

Written by Paul Conner Kearns for Expat Magazine Zine. Paul is volunteer at Makom, one of the shelters of the Rainbow Group.

Makom

Makom is a drop in/activity centre for the homeless run by the charmingly named Rainbow Group, which is an Amsterdam based community and welfare organization. A couple of months ago I offered my services there as a volunteer. My role at Makom is to be a dispenser of food, coffee and hopefully good cheer.

The building itself is tucked away on one of the narrow elongated streets that traverse the inner city district of De Pijp. It is located next door to a large church and the building itself is owned by the church but was given over to the Rainbow Group so that it could provide a service to Amsterdam's homeless people.

Common experience

I had approached Rainbow and gone to Makom with my eyes very much wide open. I had experienced homelessness myself in the UK. I had lived hand to mouth in a tent in Greece for six months and had slept in various fields, cemeteries and bus shelters throughout Europe. Living a quixotic, itinerant life whilst I still had the youth that could make such a lifestyle bearable and, at times, even pleasurable. So, I have some degree of common experience and common ground with the men and woman who use services such as Makom and, it also transpired, with the staff and volunteers who keep Makom running on a day-to-day basis.

Founded by a priest

The Rainbow Group has long been at the cutting edge of Amsterdam community and welfare services. It was established back in the mid-seventies by a bicycle-riding, compassionate priest by the name of Douwe Wouters, whose call to action very much mirrored his values and faith. At that time a large indigent community had established itself in Vondelpark. This group of people were living in the fag-end twilight of the hippy golden years. What the priest observed was that although the people there were living freely they were not living particularly well and were showing obvious signs of poverty, malnourishment and the ravages of excessive drug use. He and a few associates set up the Rainbow Foundation with the view of offering direct practical help to people in need. Of course, Amsterdam had social issues that extended way beyond the confines of the Vondelpark and over time Rainbow grew to meet the challenge of addressing those needs. Rainbow has initiated and overseen drug-use programmes such as safe use rooms and harm minimisation strategies for addicts. Short term shelter for the homeless and 'buddy' programmes that offset the slow suffocation of the spirit through isolation and loneliness. Rainbow have worked with Aids sufferers, the newly arrived Surinamese community when they were very much placed on the bottom rung of Dutch society, and they have given succor and support to those working as prostitutes. This list is by no means exhaustive.

Practical help

Most of all, Rainbow has been a presence in the fabric of Amsterdam life. Its work has, at times, been cutting edge and, for some, challenging in its approach to dealing with the detritus of life. They have led policy makers by the nose on certain issues when such an approach was needed. Their modus operandi is both left field yet it is also deeply practical and pragmatic.

As much as I enjoy Amsterdam and all of its charms, giving time at Makom has greatly enriched my Amsterdam experience. It has made a pleasant experience a substantial one. Makom embodies the spirit/ethos of *practical* help. Its staff are forever mindful of giving support without creating dependency. Staff are aware and, sometimes agonise over, the need for a person to be challenged in order that they continue to develop up to the point support may not be given if it was felt that the ‘support’ itself would lead to a person not fulfilling their potential or to them not utilizing their skills, experience and talents. So, practical help is always leavened with a bigger picture philosophy. Makom and Rainbow attempt to address the tomorrow as well as the now. Makom offers food, shelter a place to visit, the comfort of routine and dependability. But, much of what it offers is subtle, tacit and potentially far reaching. Crucially, when people are in the building they are known, they have an identity. Their story, and stories, are listened to, there is a sense of belonging. Makom functions as a community, as a cobbled together family for men and women for whom such a safe harbor has often been lost.

Respect

What resonates at Makom is an ethos of respect amongst staff, volunteers and customers. It can be a rough-hewn respect and it is not always stated but it is ever present and palpable. There are rules re expectation of reasonable behavior, these rules are fair minded and enforced. The men that I’ve spoken to who use the service view the staff and volunteers with a genuine fondness and the time they spend in that building often acts as a balm against the invisibility and the lack of respect that they endure whilst out on the streets. Makom provides craft activities, it has its own band, it has karaoke, and it has a cinema night. It provides fun along with the practical.

Serving the community

A fellow volunteer, an Amsterdammer, told me that he had not realized that such a problem with the homeless actually existed until he had begun to work at Rainbow (he’s now been there for 13 years and is a much respected mainstay). Another volunteer, a De Pijp native, told me that she was of the opinion that most people in Amsterdam lived in a kind of happy but wilful myopia and that they didn’t see such problems because well, they didn’t need or want to see them. Interestingly, Rainbow states on their website that one in five Amsterdammers live on or below the poverty line. In a way such a lack of awareness is also a testament to Rainbows efficacy. Their PR person told me they exist to serve the community *as a whole* by serving those who constitute its underclass. There is no doubt that they are successful in this aim. This secular ‘church’ of practical, compassionate help is a highly effective one and everybody benefits from its existence.

Personally, I enjoy the small moments; the interactions, the smiles, the understated but ever present camaraderie that exists in Makom. For me, it is also a balm from much of what goes on outside of its doors. I always walk away feeling better for having spent a few hours there and I guess that is the principal reason why I will continue to go back.

Rainbow Group has over 800 volunteers working in its various programmes and those programmes could not work effectively without those volunteers. If it interests you, climb on board you couldn’t do much better with your time. Check them out at www.deregenboog.org