

Underground Movement Attracts Immigrant Youth in Sweden

Every evening up to 100 teenagers representing dozens of nationalities and various religious backgrounds converge on the community center in Råslätt, a largely-immigrant suburb of Jönköping, Sweden. The city runs "Underground" on weeknights, offering sports, popular games like Play Station and other activities. Three years ago OM agreed to take responsibility for Saturday nights; with the addition of increased staff this September they are now able to open on Sunday evenings as well.

"The kids know we are volunteers," says Peter Magnusson, who leads the OM team. "The city offered to pay us salaries, but it means a lot to the kids to know we do it free. The officials even pay their staff to hang with us, because they want them to learn how we establish boundaries. We get a lot of respect, even from the Muslim parents of kids, because they know we're faith-based and we are focused on moral values."

Underground was designed for older teens, but after becoming aware of a gang of girls causing trouble in the community the team decided to open a room to 12- to 14-year-olds. These girls have now discovered they prefer to spend time at the center; and the gang leader's loyalty to the place is so complete that Peter entrusts her with money to buy snacks.

Rules have to be bent to allow some girls to bring their baby brother or sister, if it's the only way they can come. But the OM team feels they are starting to carve a place in the lives of these young people. A few have even started to clean up the mess others make without being asked, and recently teens chose the colors and design for a dance/game area, then painted it themselves. One girl told Magnusson with tears in her eyes, "This place is so important to us. We have no other place to

go.”

Of course, tensions between Orthodox and Muslim youth can easily erupt, but staff maintain zero tolerance for fighting or for boys bothering girls. Occasionally they have to bar someone, but a few troublemakers have later come back to apologize. They have never been a problem since.

Magnusson has realized that many parents who come from other cultures, both Orthodox and Muslim, have no idea how to manage their teenagers in Sweden. He would like to provide counseling for them. He also wants to start a mechanics course for the boys that will help them earn money as they learn.

Homework help is also a felt need by these multicultural teens. Although Swedish students often employ tutors to improve their grades, the majority of kids in Råslätt can't afford them. Magnusson hopes to recruit a few teachers from the international church or students from a nearby teachers' training university.

Driver's education opens an excellent avenue for possible ministry. In Sweden, you can reduce the expensive hours at a driving school by driving with someone privately who has been through a course.

“It's hard to find people willing to teach kids, even though the city will cover some of the costs. The girls especially, rarely have anyone to help them,” Magnusson explains. “I am actually teaching seven kids myself right now. These driving lessons give us an excellent way to come close to the teens and talk about everything in a very non-threatening environment. It is the best ministry I've ever done!”

A leadership school has just been started for some of the Underground teens with most potential. “It is amazing how they take responsibilities and identify themselves with us, even though they are from a mixed religious and ethnical background,” observes Magnusson. “They get teased sometimes

but make it very clear that they are part of our team!”

This September, local officials awarded Magnusson a “passion for the community” prize for his work with Råslätt’s teens.

“The award has given me many more open doors to the media and the community. I have had a lot of interviews. In October all the counselors for social services, schools, youth and immigration/integration will come to Underground just to hear more about what we do and to see how they can help us. They also want to ask how we view the challenges in the area as we often get a better oversight not only working here, but living here and hearing from teens, parents and grandparents.

“In November I have been asked to speak at a conference in Råslätt on integration with top politicians and officials, including the national minister of integration from our national government.”

Magnusson is working on finding more team members who have a professional social work background.

“My biggest challenge is to recruit one or two more people with a professional background in social work with youth,” he says. “The professional approach is important as we work on this level, and I am the only one with a professional background at the moment. We have fantastic and gifted people in the team but this would help me lead future development. It’s a big prayer request!”

Five OMers and local believers are fully involved in the Underground ministry, with 10 to 15 others helping out occasionally, including Field Leader Martin Ström.

Please ask God to supply the right professionals, with the kind of tough love it takes to connect with youth who feel caught between cultures.