

“A Dream Come True”: Example of Building Community and Social Capital (A Beauty Contest for Ladies with Disabilities in Bulgaria)¹

The National Social Rehabilitation Centre in Bulgaria is a national non-governmental organization for social services for people with disabilities. In 2003 the Centre organized four beauty contests for its consumers. The intent of the contest was to show that beauty is not reserved only for models. Indeed, people with disabilities possess a lot of beauty and creativity. The idea originated in the city of Varna and the first contest was held in that city.

The specific aims of the beauty contests were to:

- ❑ Let people see that there are very beautiful ladies with disabilities;
- ❑ Attract and stimulate the attention of society towards that group of people;
- ❑ Increase the self-confidence and belief of people with disabilities;
- ❑ Enlarge the range of activities for social integration of people with disabilities;
- ❑ Show their abilities and talents.

The organization of the contest started with a selection of the candidates. Thirty women were invited and more expressed their willingness to participate. The first 14 ladies, who “enrolled” themselves for the contest, took part. They confided that they did not have suitable clothes for the contest. This led to the idea to contact a number of fashion agencies and the largest and most popular model agency in Bulgaria provided support by giving official dresses for the candidates. That was the beginning of the “spinning wheel” that led to more and more support. While we had dresses, we needed flowers, make-up, hair styling, and gifts and prizes. The Bulgarian National Television provided the media to publicize the contests and raise what was needed. We were very pleased when a lot of people, companies, and organizations helped with organizing and conducting the beauty contests. The idea to turn this day into a source of positive emotions for the participants, organizers, and supporters was being realized.

A beauty contest was also organized in Sofia in the National Palace of Culture, a hall with 450 seats. It was filled with music, balloons, flowers, and, of course, people. The contest itself was in two stages:

1. Biographical data about the candidates for the “crown” and her individual presentation; and
2. Questions from the jury.

Miss Bulgaria of 2003 presented the crown to the winner. All ladies participating received a lot of gifts and much appreciation.

All this was possible thanks to the good partnership with local businesses, media, and different organizations.

What happened afterwards?

¹ Adapted from a presentation by Radosveta Abadjieva, Executive Director, National Social Rehabilitation Association, Sofia, Bulgaria at the Good Practices in Social Service Delivery Pre-Training Workshop, 8-12 December 2003, conducted by the International Labour Office, Sub-Regional Office, Budapest, Hungary.

A part of society was shocked! Some people changed their attitude towards people with disabilities! But the most important thing is that these people were seen. There are people with disabilities and they are part of our society. The audience “was infected” by their strong spirit.

The ladies that took part in the contest shared that this day was very special for them. Every one of them felt herself to be a special and beautiful woman. They felt love and attention. Veronika Yanakieva, who became Miss Sofia, will realize her dream to study theatre (actor mastery).

This is a story of a dream that came true.