



STEP Bulgaria



STEP Bulgaria
(Summer Teaching English Program for underprivileged Bulgarian youth)

June-August 2007

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Harvard Bulgarian Club's newest initiative called STEP Bulgaria is a volunteer project for students from Harvard University, Sofia University, American University in Bulgaria, American College of Sofia and the First English Language School who volunteered during six weeks (from July 25 until Aug 02, 2007) to teach English, computer literacy and useful life skills to 36 underprivileged teenagers from 5 orphanages across from different cities across the country.

At the beginning we called our project STEP Bulgaria (or Step for Bulgaria, according to its Bulgarian translation) hoping that this pilot project would allow us to change the direction of the development of Bulgaria's human potential and more importantly – would give a chance to underprivileged children to develop their capacities. Our major conviction is that critical thinking, creative problem-solving and fluency of key communication channels (such as English language and computer skills) are essential to the development of any human being and that every person is entitled to such type of education. At the same time, volunteering is one of the most effective means to get to know oneself through creating relationships with others. Thus, the steps which we made during the last six weeks are not limited simply to acquiring new English language and computer skills by our students. The feedback that we received by the program participants showed as that its results are in reality much broader than what we had initially planned. For example, the students became more experienced in dealing with unfamiliar, difficult situations and had to learn how cope with a new environment and establish effective communication with the rest. They acquired more confidence as a result of the different educational games and creative activities which allowed them to reflect on their interests and qualities as well as on the ways through which they could further develop them. Meanwhile, the volunteers found their experience working with the students very enriching since it allowed them to reconsider their own ways of communicating with others. The non-Bulgarian volunteers also had a chance to get to know Bulgaria and to establish a very strong connection to the program participants and to Bulgaria.

Over six weeks between June 25 and Aug 2, 2007, we made the following steps in order to contribute to the personal development of each program participant:

Adapting to a new environment



One of the biggest challenges for the young students during the program was the separation from the familiar environment of their orphanage and the need to adapt to the new location, time organization, and group members. Every week the students switched groups and had to learn to work with new partners. Each group was led by a Harvard volunteer and two Bulgarian volunteers. This dynamic system created more opportunities for the students to get to know each other and to adapt to different learning environments, which sometimes posed significant challenges they had to overcome. At the beginning of the program all participants agreed on a set of rules, one of which was to respect each other and to listen to each other. It was certainly not easy for everyone to follow this rule right away. Meanwhile, some students got offended too easily when someone made an insignificant remark. In these cases our volunteers tried to encourage the timid students and to show them how they could confront others' provocative attitude. Thus, the initial conflicts did not hamper the successful conducting of classes. The participants gained more confidence and satisfaction as a result of learning how to adapt to the new environment. The students established new friendships and learned how to continue communicating via internet when they are physically apart.

Getting to know ourselves

One of the main principles during the whole program was to encourage the participants to work with their own unique rhythm and to take part in activities that motivate them to do their best. In this way we tried to let each of the students



gradually find his or her strong sides and to develop them with appropriate exercises and activities. Over a period of two weeks we focused on discovering individual qualities and hopes for the future of each participant. The teenagers had to think about their plans and opportunities for the future and to discuss them with the other group members.



Thus we gained a better idea of their interests and dreams which will enable us to continue the program next year with a curriculum that will allow each participant to further develop his/her skills in the direction that he or she is interested in.



Expanding our horizons

Changing the environment, getting to know our peers from other cities, working on various projects in different ways and communicating with volunteers from Bulgaria and the U.S. opened up many new doors to the surrounding world. The participants learned that they can use Internet to find information and to exchange knowledge, thoughts and impressions with others in spite of the physical distance.



The creation of a computer presentation of a country of their choice enabled the students to visualize unknown places and improve their knowledge of a foreign place.



The conversations with the international volunteers about their birthplaces and personal experiences aroused the curiosity of the participants and their wish to learn more about the countries that their new friends come from. The Harvard students also taught the teenagers many games and activities, characteristic of American education, and those became favorite to the students. Meanwhile, the students spontaneously shared elements from their own culture with the foreign volunteers. Thus, all program participants – students and volunteers alike – benefited from their experience.



Improving our knowledge and skills



The specific knowledge of English and computer literacy, on which we concentrated during the six weeks, were aimed at acquiring basic knowledge of the English language on topics that we considered appropriate and useful for the students. We taught grammar and vocabulary related to introducing oneself, finding out more about different people and cultures, discussing personalities, personal preferences, and professions.

We encountered different challenges during the learning process: it wasn't always easy to keep students' interest in the subject matter and to motivate their active participation. We tried to tailor our teaching style to individual levels and modes of learning. The English classes were combined with learning how to use e-mail, Word and PowerPoint. Every student created an e-mail account and sent a personal description to his or her mentor. The students also learned how to look for different kinds of information and images online and to send them via e-mail. Besides the English and computer skills, we included some creative and practically oriented courses, such as photography, dances, textile products workshop, as well as two health courses on prevention of HIV/AIDS and drug addiction.

The project STEP Bulgaria showed us that this kind of interactive education with a focus on creativity and useful communication and life skills is extremely helpful to teenagers, deprived of parental care. We are convinced that we must continue the program next year by including the same participants and involving more interested students from different cities in Bulgaria. The evaluation of



our pilot project at the end of the six weeks gave us new ideas about improving both the program organization and its curriculum.

In order to continue the project next year and to involve more young people in such volunteer activities, we decided to establish Foundation "STEP Bulgaria". The Foundation's mission is to contribute to the development of Bulgaria's human potential. It will insure the implementation of next year's program and will also expand its network of contacts with motivated young people, organizations and individuals who would like to support similar initiatives, so that our steps can continue to multiply. We count on your ideas, support and collaboration and look forward to making more steps for Bulgaria together!

Do not hesitate to contact us at:

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The mission and goals of STEP Bulgaria are realized with the kind support and cooperation of:

- Karl Popper Foundation, Switzerland
- Consulate of Switzerland, Cambridge, USA
- American University in Bulgaria
- American College of Sofia
- American Commercial Chamber in Bulgaria
- Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Bulgaria
- Social Assistance Fund (MLSP, Bulgaria)
- Agency for Social Support, Bulgaria (MLSP)
- National Center for Professional Education (MLSP)
- Social Fund «Detstvo»
- EKSA, Bulgaria
- Aims Human Capital, Bulgaria
- DINO, Bulgaria
- Herlitz, Bulgaria
- Oxford Center
- Longman
- Arena Cinema - Alexandra Film
- Theatre 199
- Sladkarnitsi Nedelia
- SAMEX
- McDonalds
- UNDP Bulgaria
- ZAEDNO - Communication for Support and Development Foundation
- Blagotvoritel Foundation
- Art of Living Foundation
- Foundation Du Coeur a l'Ouvrage
- National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies
- Business Club at the Economics Faculty at Sofia University
- Ambassador Blaise Godet
- Ambassador Elena Poptodorova
- Dean Judith Kidd, Harvard University
- Mr. Emil Wyss, Consulate of Switzerland in Cambridge
- Mrs. Emilia Maslarova, Bulgarian Minister of Labor and Social Policy
- Mr. Emil Ivanov
- Mrs. Mariana Stoyancheva
- Mrs. Nevyana Malcheva
- Mrs. Mariana Stoyancheva
- Mrs. Silvia Rousseva, ACS
- Ms. Roumiana Ivanova, ACS
- Mr. and Mrs. Stankulov