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Stand up – Speak up! BSA Scotland at ELSA 2007

Four Scottish delegates (Roz, Dev, Richard and Cian) attended this year's ELSA youth meeting, entitled 'Stand up, Speak up', along with Jan Anderson, BSA Scotland staff member, and Lulu Black, drama worker for TAG Theatre Company, Glasgow. Lulu and Jan were charged with delivering a programme of drama workshops to run alongside and complement core sessions aimed at encouraging participants to engage with their national stuttering associations with an increased understanding of human rights and equal opportunities issues. We were delighted to have this opportunity, in view of BSA Scotland's current interest in developing a longer-term drama project for young people in Scotland who stammer. The ELSA meeting provided a chance to test the relevance of drama with a large group of young adults over a short, intensive period.

The different strands of the programme bore fruit towards the end of the week when small groups of participants each presented a stuttering project proposal for a new stuttering association in an imaginary country (Thursday evening) and two devised theatre pieces (Friday evening) before the final night's party got underway. The excellent project presentations demonstrated the wealth of vision, talent and good sense that young people can bring to their stuttering associations. They also promoted teamwork and provided an opportunity to practice good communication skills. The theatre presentations were the culmination of a comprehensive exploration of dramatic techniques during the preceding workshops. In the final shows, everyone worked co-operatively and played to their newfound strengths to produce imaginative, funny and, at times, profound ensemble performances.

The youth meeting was held near Nijmegen and lasted a full five days. Thirty delegates, aged 17 – 30, from a wide range of Eastern and Western European countries, attended. Countries represented included Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Bulgaria, Spain, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Norway, UK, Netherlands and Ireland – a mix that was extraordinarily rich in terms of language, culture, attitudes, beliefs and approaches to stammering.

The event was an undoubted success – a journey of personal, political and creative discovery, with plenty of time for socialising – that left participants stirred and inspired by the new ideas, questions and experiences encountered. The young people brought fantastic reserves of creativity, energy and insight to share.

Participants were timetabled from 9.30 – 12.30pm and 2 – 5pm on all but one free day. They were divided into two half groups and each group spent half the day focusing on active engagement with stuttering issues, and the other half, in drama workshops.

In the active engagement workshops, Anita Blom, Edwin Farr and Gina Waggott shared their experience as ELSA Board members, outlining the historic and current legislative framework through which they seek to represent people who stammer and detailing successes to date. Irina Papancheva, former ELSA participant, journalist and currently deputy Mayor of Sofia, Bulgaria, described her empowering experience of influencing disability policy in her home city.

In the drama workshops participants had the opportunity to warm up and/or relax using voice and physical movement exercises and games before experimenting with mime,

choral speaking, story telling, character development, improvisation and ensemble work. These sessions were a great leveller as many of the activities did not rely heavily on spoken English. Indeed, participants were encouraged to use their own language at times, with everyone enjoying the freedom this allowed.

On the free day Jan, Lulu and many other delegates visited the nearby Hoge Veluwe national park and Kroller Muller Museum and Art Gallery where we cycled 24 kilometres on free white bicycles and visited a vast and exciting collection of Van Gogh and other paintings and outdoor sculptures.

Quotes from Scottish participants

“The meeting was relevant in many ways. I am more aware of my rights and organisational issues. Culturally, it was a melting pot in which ideas and opinions flourished. Socially, it was relaxing because of the music, games and laid-back atmosphere. It was very creative and spiritual because of the drama and yoga – but, what stood out most was the personal journey I experienced as a young man beginning to know my stammer.”

“I had an idea of disability rights before attending but found the specific consideration of stammering and the legislation really interesting and relevant. It provided a good idea of the work that national stuttering associations should be doing. The proposal we designed for a pertinent project was very enjoyable as well. It has definitely inspired me to get more involved. The more people who stammer who know their rights and responsibilities, the better!”

In view of BSA Scotland’s commitment to developing a drama project for young adults in Scotland who stammer, specific feedback was sought on this aspect of the programme. A selection of responses from Scottish and European participants are provided here...

“It was a perfect balance. The drama workshops benefited the human rights lectures – and vice versa. The experience will give people confidence to return home, stand up and speak up in front of people about their National Associations. It will also help us connect with people because we have connected with ourselves. I think there is scope for a workshop programme purely around drama. People were just beginning to find themselves.”

“In the drama workshops I was allowed to do something I never thought I would do. I always thought that drama was for people who were fluent and confident in themselves and their bodies. I never thought I could stand up in front of people, take on a role and express myself. Often you say what is necessary, what you need to say, without any expression. The drama allowed me to find the voice that is deep inside me that does not come out very much.”

“I got a lot out of the drama workshops because they focused on the physical side of communication, which I liked very much because this gives me a lot of freedom and I can feel my way around. I was afraid of using words, because this was the first time I was confronted by the fact that, as a covert stammerer, I have gone through a lot of my life avoiding using the words I feel.”

From our European friends ...

"I liked so many things.... The sessions woke me up every time. Also, I learned not to care so much. I'm not stressing about things such as trying to say things quickly."

"I found answers to some of the deep questions in my mind. Through drama, we were able to gain a lot of experience. The main thing that came to my mind was to never feel any **shame**, which was very nice for me."

"Acting, or performance, is the best way of breaking the ice between people who do not know one another. There are no limits, no walls – you just act and see how people react to one another or the situation – and you get to know people better."

"This week I was without any mask. This is unusual for me because I think I have three or four main masks that I wear for self-defence and because I am not happy being myself. Now it has become easier to play with my speech and manipulate words. Now I don't just speak to provide information, but rather to have enjoyable and valuable conversations."

BSA Scotland thanks Edwin Farr, Gina Waggott and Anita Blom of ELSA for enabling Jan, Lulu and the Scottish delegates to participate at the 2007 ELSA Youth Meeting. We are delighted by the positive response to the drama workshops and believe the feedback demonstrates the healing and transformative potential of this work for people who stammer. We hope, on the strength of this experience, to pursue our Scottish drama project proposal as well as further European initiatives in future.