

Kevin Bullock

## Community and Youth Work

Placement in Cafe Ratz, a youth centre in Stuttgart, to gain an understanding of German youth work and experience a different culture.

1<sup>st</sup> March to 31<sup>st</sup> May 2014

What a fantastic experience! I had no idea, when I was made redundant from my Reprographics Manager's job in 2011, that three short years later I would be living and working in Stuttgart for 12 weeks; and what a twelve weeks it was. I was welcomed at the airport by Katrin, a German Erasmus student I had met when she attended lectures in England at Sunderland University, where I am participating in the Ba Hons Community and Youth Work Degree course. Katrin helped me find my way to, and into, my accommodation. We then went to buy some essentials and get some food and a beer. The next day Rufina, another Erasmus student I had met in England, helped me navigate my way around the city and the paperwork I had to complete. This support in the early days, and that from the International Office DHBW Stuttgart, was invaluable and I am looking forward to returning the favour for the next Erasmus students coming to England.

As part of my Degree course I have previously completed placements at Youth Provisions both within the charitable sector and the state run sector. It was with great enthusiasm then, that I accepted the opportunity to complete my third placement at Cafe Ratz Jugendhaus und Kindertreff in Stuttgart. Again, I was made to feel very welcome from the first moment I stepped into the building. Being 47 years old, I am not a typical student and certainly not a typical exchange student, but after the initial novelty wore off for us all I was treated the same way as everyone else and quickly felt part of the team. Being a football fan, I had decided before arriving that I would like to watch a game here in Stuttgart. My home team, Middlesbrough, had played here a few years ago in the UEFA cup; but I didn't come to that game. Imagine how happy I was then that Phillip, one of the Cafe Ratz team, arranged a ticket for me in my first week there. I was met outside the ground by Frank, the husband of the Cafe Ratz chief Sylvia. Inside the ground I sat with Phillip's friends who again made me feel very welcome. I think the way not only the people I was working directly with welcomed me but also their family and friends illustrates how friendly Stuttgart is.

In my early sessions Arno, my supervisor for my placement, helped me settle in and explained how Cafe Ratz worked and the ground rules; in particular the Youth House where I would work most of the time. My role was to spend time with the young people attending and get to know them. I also worked behind the counter serving food, drinks and sweets to attendees. This was a great opportunity to improve my German language skills, although most people spoke some English. The young people attending the club also accepted me and I got to know them really well. I liked the informal approach to face to face youth work, which is how many of us in England would like to work. Make no mistake, Youth Work in Germany is very well organised and the structure of the organisation Cafe Ratz belongs to, Stuttgarter Jungenhaus Gesellschaft, is very similar to organisations in England. However, the culture of informal education through relationships, built on

trust, is prevalent in Cafe Ratz; and the needs of the young people attending are at the forefront of everything they do. I had some great supervision sessions with Arno and we talked at length, comparing English and German youth work and the mixed backgrounds and cultures of the young people in the community Cafe Ratz serves. We began to focus a little on Identity, as we had some very interesting conversations with young people who were born in Germany after their parents had migrated there. Sometimes families had moved several times and some of the young people still had a clear idea of who they were and where they were from. I think this is a very interesting time for the young people of Europe. There are some amazing opportunities that come with the freedom of movement we currently enjoy. However, I am also a little concerned for those young people who do not cope so well with the impacts of this. I hope to study this further in the future. I also spent some time in local schools, speaking English to local children during their English lessons. Again, I was made to feel very welcome and I met some very interesting young people from all around Europe and hopefully helped them as much as they were helping me.

Outside of work, I found the whole experience very liberating. I found the time spent outside my own culture very interesting. It gave me the time to reflect on the issues we have at home and, in particular, a rest from the influence the media has on our daily lives in England. I also attended a Cultural Exchange Discussion at the university, with students and staff from DHBW along with some fellow exchange students from Egypt. This gave me an insight into the little everyday differences we have that can mean so much, such as how we say hello and shake hands; people shake hands a lot in Germany! I was also "invited" to many social occasions. In England an invite is simply that, an invite. In Germany, however, I found it meant not only was I invited to attend, I would not be allowed to pay for anything as the host pays for everything. I liked this idea, although I was never allowed to "invite" anyone as I was a guest in Germany. I hope to return the favour when they visit me in England, which I hope will be soon. I also enjoyed the many small encounters that occur over twelve weeks. From the regular visits to the local Kebab shop, Stuttgart has the best Kebabs, to the broken German / English conversation with the local Lotto café owner, who not only sold me a credit Top Up for my German Handy, he also rang the appropriate number for me and input the code. I also had a very interesting time trying to describe to the House Master, for my accommodation, that my door key wasn't working properly; and how I managed to explain to one of the house keepers that the Tumble Drier wasn't working I'm still not sure. However, in both cases, we got there in the end.

As you can see I had a great time in Germany. There were many good experiences, and the problems I overcame, that make a valuable experience. It is a time I will cherish and the growth I have experienced during this time will stay with me for the rest of my life. Thank You!