

Come and walk in my shoes ...

Stefanie Gfeller

The distances people needed to travel to get to the Co-Leadership Dojo in Bern are quite diverse this morning. And if you would ask the participants where home is, the answer would be even more divergent. *"How do we experience migration and inclusion in Bern?"* This was the calling question that brought us all together for a Learning Journey, aiming at getting to the bottom of one of the most pressing issues in Switzerland and beyond.

Around 20 people from various background gathered in the light-flooded room. Catherine von Graffenried, founder and president of the association "Bern hilft mit" welcomed everyone. For 5 years, she has been supporting people with a refugee background voluntarily. "Contact with Swiss people is very important in everyday life", she says. "We must support people with such a background to gain a social and sustainable foothold here, help them better understand our culture and guide them through bureaucracy." At the same time, we learn a lot from them and with them. Catherine has been living in a shared flat with her partner for 15 years and currently Najib from Afghanistan lives with them.

Turning over to her left and right, Catherine then introduced us to three young people, who were here to share their life stories with us. All with different backgrounds, paths and challenges regarding integration in Switzerland. Ubud, Hammasseh and Hossein (names changed) invited us as experts of their experience to listen to the unspoken and the informative nuances in their stories.

Ubud is a young temple painter from the highlands of Tibet. He arrived in Switzerland with no language and reading knowledge - but with special drawing skills. His eyes shine deeply and his entire face is slightly smiling when we get to admire his beautiful drawings. Sometimes he exchanges them for goods or sells them, because with only 58 francs emergency aid per week for food, hygiene articles and clothes, it is not easy to make a living here. As a sans-papier Ubud needs to give himself a daily structure. He is not allowed to work, although he would love to. Leaving is not an option either. No country takes him.



How do you build a life for yourself arriving in Bern with your mother and siblings, as a young woman who went through several traumatic experiences? Hammasseh is telling us her story with a quiet but determined voice. As she fled her country of origin already once to a country, where she did not speak the local language, she was not allowed to continue studying. Arriving in Switzerland, her mother urged her to get married. But Hammasseh has the dream of being an independent woman. Never become dependent on anyone. Here she is in front of us,

standing between two cultures, balancing between rebellions and caring for her family. Strong and empathetic, she is following her path.

To the surprise of everyone, Hossein quit his electrician apprenticeship to become a baker. “It was just too cold for me”, he explains smiling. Hailing from Afghanistan Hossein came to Switzerland after a long and dangerous escape. He fled from the Taliban who attacked his village. Because he belongs to an ethnic minority, he couldn’t attend school. At the age of 10 he started to work and mended motorcycles. Unfortunately, he could not convert his practical skills into a proper job here, as reading and writing skills are essential. How much will and courage can a person possess to master such a path?

Ubud, Hammaseh and Hossein shared their unique and impressive stories and let us participate in their lives for a short moment. What would be possible in our world if our ideas, projects and actions would be created out of such a space of deep mutual respect and humanity?

We all continued by sharing with each other what has stayed with us from the stories. This created the momentum to come up with ideas for concrete steps and actions – actions that can only be achieved together and across sectors. The courage of our narrators has inspired us. Courage is needed from all of us. Everything starts with us – including integration. This Learning Journey resulted in this wonderful Call to Action: **“We invite you to be a bridge builder, to share your comfort zone and to seek exchange; from politics we demand the resources and the focus on the promotion of the positive.”**

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