

Elsa Youth Meeting- Nijmegen, Netherlands, 15-21st July 2007.

I came across the advert for the youth meeting by accident on the BSA website, and after reading the reports of previous meeting thought it would probably be worth a look. After spending a lovely weekend in Amsterdam, I set off to Nijmegen on the (punctual, clean, and double decker!!) train, unsure of what to expect. Some of the other delegates were waiting for the bus to our accomodation, and after establishing we were heading in the same direction we got chatting; such a friendly atmosphere pervaded throughout the whole meeting.

We arrived and started to make our introductions.. lots of unfamiliar names to try and remember, and almost 40 delegates aged 17-26 from Bulgaria, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Ireland, Scotland, Norway, Belgium, Austria, Spain, Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Lithuania, and Holland, though I was the only English delegate. I don't think I've ever been in a group that big where fluent speakers are very much in the minority, and over the week it proved an ideal atmosphere to practise speech techniques. It also took all pressure off speaking; though everyone's speech was very different, I personally felt all pressure of speaking was almost eliminated by talking to people who know exactly how it feels to be struggling with a block, and don't judge me for it. This was definitely one of the best aspects of the meeting for me.

The title of the meeting, "Stand up, Speak up" had the aim of promoting human rights and disability policy, and we had a number of sessions on this theme which culminated in a presentation of a project asking for funding to promote stammering in some way. We had a lot of fun thinking up ideas for projects mainly with the aim of educating people about stammering, and presenting them in novel ways; groups used plays, video and dance (!) to put their ideas across, and it was brilliant to watch really innovative ideas come to life, presented by people for whom the word "presentation" had probably previously brought out a cold sweat! The meeting had a good emphasis on young people's contributions to society, and how important it is to get involved in our national association, and I think that message was taken on board by everyone present; it definitely inspired me to be more active in the BSA.

The other main activity was a drama workshop, which the organisers cleverly (deviously) hadn't mentioned in the information we'd been given about the week. I'm sure I would have had second thoughts about going if I'd known, as drama was never a particularly pleasant experience in school, mainly because of a sense of frustration for not being able to realise my full (and doubtless extensive(!)) drama potential. I think everyone really enjoyed the workshops though, and the emphasis was very much on all aspects of communication, including sounds, movements, and posture as well as speech. We worked really hard in two groups to put on a play each to show on the last night, both of which went down really well; everyone had some sort of speaking part, and it was a novel experience for most of us! Everyone was really appreciative of our amazing drama tutors; Lulu and Jan, thanks again!

As well as the activities mentioned we had a lot of fun in the evenings too.. everyone ended the week with varying degrees of sleep deprivation from chatting, dancing and drinking into the early hours. BE WARNED any future delgates.. the last night's staple entertainment IS kareoke, like it or not (a definite not in my case!) and it's loud, cheesy, and unrelenting. But don't let that put you off. We had a welcome day off on the

Wednesday too, where people had the chance to take in the sights of the Netherlands, and the week normally coincides with a massive street party in Nijmegen, celebrating the end of a massive walk with late night music, fireworks (accompanied by Christmas music.. crazy Dutch..) and general merriment.

I'd very strongly recommend the meeting to anyone who would like to meet other people who stammer, share experiences, learn about other countries, get more involved in their national stammering associations and have a brilliant week while doing it. The meeting's main language was English so any British delegates can leave the hard work of speaking a different language to their European counterparts (while fostering a sense of guilt for their own linguistic deficits).. even with the language guilt though, it was a thoroughly enjoyable and unique week and one that any young person who stammers should definitely experience.

Lindsey Pike
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