

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'd like to introduce you now 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 Social Integration by Sports and active Life), a new kind of cooperation of innovative rehabilitation projects for mental health service users throughout Europe, based on sport and leisure-time activities.

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'. It will start in 2004 as a pilot project in Bavaria, offering sport and leisure-time activities adapted to the interests of mental health service users, thus following the example of 'Pro Sport', a project of the Austrian association 'Pro mente'.

Before giving you details about 'Regenbogen Aktiv' let me tell you something about the history of the project.

The association 'Regenbogen e.V.' was founded in 1986 by employees of the hospital in Haar, aiming at elimination 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 soccer-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 experiences, that there was hardly any common activity beside work. Therefore I started playing soccer during the lunch breaks. Little by little, more employees joined, some of them without having ever played soccer 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 soccer team for mental health

service users and pursued this aim, although none of the therapists thought this plan could be successfully. From the beginning, all my team mates justified my idealism for which I am grateful until today.

All of them was much stronger and much more reliable than any of the so-called experts 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. Then they said, without a gym we would not get over the winter, because the winter is cold and no mentally ill 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 tricots 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 everything everybody thought we could ever be capable of. 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.

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 dreamt 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 to establish a similar project in Bavaria. But this plan had to be put aside until I had finished my psychology study.

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. Until then, the soccer 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 soccer. 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 seven years now, more than 50 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 20 tournaments in Germany, Austria, Czech Republic and Italy. We organized seven of these tournaments.

By now I have finished my studies and I can say that – beside the professional knowledge – I have learned the most important things during my civilian service and that this has probably been the reason why we have played soccer during all the years and why we will convert this basis into a pilot project for a new kind of day-structuring facilities. I have seen what a mental illness means 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 mentally ill people exactly there alone, 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 mentally ill persons 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 skills. 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 hat grown naturally and is almost free from authorities.

From next year on, not only the soccer team will support all these needs of mental health service users in Munich, but also the project 'Regenbogen Aktiv'. Hopefully it won't be a unique pilot project for a long time. These day-structuring facilities will give us the chance to offer additional kinds of sport, e.g. traditional martial arts, fitness and dancing.

Since 2003 not only innovative national projects support the aims we have talked about during the symposium but also a new cooperation of these projects throughout Europe. It is called EASI (European Association for Social Integration by Sports and active Life) and its members come from Germany, England, France, Italy, Austria, Slovakia and Czech Republic. At the moment it is still only an informal union, but it strives for registration as a European association until next year. EASI's aim is to define it as a basic human right, that mentally ill people 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 will be organized by our members.

But above all EASI tries to make heard a certain philosophy, which I talked about, and to support our ideas and ideals whenever possible, to make reintegration into society more efficient and more human. The life of a mentally ill person 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. 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 mentally ill, 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!

Thank you very much.