Being a volunteer in Amsterdam-Zuidoost

Computer support in the local community center

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After realising how lucky I am as an healthy, well educated, young man with a solid income, I wanted to do something for other people as volunteer. It just so happens to be that two years ago I received a flyer in my mailbox from the local community center: they were looking for someone with some knowledge of computers. A very interesting journey was about to begin!

Amsterdam Venserpolder

In 2010 I bought a small apartment in the Venserpolder neighbourhood in Amsterdam-Zuidoost. Some friends warned me about the bad reputation of the area: home to thiefs,

drugs and other criminals. I decided to ignore that and find out for myself. I was not afraid since I am a rather tall guy with a slightly more than healthy weight.

Typical alley in Venserpolder, Amsterdam-Zuidoost

The neighbourhood is composed of several large 4-5 story apartment blocks made in the 80s. There is a mix of house owners and social rental houses. The area is well connected to the rest of Amsterdam by road, train and metro. In contrast to the older central part of Amsterdam, this part of the city has much more space for green (bushes, grass, trees) and water. Cars, bikes and pedestrians are often separated by distinct roads and pathways.

The neighbourhood has lots of water and green

I really like the neighbourhood despite some of its problems. You can eat here like nowhere else in Amsterdam, there are lots of friendly people that aren't as stressed and self-minded as I have seen elsewhere. And what's more: many of them say "hello" when you pass them. Sometimes I think of Venserpolder as a little village, and that's a good thing.

The local community center is located at the Albert Camuslaan

Local Community Center

In December 2014 a flyer from the local community center was calling for volunteers. The community center can be described as a public living room with a kitchen, free coffee and wireless internet, where inhabitants of the neighbourhood are able to organise activities like a knitting course, cooking and Dutch lessons.
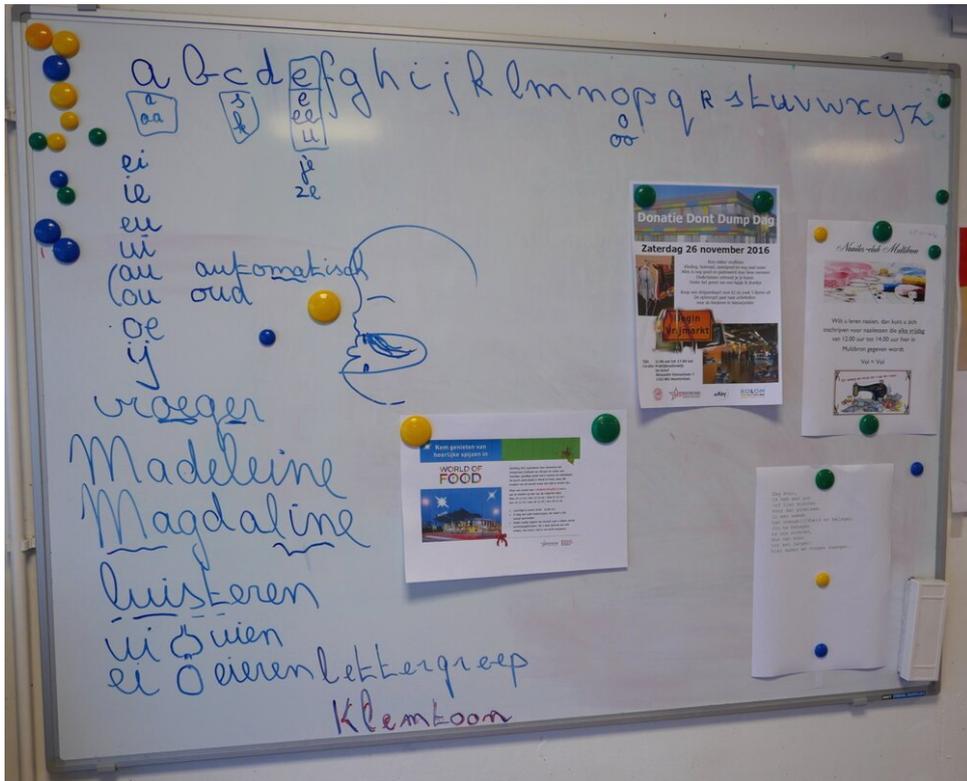

The community center is like a cosy living room

The local community center was looking for someone with computer knowledge. With more than 10 years of professional IT experience, a related academic degree and several certifications, including two from Microsoft, I figured that I might be qualified for the job. But I really did not want my professional reputation to be part of this. I wanted to start from scratch, earn trust and appreciation from what I would do there instead of what I had done before. Heck, I just wanted to be "Willem from the neighbourhood".

Different activities are organised at the community center

Dutch is more challenging than many natives realise

Computer Support

After a brief introduction at the weekly meeting, I was welcome to start my work as volunteer. I joined the so-called "ComputerBrigade" that aims to help people with all kinds of computer problems (viruses, updates etc) and tasks (internet, email, social media, banking, and office). It runs on a weekly basis where people can just drop by and get help. Nothing I can't handle I thought...

My first day was good, helped about three or four people and was assisted by another volunteer with some more experience. But just two weeks after my first day the other guy left and I was running the computer support by myself. The number of people grew every week. At times I was helping more than 10 people simultaneously! I remember to go for a sleep after each session because of the sheer intensity of all this helping (they don't teach you that at the University, ha!).

Some of the regular visitors of the weekly computer support sessions

Earning trust and appreciation

Having survived the first weeks I really started to know some of the regular visitors. And likewise: people started to know me. They knew I was serious and would show up every week. This mutual trust is very important because it allowed me to have the weekly schedule changed from 2x1 hour to 1x2 hours. The longer session allowed me to help people with more complex problems while making it easier for myself to combine my work as volunteer with my regular job.

It actually surprised me how valuable my knowledge is when used to help people: you are appreciated in a way that is genuinely different than getting money for a job. No matter how small a problem appears to me, being able to solve it can make a huge impact on how other people feel. You are instantly rewarded with gratitude and unlike money you don't have to pay tax on these gains (ha!)

Sad things I learned about modern society

In addition to the trust and appreciation I gained, I also learned a few sad things about the modern socieity many people are proud of. Let me share two examples:

Cashback trickery

One day an elderly lady told me about a kitchen device she bought; she paid €40, but she was told by the shop's staff that the real price was just €30 because of a cashback action... she just had to visit some website and the money would come back.

In order to be eligible for the cashback, the manufacturer of the kitchen device required her personal details (like name, address, date of birth, phone number etc). Then they would send an email with a PDF attachment that had to be printed, filled out with banking details and send by paper mail order to get the money back.

The lady did not even have a computer, let alone internet access, an email address or the ability to print PDF attachments. FURIOUS by this madness I created a false email address and filled out the forms with her, it took us three weeks but we got the money back.

Cashback madness: imagine explaining this to your grandmother

Fixing things that ain't broken

Another day a guy came by with his laptop, he told me he has fallen onto it (..) and now the keyboard didn't work anymore. He told me he visited a computer store that concluded his laptop needed a €55 keyboard replacement. If that was too much money for him they were willing to sell him an external USB-keyboard for €30.

Curious by this story I decided to start the laptop and see for myself. When I pressed some keys, strange input appeared on the screen: pressing the "U"-key got me a "4", the "I"-key a "5" and more of that. To an untrained eye the keyboard was malfunctioning...

but to my eyes it was the Numlock function on his laptop keyboard that was accidentally enabled.

I made a little fun with the guy when I said that it simply required "magic fingers" to type on it: I quickly disabled Numlock when demonstrating his keyboard was typing fine, then quickly re-enabled it when inviting him to give it a try... I explained the Numlock function and saved him a new keyboard.

Numbers instead of letters: a keyboard feature easily mistaken as malfunctioning if you are unfamilair with Numlock

What an amazing time I have as volunteer! In the past two years I have helped many people and learned a few things myself. It is hugely rewarding. It is different every time, you never know who will show up and what his or her story will be... already looking forward to next week!

You never know what kind of machine will show up at the computer support sessions...

Update July 2018

Recently I started to help people with free software on their computers. Read about it here.

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