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Skills for SCYL:

The Alps show new horizons to young leaders

Perched at 2600 meters atop the small village of Davos, the summit of Jacobshorn is known for its smooth ski slopes, tender edelweiss, rugged rocks and mighty forests. This March, however, the mountain reached new and unexplored heights.

YULIA LEMENEZ, UNDP¹

It became the birthplace of the Survival Camp for Young Leaders (SCYL), a project spearheaded by two associations, United for U (U4U) and Wisdom Acceleration for Youth (WAY). As a SCYL participant Bogdan recalls, *“I was studying and getting good grades, but life felt so monotonous. It was as if everything stood still. Then the war came to my country, and with it, fleeing my home, frustration and an uncertain future. But one day, my mom sent me a U4U invitation to register for the camp. This small step has changed my life.”*

In the wake of the COVID pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine and the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, U4U and WAY saw the urgent need to show new horizons and offer new hope to the young people whose lives have been deeply affected by the world-changing events. Thus was born the idea of breaking the barriers of trauma, isolation and displacement through ‘survival therapy,’ a series of physical and intellectual challenges that place participants far outside the comfort zone of four walls, mental and actual. *“Theory + practice has*

always been the strongest combination for learning something new. SCYL is more than that. It brings together theory, practice, survival techniques and wonderful speakers with profound experience in different domains,” says Marcelo Garcia, the founder of WAY. “I had a feeling that part of me slept all this year and finally woke up,” adds Anastasiia, another SCYL participant. “I was surprised that someone like me could enjoy this lifestyle so much; doing something every second of every day and constantly challenging myself,” echoes Bogdan.

From its inception, SCYL has been designed to facilitate the integration, empowerment and education of vulnerable adolescents and young adults, as well as their families. Among other things, it has sought to answer the question asked by Anatoliy, a former Ukrainian politician and entrepreneur: “At times, we encounter novel situations that may cause us to feel uncomfortable or out of place, such as being a new employee, encountering new obstacles or facing unexpected delays. However, we often have a support network of friends, family and colleagues who we can turn to in these situations for help and support. But what if we were suddenly without this network to rely on? What if we were in the position of a refugee with no one to guide us?” For SCYL organizers, part of the answer lies in offering a different perspective on life in all its beauty and hardship, unlocking inner strength and resilience, teaching and exchanging survival skills that appeal to our core instincts and intelligence, and most importantly, (re)building the confidence not only in oneself but also in the community.

Sharing what SCYL involved in practice, a Ukrainian badminton champion Ivan recalls that “the week in Davos was full of events and new experiences. There was not a second when we were not doing something exciting. Being

in the breathtaking Alps is in itself amazing. However, it is the people that were around that made SCYL so special. The community spirit that developed over just one week was exceptionally strong, compassionate and fun. I felt true friendship there, with everyone willing to help. In stressful situations and under pressure, we did not split up but instead united to face the challenge together. It was wonderful, and I really hope to be involved in events like this more.”

Agreeing with Ivan, Anastasiia adds that “it was fascinating to see how a group of strangers started to function, supporting each other and emerging as a community. Everything was so well organized. With effort and team work, we had time for so much! Hiking, building an igloo, diving into freezing water, learning from top speakers and mountaineering guides, skiing, snowboarding and even practicing art therapy and self-healing.”

The winter gear provided by Patagonia was key to undertaking physical exercises, which were the principal component of SCYL. Without the equipment, the participants would not have been able to do the activities at high altitude and in freezing temperatures, including trekking, building shelter, and climbing in deep snow. For Anastasiia, “the most unusual experience was diving into an ice hole. I never did that before and did not expect I could do something like this. But with coaches, correct breathing and support from the organizers I did it! Twice!”

In addition to survival challenges and unconventional exercises against the spectacular Alpine backdrop, U4U and WAY put together a tailored programme of lectures, conversations and intellectual challenges, which were developed and guided by thought leaders and ‘survivors’, who themselves went through life-changing experiences (wars,

natural disasters, health crises and emergencies) and who had valuable lessons to offer. Over the week, seven speakers covered topics such as recovery from deep trauma, homelessness, survival skills in tough environments such as deep woods, high altitudes and marshes, ‘van living’ with children, healing through arts, and many others.

“I was greatly inspired by the speakers,” says Anastasiia. “I cannot be to describe how fascinating it was to listen to their perspectives. For example, Markus Blum travelled through the whole of Canada and Australia with his family, training a camel for six months along the way. Andrew Funk introduced us to his concept of ‘homeless entrepreneurs,’ which helps the vulnerable integrate into new society. Dr. Igor Tomic from EPFL talked to us about surviving earthquakes and other disasters from the engineering perspective.”

The participants were also the first audience of Marcel Kuhn’s wonderful book “Unthinkable: Life Teachings from a Soul Surfer.”

The results of the first Davos SCYL were astounding. The participants – all victims of the war in Ukraine – were not only energized and inspired by the experience itself, but they were determined to take a leadership role in the project, laying the foundation for a community of young leaders who are themselves survivors.

Reflecting on the past year and the change he felt after SCYL, Bogdan says that he has started rethinking life and its priorities. “I became more conscious about what I am doing with my time and my life. SCYL made me believe that true happiness can be found in simple things: friendship and nature. “It pushed me to turn my

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