

20.03.2017: Visit to GIVE – Charity organization in Heraklion, Greece

Our group of two teachers and ten students visited the organisation GIVE in the centre of Heraklion. Its headquarter is in two small underground rooms with concrete walls. It's cluttered with bins and storage racks, shelved with groceries, medicine, baby food and diapers. One of the rooms is dedicated to clothing, organized in piles and stacks of similar sizes.

The organization is run mainly by two women, Tereza Peraki and Dimitra Apostolaki, who spend most days at the organization, volunteering for Heraklions poorest. They collect donations in goods from private people, bakeries, grocery stores and butchers. If they know of a family in need they visit them, get to know them, make a list of the most needed items. Based on that they get a help package together, which is later dropped off by a motorised volunteer at the persons or family's home or place of interim accommodation. It's important to Tereza and Dimitria that the organization finds the people, not vice-versa. That way they can determine whether the family in question really is in need and what they need the most. Especially with mentally ill, elderly or handicapped people it's very beneficial if someone looks after them instead of expecting them to be able to find help for themselves.

The kids had a lot of questions prepared for the two women. They wanted to find out what the organization does, how it works and what are the biggest challenges for them working here. As it turns out, the biggest challenge for them is not facing intense poverty and desperation every day – as I had suspected – but the managing of volunteer's schedules, goods, families: a complicated task. Asked by me as a follow-up question how they deal with peoples' dire situations emotionally, they said being able to help the people, to challenge their feeling of being alone and without hope is very rewarding. The sheer act of giving someone something they really need makes you happy. The name of the organization, apparently, is program: it is not about rescuing people, not about clothing them or feeding them, even if they do all that. It is about the act of giving itself. It felt as if it is an almost spiritual act for them: They make sure that all the clothes they give out are nice and clean, something they could wear themselves, the food must be sealed and fresh. They made a point of this: We can't give these people our garbage. It's a matter of respect. Everything we give, must be in good quality. One of the ladies explained her great effort in this project through a personal story: She was very depressed when she started volunteering in the organization. By working there, helping and seeing people get better because of her effort helped her to overcome her depression. An elderly man, sitting on a chair in the corner, watching us, smiling, apparently comes here every day, too, even though he can't help much anymore, but he said, he's not feeling well when he doesn't know what's going on with the organization.

We were moved by so much devotion. It's amazing how in Heraklion, where so many people live under economical pressure, there still are volunteers who want to help the poorest of their city for a few hours a week or day in and out, instead of being concerned with their own needs first. There's a lesson to learn: The act of giving has nothing to do with money. It doesn't take anything away from us. It's rather an exchange: You give away something you can spare to someone in need and in return you get to feel like a person who has done something decent today. We left the organization grateful for the experience.

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