

Upper Room/Ur4jobs visit to Barka Foundation, Poznan, Poland September 17th – September 19th 2007

Bruce Marquart and Janie Kidston from the Upper Room/ur4jobs were invited to visit the Barka Foundation in Poznan for a 3-day trip. On arrival we were met by Barbara Drozdowicz who acted as our translator and guide for the duration. Pawel who chose to return to Poland and who was a long-term client of the Upper Room and Jobs Programme accompanied her. We were immediately struck as to how well, healthy and relaxed he now appeared.

We firstly visited the Barka Headquarters for a delicious lunch prepared by the ART Smak Coop. This was followed by a visit to the Emergency shelter at Darzybor, a meeting with the outreach staff/shelter team and a visit to the Darzybor Housing Estate. Whilst the structures of the projects were different from those used in the UK the high levels of client inclusion, warmth and obvious social interaction struck us. All the Barka Programmes for shelter, education and housing require sobriety/abstinence on behalf of the service user and the benefits of this were more than evident!

We stayed in guest accommodation at the Chudobczyce Community House. This gave us the opportunity to catch up with more Upper Room clients who were now resettled at this commune. Dinner was a fabulous outdoor barbeque of traditional sausages and organic salads prepared and grown by members of the commune. We were about 40 people in all. Everyone introduced themselves round the table and we had the opportunity to describe a little about our work in London and the nature of our relationship with the Barka Foundation.

On Tuesday we toured the community farm at Chudobczyce and visited the new pasta production coop before going deep into the country to visit the farming commune of M*****. This involved a warm welcome from the community leaders, coffee, cakes and a trip around the farm. We met the mayor and deputy of Kwilicz to describe the work we are doing before heading to The Centre for Social Economy in Drezdenko. We already knew Grzegorz Niewolny from the Barka Exchange programme in London. We visited the graphic design coop and the railway project and finally on to the Drezdenko Community house for dinner. Meeting the residents in their community home was a privilege, there was a strong family atmosphere and again we were aware of the high levels of respect, responsibility and involvement afforded to the residents. Dinner was a massive spread of sausage, eggs, fresh tomatoes, salads from the garden, a homemade soup and traditional 'bigous'.

On Wednesday morning we visited the first community house in Wladyslawowo. Again we were given the warm welcome of coffee, tea and cakes and the opportunity to exchange ideas about working in the field of homelessness and alcohol misuse. Everyone got involved in a very lively and productive discussion. We had 4 members of the most recently returned group with us at the meeting and they were able to offer first hand insight by sharing their experiences of living in the UK. This was followed by a quick presentation to the Kwilicz Partnership meeting before we headed to the airport.

A lot of ideas were exchanged and we gained a valuable insight of Polish working methods. What particularly struck us was the very human and family dimension of the programmes we visited, of the client involvement and community dimension that made the projects so successful and approachable. It was fantastic to seeing everyone well, settled and happy. Thank you for all your hospitality, thanks to Barbara who had to do all the talking and thanks to everyone for making this such an enjoyable and enlightening visit!

(600 words approx)

JANIE KIDSTON 20:09:07