

Areté Youth Foundation
Mid-term report
Chris Voerg-Jones

Introduction

I have spent the past six weeks at the Arété Youth Foundation (AYF) in Sofia, Bulgaria working to build capacity within the organization. Along the way, I have had an opportunity to gain valuable insights into the operations, management and culture of AYF. This has allowed me to gain a greater appreciation and understanding for the challenges that small NGOs face in managing large workloads with few staff, all while trying to maintain relevancy in a given sector. This experience has also provided me with the opportunity to network with partners and donors of AYF such as the America for Bulgaria Foundation and Trust for Social Achievement to better understand the environment for nonprofits in Bulgaria.

Work Progress

Over the past month and a half, I have dedicated much of my time to building and improving AYF's social media presence in order to help the organization better manage relationships with partners, donors and beneficiaries. Before I arrived, AYF already had existing Facebook and Twitter accounts that were used as methods of communication with their stakeholders but were underutilized. My work has focused on using Twitter as way to build relationships with stakeholders and similar NGOs in the youth development sector. AYF has seen immediate results from this method of networking through increased scholarship and employment opportunities for Roma.

The second social media objective was to create an account with the photo-sharing site Instagram. The purpose of the Instagram account was to connect donors and stakeholders, mainly in the United States, more immediately to the work of AYF and to provide a more personal, behind-the-scenes look into the organization. AYF posts photos on their Facebook and Flickr accounts but, generally, they only depict programmatic activities. The challenge moving forward will be getting staff to adopt this new platform and marketing it so that more people are following and viewing their photos.

In addition to work on AYF's social media presence, I have been involved in the planning and implementation of a major program, Zaedno Napred ("Together Forward"). Zaedno Napred is a youth development program consisting of three camps designed to assist Roma teenagers in building leadership, professional and life skills. My work has revolved around assisting staff with preparations for camps by creating resource materials and by analyzing the planning process. I attended one of the weeklong camps in the village of Sokolitsa to observe the implementation of activities and to offer recommendations for improvement. During the camp, thirty Roma youth and eight facilitators engaged in a variety of topics which included: improving communication skills; Roma history; addressing stereotypes and prejudices; HIV/AIDS and human trafficking awareness and prevention; applying for a job – CVs, motivation letters and interviews; and roles of the media. The youth ranged from ages 16-21 and they came from many different cities, towns and villages across Bulgaria. All of the facilitators were Roma professionals ranging from director of an NGO to

university professor to presidential speechwriter. The camp was a special experience for me, because I had the unique opportunity to witness the rich traditions and values of the Romani culture through dance, song and theatre.

For the remainder of my time, I will continue to work on improving AYF's social media presence and analyzing ways it can build organizational capacity. Also, I will continue assisting staff with preparations for the next two Zaedno Napred camps taking place August 4-11 and 18-25. In addition, I hope to have more opportunities to network with other NGOs in Bulgaria to help AYF build a stronger presence in the country.

- Photos from the Zaedno Napred Camp (<http://flic.kr/s/aHsjH5vnVR>)