

2020 STENE PRIZE WINNER

HRISTINA BANKOVA

Bulgaria



I am a 47 year old perpetual optimist – perhaps an idealist. I have lived in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, since I was born. I'm married, with a grown up son. I started my career in 1995 working in the air import department of a logistics company. Since then I have had a passion for logistics and transportation. Currently, I'm a supervisor in a logistics provider company with offices in Romania and Hungary, and its headquarters in Bulgaria.

I love reading, cooking, travelling and enjoying good food with family and friends. I am a philologist (someone who studies the history of languages) but I have never worked on this field.

I learned about the theme of the 2020 Edgar Stene Prize competition from an e-mail distributed to the members of the Bulgarian Organisation for Patients with Rheumatic Diseases (BOPRD) and felt: "This is my topic".

I believe volunteering brings fun and fulfilment to my life which means a lot to me. I was a volunteer with BOPRD even before I was diagnosed with scleroderma because I believe in some way – small or large – that volunteering is a way of doing good. Through my actions and involvement I'm benefiting others on the one hand, as well as myself on the other.

WINNING ESSAY 2020

One step at a time

It's May 2013. I am wearing a T-shirt with the logo "World Lupus Day".

I am holding a stack of the same T-shirts plus pens and flyers in my hands. I am standing in the centre of Sofia, accompanied by four more people wearing the same T-shirts. I don't have lupus. And I don't even know anyone who has the disease. I have learned the basics about the disease so I can give an explanation should someone ask while I am telling people that we are running a lupus awareness-raising campaign. Why am I here? I want to support the handful of people who created the Bulgarian Organisation for Patients with Rheumatic Diseases (BOPRD) with so much passion, enthusiasm and effort some three years ago.

On that particular day in Sofia, I still don't know that I, myself, have a rheumatic disease. But I do know that something good, something beneficial is happening. People — occasional passers-by — are told that there is a category of diseases called rheumatic diseases. Rheumatic diseases are not as well-known as diabetes or hypertension. There are often no visible symptoms to suggest that you are facing a person with a serious chronic illness. At that time in May 2013, little is known about these diseases in Bulgaria because the organisation is still very young. But the organisation will grow and develop to become what it is today, a trusted partner of doctors and a forum for patients.

Still, in May 2013, we stop passers-by to give them a flyer and a T-shirt, and to explain what we are doing and why we are doing it... Why we should talk about lupus and rheumatic diseases. I feel I am making a difference. My personal goal is to attract the attention of as many passers-by as possible who will listen to me rather than simply pick up the flyer and continue on their way.

Every encounter makes me feel more and more motivated and satisfied. I am proud of myself. I am sure you all know this great inner sense of personal satisfaction that inflates you just like a balloon and you tell yourself: "I can do it! I am doing it! And I am good at it!"

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WINNING ESSAY 2020

(continuation from page 1. Essay "One step at a time" by Hristina Bankova)

I already know that this is "my" cause and that, from now on, I will give my full support to BOPRD and to this cause — the cause of people with rheumatic diseases whose voice has to be heard.

Years will pass by and I will keep on handing out many more flyers.

I will talk to many more people. Not only about the diseases, but also about early diagnostics, modern treatment, rehabilitation — about any topic we want to focus on in our BOPRD campaigns. I will educate myself by reading much more about these diseases. I will meet other volunteers within the organisation, some of whom will later become close friends.

I will be diagnosed myself — with scleroderma. Everything in life happens for a reason.

I will also have the opportunity to participate in the EULAR PARE patient conferences, after which I will always feel more motivated, more hopeful and more knowledgeable - confident that I have to spread this knowledge with the aspiration and conviction that I am doing something meaningful.

I will go to work and, at the right moment, I will tell my colleagues about rheumatic diseases — my colleagues are certainly among the most competent on the subject, bearing in mind that none of them has a rheumatic disease. They are just the kind of people who are open to new experiences, who are understanding and supportive.

Since that day in May 2013, this flame has been burning inside of me. I still enjoy "working" as a volunteer at BOPRD. I don't get paid, but my reward comes from meeting new and interesting people, building friendships, having fun, and gaining knowledge, wisdom, experience, trust and a sense of meaning.

Being a volunteer is just like being a hero — not the type of hero who shoots and kills the bad guys. But rather the type of hero who makes the world a better place, one step at a time.