

2020 STENE PRIZE *THIRD PLACE*

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I am a 45-year-old freelance photographer living in the town of Focșani in Romania. I have scoliosis and learned about the Edgar Stene Prize competition from other members of LRR – the Romanian League Against Rheumatism. I am married and my hobby is website design.

THIRD PLACE ESSAY 2020

Voluntary work and the joy of giving!

I'm not really sure where these last 10 years slipped by...

Ten years during which I have learned to be an administrator, a co-ordinator, a web designer, a driver, a photographer, a cameraman, a video editor... Ten years during which I have made friends and have learned to give and to receive.

Voluntary work is not just an unpaid activity; it is a lifestyle. It is the joy of giving!

Ten years ago, the main problem facing disabled people in Romania was an inaccessible environment. There was an absence of information (about legislation, medical news etc.) that could have improved their quality of life and reduced their isolation in their own homes.

It is very important to know your rights because, if you know them, you are able to claim them, defend them and try to find solutions to the problems you face. It is also important to learn how other people have handled similar situations – rights violation, health problems.

I was passionate about web design and, when I was myself diagnosed with scoliosis, I told myself that I could try to change something in this regard. So I created the online platform DizAbil.eu to enable disabled people to get to know their rights, to find medical news and inspirational positive examples, as well as negative examples around them.

This would enable them to communicate and seek solutions to the problems they face together. At the same time, they could connect with friends because loneliness can sometimes be more painful than the disability itself.

Despite the fact that I have put a part of my soul into this project, I never hoped that it would reach so many people in difficulty. Over the past ten years, the online platform has reached more than 400 members from all across the country.

Even though I started this “adventure” ten years ago all on my own, my effort has been rewarded more than I have ever hoped. Indeed, the DizAbil.Eu project has brought me not only friends but a family.

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Just one year after launching the platform for disabled people, I met Iuliana – a blogger and support group co-ordinator for patients with rheumatoid arthritis – while I was looking for a team to provide me with the necessary support to co-ordinate it. Just two years later she became my wife. Thus DizAbil.Eu brought together two dreamers who lived 700km from each other and who, probably, would not have had many opportunities to meet and start out on the same road together.

My wife and I have become partners not only in our daily lives, but also in all the voluntary activities that we have initiated.

Seven years ago we thought that we should do more. We decided to move beyond the virtual environment and organise meetings with the members of the platform in Vrancea, the county where we live. Thus, we created the DizAbil.Eu-Vrancea Civic Group which soon became a big family, campaigning for accessibility according to EU rules regarding public institutions, sidewalks and public areas in general.

We meet, we set common goals and strategies for achieving them, we co-ordinate community-organisation workshops, we draw up petitions aimed at authorities or economic agents that violate the law protecting and promoting the rights of disabled people, we visit cultural objectives and we create campaigns to enhance public awareness. We use all the means at our disposal to convince local authorities to take necessary measures to make the localities where we live "friendly" for disabled people. The most recent campaign launched by the DizAbil.Eu – Vrancea Group is called "We want Focsani without barriers".

Regardless of the fact that disabled people are sometimes perceived differently, with only their disability being noticed, disabled people are more than that. They are People who have their own normality. They have many weaknesses, sometimes many complexes, but they have as many qualities as a healthy person – even if people often fail to recognise their due value in benefiting their community. We try to stimulate disabled people to showcase their skills, even by involving them in voluntary work.

Voluntary work takes time and effort, but without these voluntary activities to support disabled people I would feel much poorer. These activities have given me a wife and many friends. Thanks to my desire to make a greater contribution to the activities of the group – besides administrating the online platform – sometimes I am a driver, bringing the members who have difficulty moving to meetings. I also take pictures and/or film our activities. Like me, each member of the group has the opportunity to showcase their abilities or to discover new skills as a way of supporting the group.

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It is not easy to make changes in the community where you live or to change the way people think. But every change, however small it may be, brings you immense joy and motivates you to go even further. In addition, it makes you forget about the physical pain, the failures and the fatigue caused by your illnesses or effort.

As far as I am concerned, voluntary work makes me feel useful, and I believe that this is my mission. I'm doing exactly what I like doing!

I am learning new things all the time, I have got to meet beautiful people and, even more than that, I am discovering myself. I am more than I would have been if I had been healthy and hadn't felt the need to get involved to change something in other people's lives, as well as in my own.

These activities do not bring me any material gain, but helping people in difficulty brings a richness of the soul that can hardly be quantified.