

Ladies and gentlemen,

Now I'd like to introduce you the project 'Regenbogen Aktiv' of the rehabilitation group 'Regenbogen e.V.' from Haar near Munich. Furthermore I'm going to present you EASI (European Association for Sports and Social Integration), a new kind of cooperation of innovative organisations working on the recovery of mental health service users throughout Europe, based on sport and leisure-time activities, which I am proud to represent as an elected chairman.

Above all I want to talk about the projects' development, experiences and the attitudes behind the projects.

To start with, I'm going to talk about 'Regenbogen Aktiv'.

The association 'Regenbogen e.V.' was founded in 1986 by employees of the hospital in Haar, aiming at elimination of gaps in the supply system for mental health service users. The main problems then were deficits in housing, jobs, leisure-time activities and cultural offers. Since those days our activities developed gradually. By now we are providing about 190 accommodations in flat-sharing communities etc. in Southern Bavaria. Furthermore we are offering about 100 jobs for mental health service users. The third very important element is the leisure-time, culture and sport sector.

Sport, culture and the support of artistic talent encourage the integration of mental health service users into society as well as the removal of barriers. To reach these aims, 'Regenbogen e.V.' runs three projects: the theatre project 'Kultur am Ostpol', which has become an important part of the cultural life in Munich, the project 'See-lenART', which supports mentally ill artists and the football-team of 'Regenbogen e.V.', which I launched in 1997.

During my civilian service in one of the work projects of the association I got in contact with mentally ill people and got to know, what those people needed. During my work I experienced a very pleasant and human atmosphere and got to know employees, who identified themselves with their work and who were proud of everything they reached together. But I also experienced, that there was hardly any common activity beside work. Therefore I started playing football during the lunch breaks. Little by little, more employees joined, some of them without having ever played football before and dressed with rubber boots. But all of them showed a lot of enthusiasm. Soon we even played during the short coffee breaks. Shortly before the end of my civilian service, we decided to play against the soccer team of the sport therapy of the hospital in Haar. Although we lost the match, it was a great experience for everybody involved. Therefore I decided to set up a football team for mental health service users and pursued this aim, although none of the therapists thought this plan could be successful. From the beginning, all my team mates justified my idealism for which I am grateful until today.

All of them were much stronger and much more reliable than any of the so-called experts and professionals would have imagined to be possible. The experts said we would never get over the first summer, because the summer is hot and for that reason mentally ill people won't have energy for anything beside work. The summer was hot and we had a lot of fun together. Then they said, without a gym we would not get over the winter, because the winter is cold and no mentally handicapped person would stand this. We played in the rain, we played in the snow and yes – we spent a great time. And one winter later, we had a gym.

Every year the team grew and became more and more professional, we got kits and many teams wanted to play friendlies against us. Luckily we never listened to experts, so we all were much better than our reputation and much better than everybody thought we could ever be. In 1998 the first 'Regenbogen-Cup' took place with Bavarian teams playing against each other. During the following years, the cup became an international event and one of the factors which launched the foundation of EASI.

Looking back it can be said, that the acquaintance with the Austrian project 'Pro Sport' has been very important for us: we got in touch with new partners, we travelled abroad and we even gained a new vision. Putting into action what we always had dreamed of and what didn't exist in Germany then, 'Pro Sport' showed us, what was possible: a sport and leisure-time project, adapted to the needs and interests of mental health service users. This example encouraged us trying to establish a similar project in Bavaria.

Apart from 'Pro Sport', the friendship with the 'Red Cross Kickers' from Plattling and with the team of Fokus Mlada Boleslav opened up new possibilities.

Finally in 1999 the managing committee of 'Regenbogen e.V.' became aware of our activity, provided us money and included us into the association's projects list. Until then, the football team had merely been an honorary initiative.

From the beginning it has been our aim to offer more than a mere sport therapy. Our motto has always been: 'As much reality as possible, as much protection as needed'. Therefore our offer has always been guided by the example of 'normal' sports clubs and we always tried to reach a quite high and satisfying level in playing football. But our main aim is and has always been to give everybody the chance to join our team and to take part, independent of age, gender or athletic ability.

There's no team without players – that's why our players support the project with enthusiasm und take over responsibility.

Existing for nine years now, more than 70 players were part of the team. Nowadays it consists of 22 players, some of them taking part since the first day. We have played more than 50 matches and we took part in more than 30 tournaments in Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, England and Italy. We organized eight of these tournaments ourselves.

Now having a master degree in psychology, I still have to say that beside the professional knowledge I have learned one the most important things during my civilian service. I have got an impression of what mental health problems mean for the concerned person and I have experienced that rehabilitation means reintegration into the working process and independent living.

Being idealistic and almost free from theoretical knowledge I then thought – and still think – that this can't be enough. None of us lives only to have a job and a home. For most of us, this is only the basis on which we build up what we call our life. Although the existentialistic and the humanistic psychology aren't very much up to date today, most people will still agree with Abraham Maslow, who assumed, that there were lots of needs - in addition to basic physical needs and material security – with a higher value for the human being. Why shouldn't this also apply to mental health service users? Unfortunately rehabilitation normally means only reintegration into work and living. But it doesn't really matter, if the person leads a satisfying life beyond work. Perhaps we leave mental health service users alone exactly where real rehabilitation starts and where a relapse can be prevented. We are convinced that health and illness are at least partly connected with a decision deep inside the consciousness of the concerned person. A mental health service user should want to be healthy and to accept all the responsibility for his own life coming up then. We believe that it is our task to lead mental health service users towards this decision and supply arguments for health. This means, that we should also put an only medical view of health out of our minds, which generally describes health as the lack of pathological symptoms. But we are sure, that there is a difference between being not ill and being healthy.

Experience has shown that doing sport together is very important for the social life of the players. They made new friends and many of them found a way out of isolation. Although the soccer team is by definition free from therapy but provides an excellent platform to reach therapeutic aims and to practice needed skills for every part of life. On the one hand sport offers the possibility to practice physical and cognitive skills, for example making out a situation and reacting adequately. Athletic improvement surely is connected with other developments, like general well-being or emotional balance. Sport provides a great chance to experience individual success and improvement.

On the other hand social networks and friendships develop. People experience themselves as a part of a cheerful and powerful community, to which contribute their individual part. In the group, basic social abilities can be practiced. The group members form a kind of social system that is very close to real life, because the group had grown naturally and is almost free from authorities.

And apart from all that we brought people together in all over Europe. In 2004 we organized the biggest Regenbogen-Cup ever with 15 teams from Germany, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Austria, England and France, a one week event accompanied by

a two days conference about our international cooperation inside EASI which was founded one year before.

EASI (European Association for sports and Social Integration) was founded in 2003 celebrating the first EASI-Cup in Plattling. Its members come from Germany, England, France, Italy, Austria, Slovakia and Czech Republic. At the moment it is an informal union. EASI's aim is to define it as a basic human right, that people who suffered from mental health problems should have full access to sport activities. We are convinced that the existing club system in all participating countries cannot meet the special needs of mentally ill people. EASI tries to build up an international network and to expand the national projects to make our offers available for a larger group of people.

EASI wants to be a strong voice for the national projects and their common attitude and to create an international lobby for rehabilitation projects based on sport, too.

Our mutual support will be expressed by a common name for all events, which are organized by our members. But EASI is not only limited to international cooperation. We elected national coordinators, who are trying to build up National EASI Networks. EASI-Czech Republic, EASI-Austria, EASI- UK and EASI-Bavaria are developing at the moment. In the UK EASI members are organizing two football leagues in the north and south of England and Wales. Plans exist for the founding of EASI-Outdoor to support outdoor activities like long distance walks, climbing, etc.

Each year one EASI main event is organized by one of the members – the EASI-Cup. EASI-Cup is a one week event for sports, leisure time and cultural experience. The first cup took part in Plattling/Germany in 2003. 2004 it was hosted by New Way Forward in Manchester/England. Both were fantastic trips, great sports and a fantastic enrichment for the life of everybody who was taking part. In 2005 Pro Sport Linz in Austria is going to host the EASI-Cup. It is tending to be the biggest known sports event for mental health service users. Six different Sports will be offered to mental health service users from all over Europe. Over 200 People from 10 nations will come together celebrating something like their special Olympics.

But above all EASI tries to make heard a certain philosophy, to support our ideas and ideals and to bring people together in friendship and sportive competition. Even being an unofficial network EASI has been very successful persuading these aims over the recent years. A person with mental health problems life should contain the same rights and possibilities like any other life. It should only be limited by health but never by society, which refuses aid or the desired access to sport or whatever. This means a real way out of stigma and isolation. EASI wants to be as uncomplicated, unbureaucratic and free from hierarchy as possible, just like the single projects, in which equals practice sport with equals and celebrate their successes, no matter if somebody is psychologist or mental health service user, just human being with human being – life just like everybody else lives it. Therefore the name EASI alludes to the English word 'easy'.

Finally I want to state, that it is an important aim for me to show you, that sport and simply life are often better therapies than – without wanting to deny the sense or the legitimacy of anything – talks with a doctor, who probably will only raise the drug dose. Team sport implicitly contains so many therapeutical methods and effects, which are very close to real life.

We want more than suppressing symptoms. We want to live – together.

What we do, it's worth it! Just ask the one who play this game.

Thank you very much.