the fact that the level of knowledge is very different for every child. Some kids do not know basic Czech grammar in the 4th grade. This is due to the fact that the Romani language is different and the children struggle to learn proper Czech. We are aware that these children need more time and practice to grasp certain concepts that the Czech kids normally handle with ease. Unfortunately, teachers at elementary schools are often unaware of these challenges. One of the things we try to do is meet with teachers and raise awareness about certain issues that the Roma children face. One of the team members even wrote an academic thesis on this topic while studying at the Faculty of Education. We intend to continue regularly sharing our observations and insights at various conferences, debates and meetings.

**"Mono is worse!"**

That was the first hint during one of our games at the Volunteers Weekend. Some children needed the second hint, too ("It is not so dangerous outdoors"), and the third one ("Monox is more dangerous.") or fourth hint ("It is a gas"). After the last hint, everyone had already guessed. They knew that carbon monoxide is more poisonous than carbon dioxide. They're both produced by combustion or burning. Carbon monoxide is produced when fossil fuels burn without enough oxygen, and carbon dioxide is a part of our atmosphere. At the end of the game, everyone found their reward free coffee vouchers - which Costa Coffee gifted to us. We held our first Volunteers Weekend in 2016 and have been happy to repeat the event regularly since. During our summer camps, there is usually no time for any conversation beyond what needs to be done. This event gives all volunteers a space to talk and play a few games together. We browsed through photos and videos from the summer camps, talked about what could be improved, what went really well, or what went wrong. We were preparing for the next summer camp. We were accommodated at a weekend house, which might not have been a five-star hotel, but it was cozy and sufficient for our needs. At the same weekend, elections were taking place in our country, so we all went to throw in our vote. We are not indifferent to what happens in our country.