



My experience in voluntary activities



2011 is the European Year of Volunteering, as declared by the Council of the European Union, because: “volunteering is one of the key dimensions of active citizenship and democracy, putting European values such as solidarity and non-discrimination into action, and as such contributing to the harmonious development of European societies”. I contribute to this occasion by sharing my experience in volunteering activities as a person on the autism spectrum.

I am a man of nearly forty years and I have received a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome (AS) only five years ago. Meanwhile I have been a volunteer for thirteen years. When I was young I never thought that I would be able to become a volunteer; for me to stay in close touch with people was unimaginable because of all my difficulties in communication and social interaction (which only many years later I understood to be features of the autistic spectrum condition). I've always been very shy, in kindergarten I never talked with other children or with the schoolteacher, it was very difficult for me to talk

to new people, both my peers and adults, and I would only begin to interact after I had seen them for a long time, but even then I always barely interacted at all. Also, to see people in trouble or in need of help was very annoying to me and I always avoided such situations.

In 1997, while I was still a college student, I became a conscientious objector to military service for ideological reasons, rejecting all forms of violence and weapons, so I did civilian service instead of military service, which at that time was still mandatory in Italy. This was my first experience with the world of voluntary activities. I worked in accompanying children of Roma camps to school, along with social workers. At first I was not convinced that I was able to carry out these activities, especially since the children were 'live wires' and I had no experience and no predisposition to work with children, but I had a strong motivation to continue.

Slowly I was able to adapt, social workers followed me closely and the parents of the Roma camp gave me confidence because they knew that I was unable to scold or mistreat their children, even when they were a bundle of mischief, and the children themselves preferred to be in my company rather than that of the social workers because I never reproached them. Moreover, since they





were very lively and alert, they themselves began to interact with me and stimulate me. Eventually I felt so at ease that when the twelve months of compulsory civilian service came to an end and I resumed my university studies, I continued for another six months in the same Roma camp as a volunteer. I found a lot of gratification in what I did; the experience has enriched me a lot and changed me as a person, dramatically improving my social and communication skills.

In 1998, then I entered into an international organisation of volunteers who are dealing with human rights and social, cultural and political projects. In particular, I participated in campaigns for human support in third world countries and I have travelled many times in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, as in the experience of civilian service, I was surrounded by sensitive people who appreciated my virtues, strengthened my strengths and helped me to overcome my weaknesses and difficulties - unlike in my previous domains of schools and university, where people around me had a competitive spirit, exalting my flaws, mocking me and not enabling me to experience much personal growth. I felt particularly at ease in my travels in Africa because the relationship with the African people, especially in villages, is more direct and explicit than in western countries; there are fewer barriers and less filters, it is obvious how they feel and what they need, and it is easier to relate to them.

Meanwhile, I dropped out of university and I started working in a computer company. I put those skills to good use in Africa, working with computer literacy and opening an internet centre. I turned my difficulties into strengths; after one week the other Italian volunteers who travelled to Africa with me began to miss Italy, friends, relatives and Italian food. They wanted to go back, but I was very focused on my task and for me, eating rice for lunch and dinner for weeks was not a problem because it's my favorite dish. My longest trip lasted two months.

Finally, five years ago by accident I discovered Asperger Syndrome. After that I received the diagnosis and I started to participate in associations of families, professionals and workers in Autism Spectrum Disorders, and I compared myself with other people in the spectrum like me. All this has made me fully aware of my situation and provided additional tools for me to continue my journey of personal growth. I immediately started to do voluntary activities in associations in the field of ASDs; participating in projects, giving talks at conferences and connecting with people with AS and their families.

Recently, my responsibilities have increased; in 2009 I became Vice President of Gruppo Asperger, a non-profit organisation, and in 2010 I became a member of Autism Europe's council of administration as a self-advocate. Voluntary activities have become the main activity of my life and also the one that gives me the most satisfaction and benefit for my personal growth. I discovered with pleasure that many other people on the autistic spectrum have undertaken a path in voluntary activities similar to mine, mainly by giving accounts at conferences, becoming a councillor of associations of families who are dedicated to autism, or founding organisations or communities made up of people in the autism spectrum. I can not list them all here, in the literature and on the internet it is easy to find biographies of these people in the spectrum and on these organisations and communities. I would love to mention Marc Segar, though, a young English man with ASD that died young in an accident; he was the famous author of *Coping: A Survival Guide for People with Asperger Syndrome*, which was published in 1997, and he was also a volunteer in Africa and active in associations of families dedicated to autism.

• Pietro

