

COMMUNITY OF KINGS (AND QUEENS) OF THE STREET

Kralji ulice (Kings of the Street) has actively involved individuals with lived experience of homelessness since its beginnings. Nineteen years on, they offer numerous opportunities for participation, focusing on the desires and interests of the individual, from as working on their street paper, in the educative day centre, or giving tours of Ljubljana, and even offer employment through a public works initiative. Quotes from peers Matic and Taubi highlight the effective and crucial role participation plays in empowering its members.



By **Hana Kosan**, President, Kralji ulice, Slovenia

It all began in December 2004, when a group of social pedagogy students at the Faculty of Education Ljubljana, together with their professor Dr Špela Razpotnik, decided to spend 24 hours with homeless people on the streets on a cold winter day, within the framework of the subject 'Working with the homeless'. They were warmly accepted by the people they met on the street, and consequently, they began to look for further activities in this field. The following months were full of meetings, developing relationships, and discussions about future plans. They conducted interviews, collected graphic materials, took photos, visited secret sleeping places, and built networks. Simultaneously, relationships and coalitions with professional workers of different disciplines (social workers, social pedagogues, journalists, anthropologists, artists, medical doctors, and psychologists) began to be established. The idea of a street paper emerged and in May 2005 the first issue of *Kralji ulice* (Kings of the Street), the first Slovenian street paper for homelessness and related social issues, was printed and sold by the homeless people.

In 2005, the project took an official form through the creation of an association which, in its very name, emphasises the importance of the inclusion of people with experiences of homelessness - *Association for help and self-help of homeless people, Kings of the Street*.

BEING PART OF THE ASSOCIATION

People experiencing homelessness can participate in the association on different levels and with the intensity they choose. A key guideline for support work is starting from the individual, their needs and desires, with the assumption that it is these individuals who have the potential

for power and creativity, which, in a supportive and empowering environment, can become an important asset not only for them but for the community as a whole.

"We strive to ensure that users are not just 'consumers' of our services but have an active role in the creation of the association." The emphasis is not only on strengthening peer support, but also on enabling equal involvement and leadership in the activities of the association: "When I came to your door, you didn't ask me about my problems, what all was wrong with me, but a member of staff first offered me a cigarette. We started talking and when I mentioned what I was interested in, he immediately invited me to come to the workshop tomorrow, where I could teach them something. After a long time, I felt accepted and worthy," said Matic.

When people are involved in our association, we encourage them to identify for themselves what they are interested in, and it is the role of the professionals to present them with the possibilities, to encourage them in their choices, and to find solutions to implement the suggestions. We feel it is important to help people regain a sense of belonging, value, and inclusion, in addition to dealing with their living situation (i.e., finding accommodation, dealing with status and bureaucratic issues etc.) "What I like most about my work at the association, both as a volunteer before and now as an employee, is that I have a certain responsibility. That you trust me to do the tasks, that you trust me with the keys, let's say...I know that I would be completely lost again if I didn't have some chance to do something meaningful. And because of my experience, but also because of my age, I don't get those opportunities anymore," added Matic.



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INCLUSIVE ACTIVITIES

People can get involved in a wide range of activities, but we would highlight the following:

Street newspaper

The original aim of our newspaper is a more active and socially acceptable participation of this hidden and mostly socially excluded population in public life, without utopian expectations for an immediate solution to the problems that cause homelessness or for a change in their way of life. The newspaper has a very diverse community of creators, bringing together people with different skills, social backgrounds, and interests. The newspaper allows people to talk about homelessness through first-person narratives; it provides a space for co-creation from different life experiences, where none is more important than the other. The Editorial Board represents the members who are most active in the creation of the newspaper, with more than half of the current membership having experienced homelessness or social exclusion. We also hold regular street vendor meetings to discuss different situations and suggest improvements.

University under the stars

One of the activities in our day centre is also an open form of education, through the organisation of social, cultural, and educational workshops, including the training of social and other skills through music, theatre, sport, video, language, sewing, computer workshops and so forth. *University under the Stars* works on the principle that everyone can suggest activities they can lead, or people can tell us what they want to learn, and we try to find the person who can pass on the knowledge. Mentoring is provided by staff or peer support to guide the activity.

Invisible Lublana

The project started as an initiative of a long-standing member of ours, who at the time was staying in a residential support programme. Our guides have personal experience of homelessness. They don't show you traditional tourist spots, but instead, they will take you through their authentic life stories to a joint exploration of the city. "Tours are places where we can talk about ourselves and our problems then and today. Where we can open the eyes and souls of the people who walk with us. I think tours are a lesson and a warning to all who go with us and most of all to ourselves in self-reminder of where we have been. And where we no longer want to return," says Taubi.

Volunteering

In 2023, 85 people with experiences of homelessness are volunteering in our association and involved in various support activities of the association. They do a variety of different jobs; after the initial interview, we encourage people to suggest which area they would like to be involved in and to which activity they would like to contribute. For example, they may help in the day centre, work as peer supporters, help clean the neighbourhood, lead workshops, help with cleaning, help with janitorial and technical tasks, and much more. In Slovenia, people who are receiving social assistance money are entitled to a work activity allowance, but most of our volunteers do more hours of voluntary work than is required for said allowance because it is important for them to be actively involved in the association. For many, it is also their first activity and commitment after a long time, which can also serve as an incentive for different employment options.

Integration into active employment policy

As an association, we regularly engage in active employment policy, which means that every year we employ 3-5 people with experience of homelessness. It is so-called public works for the long-term unemployed, co-financed by the state. Most of the time, the most active members of the association are recruited, with mentoring and tailoring the job to the needs and current abilities of the individual being key. We also run a second-hand shop that operates on the principle of social entrepreneurship. If the funding allows us to do so, many stay in employment for a longer period. For many, it is also a positive experience that allows them to expand their social network and job opportunities outside our association. And we always remain there to support people if that's what they want.

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MEMBER OF A COMMUNITY?

“Kings of the Street as an association to help social problems is very much a part of my life. Although, to be quite honest, when I found out about them, I refused to work with them because I didn't have the time. But life goes on and things change. So, after a few years, because of my community service job, I came to Kralji ulice to join their theatre group and I was hooked. I have stayed at Kralji ulice until now and it's been more than ten years. How did I find myself? Simple, I've loved writing and being involved in theatre since I was a kid, so I found a place here where I was accepted. It wasn't difficult for me because I already had the mileage. Because of my open and crazy nature, I brought my two other projects to the association, and they were well received; one of them, Invisible Lublana in particular, and the other one, book signing or leaving books with dedications at bus stops, which is more personal, but as I know, very well received.

So, what do I think of Kralji ulice? It is an extremely necessary association for socially stamped people. It is important to help us feel useful and accepted. Both, inside and outside the association. We just need to remember that results and successes don't come overnight. They didn't happen for me either. But here is the important role of the association, to stand by and, when someone (including me) stumbles, to help, to accelerate so that he does not fall to the ground but gets up and continues where he stumbled. We learn from our mistakes because nobody is perfect. Not even KU employees.”, Taubi concludes.