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Rotary Club Prague International and Speechless Reconciliation Project

How do you perceive today's world? If you look at the news headlines, your world is shaped by the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, climate change and natural disasters, and the covid-19 pandemic. However, beneath the surface, there are many individuals and organizations working on meaningful projects. I personally took part in two projects supporting youth from underprivileged backgrounds this summer.

It is a pleasure to introduce you to Matěj Keka, who is the Leader of the Speechless Reconciliation Project. This project brought 24 youngsters, six educators from four countries of the Balkan region to a nine-day long summer camp in Beskydy mountains and Prague.

The project managed to include various organizations, both Czech and foreign embassies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as many individuals and even whole families.

Such a project not only changed the lives of individual participants but also made an impact on those who helped with the organization. And I was proud that the Czech Republic had the chance to play such an important role, as these projects represent what we call public diplomacy and shape favourable public opinion towards our country.

The auspices received and support from all the embassies involved also show how unique and substantial this project was.

Let me quote Jana Kálmán from the Department of South and Southeastern Europe, a former deputy head of mission in Podgorica, Montenegro and Pristina, Kosovo.

“A series of war conflicts that had accompanied the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, is still in living memory of most population of the Western Balkan territory. Fratricidal violence and hatred that was a part of the breakup of Yugoslavia, created a deep chasm in the society, that still can be seen between the various ethnic groups. This has also had an impact on the young generation, born already after the war. I am glad that a project such as Speechless Reconciliation came into existence. Looking for reconciliation and building understanding and mutual respect throughout the projects that include young generation is the best way possible”.

Matěj Keka was born in the Czech Republic to a Czech mother and a Hungarian father. He recently graduated from the European Academy of Diplomacy and Visegrad School of Political Studies in Poland and joined the Unilever company Future Leaders Program. He will be pursuing an MPA degree at the Diplomatic Academy in Prague. I met Matěj about a year ago when he came to the Rotary Club Prague International. Already during his membership speech, he presented an audacious project about bringing young people from the Balkan region to the Czech Republic. His determination, energy, and focus were simply too hard to resist.

Matěj, how did you come up with such a big project?

The idea of Speechless reconciliation, bringing together children from orphanage homes in former Yugoslav countries, comes from various sources. I was thinking about carrying out a meaningful project even before I joined Rotary International. A big part of the inspiration comes from my personal experience, the other comes from my educational background as someone who studied cultures and lived in seven different European countries. I am also a passionate history student. Last but not least, I would also say that my urge is to always do something for the community. I don't define a community by people that live near an individual, but rather as a group of people that have something in common whether it is origin, background, values, or history.

At what point did you decide to involve Rotary Club Prague International?

I knew even before becoming a member of the RCPI that I wanted to use the potential and resources of the Rotary International organization to make this happen. Rotary International is the perfect organization for this kind of project, which is trying to bring peace, reconciliation, and opportunities to disadvantaged youngsters. One of the main reasons is the nature of the organization itself so it came quite naturally to me that Rotary would be a perfect match for this project. And many thanks to the Rotary Foundation for the financial support of the project.

You managed to involve many individuals, families, and even organizations. I know that you like the proverb “If you want to go fast, go alone if you want to go far, go with the company”.

Thus, I would like to share firstly my gratitude to all of the members of the Speechless reconciliation team, without their decades of experience this project would still be just a dream.

Namely, I would like to thank Casey Holt and Diana Burr for setting up the website of the project that will be vital for the presentation of the outcomes of the project to the public. I would like to thank you, Linda, for helping us with the engagement of the Czech embassies in the region. They were crucial for us. It is necessary to acknowledge Fernanda Escobar who managed to engage various ambassadors from the participating countries. Their support will be crucial for our project in the long term.

Gratitude also goes to Gerry Tipple, who as the president of the Rotary Club Prague International took a risk and engaged actively in the project as well as in the summer camp. I would also like to share my deep gratefulness to Mamun Hassan, who made sure that our youngsters tried the best Indian food available in Prague. Our trainers were indispensable, making sure that the youngsters have tangible outcomes from the project. These trainers were Karin Genton-L'Epée, Ellion Kollcaku, and Valery Senichev.

My thanks also goes to the ADRA organization, namely, Renáta Chlebková, who managed to connect me with three fabulous volunteers Laura, Natália, and Gabriela, who were also a critical part of the organizing team of the summer camp.

One of our other important partners that I would like to thank is Lastavica led by Mr. Edo Jaganjac who proved to be very kind and welcoming when he offered us support. I am already looking forward to future cooperation with the Lastavica organization.

Last but not least, I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart the Belon family who were at the center of the success of the summer camp. Tim, Joke, Jens – you are among the kindest people I have ever met! Thank you for being part of the project.

I know that you have thanked many people while we all keep thanking and appreciating you. It still amazes me how you not only dreamed and dared but also managed to undertake such a big project?

I know it might sound like a cliché but one of the most important things I would like to share is the fact that everything is possible. Once you have a clear vision of what you want to achieve, then it's just a matter of time until you accomplish your goal. My goal was to bring youngsters from orphanages to the Czech Republic and, with the help of various individuals, that is what I have managed to achieve. It takes time and perseverance but eventually it will come. One of the other moments I would like to share is the impact that this project has had on us as organizers but also on the youngsters. Before we started the project we could never have imagined how powerful and impactful it would become.

One of the other things that helped me to create and eventually execute this project is a method that I developed for myself a few years ago. This method has six steps: Want, Deserve, Plan, Execute, Focus, Adjust.

What are the lessons learned and perhaps to be passed on to other young aspiring leaders?

Don't be too hard on yourself. I struggled a lot with that during the preparations for the project. As a perfectionist, I was trying to do my best and eventually forgot to also enjoy the process itself.

It's important to have fun while doing good. Sometimes we tend to get lost in all of the to-do lists, tasks, and pushing forward without having fun. I have to say that eventually after all of that hard work we have done, we had so much fun during the summer camp.

Do your best and then believe in the best results. Many of us were concerned about what was actually going to happen because, as I already mentioned, we were trying something that was never done before, and thus there was a lot of uncertainty and risks. Sometimes, we were taken away by that fact. However, on the other hand, I have to say that once we established a good rapport and trust among team members we were very much doing our best.

After you get some rest, what are your future plans?

I believe that big things start small and with this group of people with big hearts with the same urge as I have, everything is possible. Even this small success can eventually turn into something bigger that will influence the lives of many; one of our future plans is to make this project even more sustainable. We have a couple of ideas that we are currently working on in our team. Some of them for example, are to provide youngsters with more opportunities such as jobs, internships, online courses, etc. which is, at the end of the day, the motto of our Rotary organization.

However, there is already one thing for sure: Speechless reconciliation summer camp 2021 was just the beginning of something way bigger.

In Rotary Club Prague International, we like the saying “Having fun, doing good”.

And now, let us hear from the ones who were involved the most.

Gerry Tipple, President of Rotary Club Prague International remarked:

"Speechless reconciliation is in many ways one of the most ambitious projects our club has undertaken and the fact that we were able to complete it so successfully in such difficult circumstances as Covid times is a great tribute to the team and Matěj's determined and able management.

There is absolutely no doubt that the youngsters that we were able to bring from North Macedonia, Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia & Herzegovina not only made many new friends amongst the other participants but also learned much that will help them to successfully meet the challenges of life. We are determined to repeat this project and are now looking for partners that would like to support these potentially life-changing opportunities for youngsters whose start in life has so often been extremely difficult."

Valery Senichev, who was the Head of Training, mentioned: It was challenging to create a development program for young people with so different levels of English, not knowing them and their motivation. But the leadership of Matěj, professional work of the team and groups leaders made this project happen on a high level. I am happy that Matěj was not just coordinating all people, but also

brought some training activities to the camp. Right now we are working on how to make this project more effective and sustainable for all people in the project”.

Hana Gamrot, Chairwoman of Rotary Foundation District 2240, mentioned: “Speechless Reconciliation is one of many truly meaningful projects that Rotary Foundation was happy to support. I am very proud of the project and big appreciation to Matěj for a perfect leadership.”

Karin Genton l’Epée, a coach and a Rotarian, presents her perspective:

“As a fervent European, I truly enjoyed participating in the Speechless Reconciliation Rotary project. It was a real pleasure witnessing these youngsters from four different Balkan countries (Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia) create and develop friendly and peaceful relationships during this 2021 summer camp. Looking forward to supporting many more friendships amongst future participants”.

Tim Belon took part with his wife **Joke** and son **Jons**. They all spent the whole week at the Beskydy mountains with the group.

“I joined the project team in an early stage, a stage where a lot of stakeholders had doubts about the feasibility of the project. Especially because the timeline we had was very short. The chance of failure was real. A few weeks ago there were still a lot of important issues to be solved. But we worked as hard as we could with a small team of ‘believers’, all of us realized that we could not be able to make it on time. At that time even the ‘believers’ did not realize at all the impact that this project would have on so many youngsters. Our first ambition was to give all of the participating youngsters a week they would never forget and to find ways to make a difference on the long run for some of them. Two weeks before the event me and my wife traveled with Matej and Gerry to the location where the event was going to take place. We found this place was in the middle of nature, an inspiring place... ideal for the project. We returned to Prague convinced that we were going to be able to realize our first objective... organizing a week never to forget.

Since the project team was very small and really needed extra resources, my wife Joke and our youngest son Jens were happy to join the team to support the project during the week at Beskydy mountains. When we drove towards the Beskydy mountains we did not know yet that this was going to become the most beautiful week of our life.

As a family we tried to facilitate the week as much as we could. We drove to the shop to get supplies, we took care of those who were in need... Our son Jens integrated very strongly in the group of youngsters. He had a bigger roll in bringing all of them together than we ever could have imagined. We, as a family, also had time to connect with the youngsters. These intense, authentic and honest discussions and exchanges were sometimes very hard and emotional, but at the same time they were so beautiful and pure. As a family the warmth these youngsters brought to the Beskydy mountains gave us more and more energy to give all we had.

I can also speak for my family and all other members of the project team when I say that all of us had tears in our eyes on different occasions. The youngsters showed their gratitude in so many ways, messages, words,... it was more than heart warming.

We received many messages. (Remark: All materials quoted with a permission of the participants)

“After a long road we finally arrived and my friend Jens is a good friend. He is very good I think we will be friends for a very long time. He is good with everyone and that is what I like about him”.

Tim and family

“When I came I didn't think there was anyone here as a family. After a while, someone told me you were a family. It only took me a moment to actually understand how family works. I honestly don't know how you do it, but you impressed me with it. Your family looks so happy and fun”...

These and other messages which touched our hearts immensely. We started to realize that the impact of this project was going to be much bigger than we wished for before. During the individual talks with the youngsters we realized that we have chances to make a real long term difference for them on the long run.

It was also amazing to see how the youngsters from the different regions, with a different culture, believe,... became ONE after only a few days. They connected already during the first day, but they became ONE group after 2-3 days. So beautiful to see, especially when you know that adults (in the Balkans) do not always seem to get along too well. These kids have the potential to make a difference in their region and in the rest of the world.

We still continue to receive 20-30 messages per day, such as

„I promise that I will work hard in the school and yes you and your family have a very special place in my heart, so I will wait for the day that we are going to meet again“.

„I also have a lot of trouble sleeping because I am used to hugging you and saying good night to you and your wife and Jens. I really miss you“.

I wanted to conclude by the poem the youngsters of Kosovo have written about us, Rotarians. Touching. Including typo's... but then again... makes it even nicer to me. They have presented the poem during the presentation of their country. Matej, Gerry, Karen, Joke, Jens and myself... we were speechless... and all had tears in our eyes. That was maybe the moment when we realized they will be in our hearts forever. Our support towards these kids will be unconditional for a lot of years to come.

It's a life changing project, not only for the youngsters, but also for all active team member who participated during the magnificent week. A week never to forget.

A poem written by one of the participants of Speechless Reconciliation Project from Kosovo

Not very often, the miracle is here
But this is what happened to us this year
Our friend Matej called us one day
And came up with the idea that made our minds fly away
Together with SOS they came up with the plan
To unite the youth of all the Balkan
We told them our story from the first day to the last
So the Rotarians can have a clear picture of our past
They listened carefully of what we had to say
Then they gathered around and started planning right away
They organized the trip for us and others too
Together and united Rotarians can make our dreams come true
At the time that this happened, we thought that it is a dream
Never did we think that it would become real thing
Here we are today, together with our new friends
Happy and relaxed spending more than just a weekend
Kosovo this beautiful place, is home to many people that are young at age.

Young Europeans we are called very often and that is why we feel that we can do anything... even cross the ocean.

NEWBORN Obelisc represent us all, because we are the youngest country in the whole wide world.

Being here today and sharing our time with you, brings us joy and happiness too.

Thank you for the wonderful memories that we are making every day,

Next time we expecting you in Kosovo, preferably in May.

Do you want to become involved in the Spechless Reconciliation project...

Or donate...