

## **Co-operation in the New Millennium**

The ELSA Youth Meeting 2000. Mullsjö Sweden

### **Gina Waggott:**

Like our fellow BSA Member Kevin, my plans to go to the Youth Meeting in Sweden were very last minute and, at best, very disorganised. Luckily for me and my travel buddy Hedley Phillips (also a BSA member), ELSA's sense of organisation was at the other end of the spectrum.

The preparation for this year's meeting had started way back in 1998, mainly due to the funding involved - as a student, I was only too pleased to have a subsidised hotel and half my travel costs refunded! Spending a week with other young people who stuttered in such a gorgeous location was also too good an opportunity to pass up... and it was with great excitement that Hedley and I arrived at the hotel, albeit a day late (my fault - long story).

This was initially one of my worries - that the group would have already gelled on the first day and a half and that we'd feel a little awkward joining in after the schedule had gone underway. How wrong could I have been? I hardly put a foot through the door of the hotel when I was greeted by a multitude of happy, outgoing, warm people. My doubts and worries vanished and I began to prepare myself for a great week.

As Kevin has already mentioned, the hotel was luxurious and the staff were also very friendly, even after cleaning up our beer cans every night (no, no, we DID attempt to clean up ourselves, but nobody expected to find cans in the saunas, pool, outside under trees... you get the idea.)

The schedule of events was varied and I can confidently say that I got a lot out of each exercise. There was a heavy emphasis on group work (to match the theme of the week - Co-operation in the New Millennium), which also provided us all with a chance to get to know each other better, though we hardly needed to be asked! The highlights of the week for me were the drama and art exercises, not least because it allowed for a bit of childhood regression... and uproarious laughter.

While the drama was underway, several local television companies came to film us for the local news, thanks to Robert Josefsson who got the media's attention, and also Anita Blom, on the board of ELSA, for giving interviews with Robert and letting the world know that young stutterers were taking over Mullsjö - though we were sure they already knew by signs such as a load of girls in theatrical make-up and wigs screaming at the top of their voices, and a load of naked men jumping in the lake at midnight - ooh, did I say that?

By the middle of the week I was already counting the days left with great anxiety... I didn't want the week to end. The only panic I had was when I had to give a presentation on the late John Larkin - a famous stutterer and singer by the name of Scatman John. The Youth Meeting gave me an opportunity to tackle my fear of speaking in front of people - I couldn't have asked for a better audience, most my age, and every one a stutterer. If only it was that easy in everyday life!

The week culminated with a party and a lot of emotional and heartfelt goodbyes. We have all promised to stay in touch and are doing so - such was the beauty of the youth meeting we have all made firm friends, from all over Europe and beyond. Many people have since said they can't quite express in words what they took from the meeting - including myself. The best way to describe it would be to highlight my memories: from moments when we sat and spoke seriously and sincerely about the emotions, challenges and experiences we feel as people who stutter, to the moments like jumping in a freezing lake straight out of the sauna, laughing so hard I couldn't finish my dinner, and dancing the night away. In a world where words aren't my best friend, it speaks for itself. I can't wait for the World Congress in Belgium when we will all meet up again. Perhaps I'll even be organised enough to attend the next Youth Meeting, and I would encourage any other young person to do the same.

My thanks goes out to Edwin Farr, Anita Blom, and Konrad and Beate Schaefer, the ELSA organisers, for making such a meeting possible and for running it so well. Also credit to the European Youth Foundation, who provided funding towards the meeting... as well as the BSA, who made me aware of all this in the first place!

Thank you....

Gina