



Atzegi (Gipuzkoa): pioneer in family involvement

Orain dela 47 urte, adimen urritasuna ezkutatu beharreko tabua eta lotsa soziala zenean, Gipuzkoan arazoa gertutik bizi zuten hainbat guraso mobilizatu egin ziren eta Atzegi fundazioa sortu zuten. Indar handia eginez, egun dituzten hobekuntzak lortu zituzten eta 1.900 familia dira taldeko onuradun. Babestutako etxebizitzak, aisialdi taldeak eta gaixo hauekiko onarpen soziala izatea aitzindari horiek egindako lanari esker da neurri handi batean.

The slogan used by Atzegi in its most recent awareness-raising campaign, “Me miras mucho, pero no me ves” (You look at me a lot, but you don’t really see me) was an advertising success and sums up the Guipuzkoa-based organization’s philosophy. Atzegi, founded in 1960, was the first organization of its kind to provide support for the families of people with intellectual disability. The slogan describes what tends to happen when we see a disabled person – we notice the differences but not the things we have in common with that person.

Mitxel Lakunza is the head of the family support department at Atzegi, where he has been working for 20 years. Over the past two decades he has seen how society has changed in terms of general attitudes towards people with intellectual disability. “47 years ago, when the first families began to get organized, there was nothing in place. It was an embarrassment for those mothers and fathers to take their kids out, and I’m not only talking about children with Down Syndrome, which

accounts for 20% of people with intellectual disability. Most intellectual disabilities can appear throughout our lives, and these are the types of problems that haven’t decreased since the sixties. There are fewer cases of disabilities from birth, but the rate of unforeseeable disabilities hasn’t dropped. Today 1,899 families with at least one intellectually disabled member are associated with Atzegi. The organization also has 2,929 collaborating members and 5,336 “atzegizales,” people who support us in our efforts to normalize the situation as much as possible.

Participation and involvement

The families that wanted to become involved came up against major stumbling blocks in the society. They contacted the Caja de Ahorros Municipal savings bank to see whether their social services department would be willing to help. Little by little different services were set in place, including apartments with support services and recreational, cultural and sport activities. Atzegi is now in charge of the housing service, recreation and free-time activities for 500 youngsters throughout Gipuzkoa, and a service that provides apartments with support services for independent living. In addition to membership dues, further financial support is provided by Kutxa, as well as agreements signed with the Office for Social Policy of the Provincial Government and most of the local councils in Gipuzkoa, plus funding from private businesses and other organizations such as ONCE (Spanish National Organization for the Blind).

“The families that visit us at Atzegi,” explained Mitxel Lakunza “don’t come with the idea that their problems are going to be solved by paying a monthly membership



fee. We try to make Atzegi members understand that it's not just a matter of getting something out of the organization, but actually becoming part of a support movement. Through the efforts of these families we've seen a number of improvements: a heightened awareness in society, work possibilities in different towns, campaigns being organized Atzegi's goals aren't limited only to providing people with special apartments or getting them involved in social activities. The families have fought long and hard and now we have to make sure we can provide them with quality services."

To meet these goals, Aztegi has a staff of 78 professionals and a large group of volunteers. There is a total of ten local committees throughout Gipuzkoa, made up of family members who take part in local activities, organize lectures, promote awareness-raising campaigns, and make note of the needs of their particular communities. This information is then brought to the central office in Donostia to see what can be done.

Integration in the schools

Atzegi is a firm believer of integration in the classroom. "It's easy to say," added Mitxel Lakunza "but actually doing it is another thing. We have a theoretical framework, but it has to be improved. I think it's an enriching experience for people without disabilities to share the classroom with people who have impairments. This kind of coexistence is another form of personal integration, but it has to be done right, with support and help from education experts. I realize that in some cases, where major disabilities are involved, integration is impossible. That's when special classrooms have to be created, but always within the framework of inclusion.

Atzegi's social integration program includes keeping families up to date on available resources and the rights of



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their children at school. It also helps families with the arrangements and paperwork needed to take advantage of support services and other rights. The organization also works on raising awareness among educators and society in general so that students with disabilities are more readily accepted and have a better chance at becoming fully integrated in the classroom. To achieve this goal, Atzegi works closely with different educational entities, including schools, Berritzegune Centers (centers designed to provide support, advice and new ideas to the education community) and the Department of Education.



COMMUNICATING ONLINE

Atzegi's website www.atzegi.org features section called "Atzegi eskuetara," where people with intellectual disability can find specially adapted interactive information. It is an interactive computer tool adapted to individual skills, needs, preferences and tastes. Atzegi eskuetara features five different sections Music (listen to music, animal sounds and even compose your own tunes with the help of a piano); Information (news, current events and cultural events going on in towns throughout Gipuzkoa); Games (with different levels of difficulty); a chat room and video-conference to communicate with others. Atzegilio, the online mascot, helps guide visitors though the website.

Recent Atzegi awareness-raising campaigns



2007



2006