

# How volunteering strengthens democracy

by Sarah Bidoli

I am a volunteer talent mentor. At least in my case, “mentoring” has nothing to do with singing or dancing. Instead, once a week I meet with my mentee from Neukölln, a neighbourhood in Berlin. Twelve-year-old Mina and I go to the museum or the cinema, we bake or tinker around. Most of the time, however, we simply walk through the park, do her homework for the next day of school, and spend time together.

Mina and I got to know each other last year through afternoon activities organised by the “Neuköllner Talente” (Talents of Neukölln) project, sponsored by the civil society foundation “Bürgerstiftung Neukölln”. The project aims to promote the talents of children who live in Berlin’s Neukölln district and speak a mother tongue other than German. A sponsor and mentor is assigned to every child who signs up. In regular meetings, the children are introduced to various activities in order to figure out what suits them. The same is true for mentors: they are not only expected to suggest activities to the children, but discover something as well – about themselves, about children in general, and about what kids are up to these days.

**It is less about discovering and activating hidden talents in the first place, as the “talent scout” talent may suggest, and primarily about breaking out of one’s own filter bubble.**

I expected the project to be a challenge. I had already worked as a volunteer with seniors and adults, but working with children was a new task for me. In my head, I pictured an ideal child-adult friendship: the child would learn new skills and adopt the adult as his or her role model, while the mentors, in return, would reconnect with their inner child, rediscovering a childlike naiveté and enthusiasm.

This may very well be the case for some tandems, but my experience so far has been a bit different. It is less about discovering and activating hidden talents in the first place, as the “talent scout” talent may suggest, and primarily about breaking out of one’s own filter bubble. This applies to both parties, to Mina and to me. The child does not look up to anyone, nor does the adult necessarily have to learn a new skill. During our meeting, both are simply immersed in a different part of life, free of obligations to learn



↑ The “Neuköllner Talente” support each other through exchange and shared activities.

anything. We did not discover or develop any talents during our visits to the museum or during our walks, and yet our meetings left an impression on me for their simplicity.

While volunteering as a mentor, I realised that children are an active part of our society. This may sound obvious, but I personally did not know the extent to which children reflect on complicated topics. How children see the world is best understood by spending time with them. The project reminded me to take how other age groups see the world into consideration, and to think more about other generations in my everyday life.

This also applies to cultural differences. To develop a better understanding of my neighbours, interaction is crucial. This statement sounds almost banal and self-evident, but then again, no one really knows their neighbours in big cities, right? In response, we could



↑ *The community foundation organises sponsorships and events for all citizens.*

try breaking out of our comfort zone and diving into all of the colours life has to offer. Our courage and our interest in different cultural lifestyles can lead us to question ourselves – this may feel uncomfortable, but it ultimately opens up new perspectives.

### **To develop a better understanding of my neighbours, interaction is crucial.**

The project “Neuköllner Talente” made me particularly aware of the fact that interactions between different social groups are fundamental to a well-functioning, inclusive society, and not only for one’s own development of intercultural and inter-generation skills. Democracy in general can only be strengthened if we develop an understanding of how we can shape society as individuals.

Questions such as “how can I contribute to my society?”, “what choices do I have as a citizen?”, or “what opportunities are available to me at all?” are at the heart of a functioning society. Only when I ask myself these questions can I engage as an active part of society: being aware of all possible opportunities, making decisions based on them, and getting involved are important traits of a responsible citizen and of a society in which everyone can participate.

Volunteering brings people together and contributes to a democratic and inclusive society, and is why I am happy to shout “Put your hands together for Mina!”. Thank you for showing me your world and teaching me new things without even trying. This project is not just an opportunity for me to ask questions about our society, but also the beginning of a wonderful friendship. ←



*Sarah Bidoli*, Sarah Bidoli is currently on parental leave. She was the Managing Director of the Network for International Affairs (nefia), the alumni association of the Mercator Kolleg and former Stiftungskolleg, a post-graduate programme in international affairs until November 2016. Prior to this, she worked in culture and talent promotion. [sarah.bidoli@gmail.com](mailto:sarah.bidoli@gmail.com)