



Live In Color

## Citizens sponsor refugees in Liège

*Jean-Luc Janot, AEIDL (09/09/2016)*

Sponsoring refugees to help with their installation and integration is the *raison d'être* of the Live In Color association, which was launched just over a year ago in Liège, Belgium. To date, around one hundred people have been sponsored and the spirit of solidarity is strengthening.



*(Photo: Live In Color)*

"At Live In Color, we leave the politics to those who have the skills and responsibility for it. We do not want to enter the debate on whether we should be 'for or against refugees'. Our aim is to show that these people, who have come to our country in very difficult conditions sometimes, need to be welcomed and integrated into society. It is not their choice to be in this situation. They are victims of circumstance. "

Like one hundred other volunteers, Nadine Lino, the initiator of the Live in Color project, advises and assists refugees arriving in Liège. "How can you remain insensitive to human suffering when it is at your door? These people have left everything and set out on a dangerous journey to escape war, injustice and/or poverty ... Their journey has been filled with obstacles and difficulties and the images we see everywhere are unthinkable for many of us. "

Live in Color was launched in June 2015 by six committed and passionate humanitarians and entrepreneurs, who were also perhaps a little idealistic. From varied but complementary professional backgrounds (advertising, law, business, teaching...), they wanted to use their skills and networks to benefit a worthwhile cause. In August 2015, Live In Color became one of the first Belgian foundation to organise a clothes collection for refugees.

"The media has been very enthusiastic , and citizens have also responded positively. The media was anxious to present a different perspective on the issue of refugees, to change the narrative of xenophobia and racism that prevailed on social media and to show that the voice of the people was different."



*(Photo: Live In Color)*

### **Citizen-led one stop shop**

Underprivileged children are Live In Color's first priority, explains Nadine: "Every day in Belgium, thousands of children from here or elsewhere, are faced with social injustice, maltreatment, disease, or living conditions that fall below the poverty line. This happens here in Belgium, often amid feelings of indifference or powerlessness. Childhood is supposed to be the stage of life where everything is possible and where we imagine that it is still possible to change our fate. This is what we want to do: to change the course of destiny, from futures that otherwise look difficult and tumultuous. Our goal is to bring a little colour to the lives of these children by focusing on education, integration and awareness of differences. We have created our own colour palette

based on everyone's sense of citizenship and humanity. Providing assistance for children from here and elsewhere, and even more importantly in the context of this migration crisis, the worse since 1945, also helps to improve the lives and integration of their families. "

"The idea, says Nadine, is that refugees can benefit from a comprehensive support package, a sort of 'citizen-led one-stop shop', instead of having to run all over the place to reach institutions that are often too slow to react. The citizen movement helps the refugees to navigate what is often an obstacle course."



(Photo: Live In Color)

## The process

After many months spent in a centre for "asylum seekers", and following a very thorough analysis of their applications by the CGRA (Commission for Refugees and Stateless Persons), some of these families - a small minority, as many applications are rejected - are given "refugee" status. These families then have two months to leave the centre, to find accommodation and convince a landlord to have them as tenants, to furnish it, to register their children in a school, and to begin the difficult process of integration, often without any knowledge of French or Belgian culture. This is why sponsorship is so important.

Live In Color invites local people (the "sponsors") to get involved during any of the three stages of this process: 1) Accommodation (search, visits, negotiations with the landlord...) - experience shows that this is the most difficult phase; 2) Installation (furnishing the accommodation, administrative procedures at the municipality, the social assistance centre, health insurance, the bank, energy and communication providers ... many of these tasks being new for the refugees); 3) Integration (developing social links, education, discovering the region and the socio-cultural environment, employment ...).

"Sponsoring a family or an individual means creating links, giving some of one's time, accompanying the refugees in their efforts to integrate. It is not about doing things for them, but supporting and assisting them to become more autonomous and paying attention to their well-being," insists Nadine Lino. "No financial contribution is requested, the sponsors decide themselves, respecting the charter we have established, how much time and energy they can give to the refugees, who are just discovering our society and its values."

### **Volunteer-based**

In addition to some coverage in the local media, the mobilisation of sponsors and partners is mainly done through information and training sessions, as well through participant's networks and by word-of-mouth. "The enthusiasm generated by our initiative has helped us to overcome the difficulties. At first, some institutions looked at us a little suspiciously ("but what are they up to?") and some even suspected us of having a hidden agenda", recalls Nadine.

As for financing, Live In Color organises various fundraising activities ("Family Festivals", "Liège For Refugees" DJ evenings, etc.) and receives some small donations from businesses. So far it only has €6 000 of own capital. Crowd-funding is on the agenda, but the association mostly relies on volunteers and the commitment of sponsors. "Donations" means providing furniture, toys, and other objects that are essential for daily life.



*Hugette, from Burundi, tells her story at an information meeting in Liège on 6/9/2016. (Photo: Jean-Luc Janot)*

Sponsors' involvement varies greatly, depending on their motivation and availability. However, they all care deeply about their role. So far, only one sponsor has not worked out. "In terms of dealing with officialdom, there are certain municipalities and administrations that are more helpful

than others, but most often, institutions are glad to see sponsors coming to the assistance of refugees. We act as mediators”, say Julie and David, a couple who act as sponsors.

One year and a lot of energy later, the results are impressive: one hundred refugees have been sponsored by one hundred volunteers, who provide one-off or occasional support. "We also have a presence in the refugee centres, to help with school homework. Our actions are very diverse, and include looking for housing, organising furnisher, finding a school and organising French classes." Because the waiting list for French courses in mainstream institutions is so long (6 to 9 months), Live In Color has established an intensive four-week learning module, each involving three groups of six people.

Huguette, 21 years old, is one of those sponsored by Live In Color. She came from Burundi last year and for six months her family has been supported by the association. "Live In Color has spent quite a bit of time with us. It has helped us in a number of ways, including finding housing, which is a very difficult step for refugees. Having someone who helps you integrate into this new environment is fantastic", she says.

As far as employment is concerned, the results are still modest: two refugees have found jobs in the construction sector. "This may not seem like a lot," says Nadine, "but refugees are now just beginning to go out of their centres. Many of them arrived last year and had to wait about nine months for their applications to be processed before they could even begin to look for work. In six months from now, the situation will be clearer in terms of finding jobs."

Live In Color is moving forward, however, and hopes to hire a full-time employee by the end of 2016. "We will also open a lighter programme for people who may be afraid to engage in sponsorship. It will be called 'Live In Color Friendships' and will also target asylum seekers waiting for an official status. They suffer from great solitude and stress, while their life is on hold, awaiting the CGRA's decision."

<http://www.liveincolorassociation.com/>



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