

BUILDING
Social
Development
2008-2018

#20

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Tobaksvejen 10

DK-2860 Søborg

Tel.: (+45) 3957 0957

Fax: (+45) 3966 0424

E-mail: info@veluxfoundations.dk

www.veluxfoundations.dk

Editing: Jens-Jørgen Pedersen

Author: Christian Holtet

Translation: Kevin McGwin – IN OTHER WORDS

Layout & type: TeR Døssing / ddsign.dk

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Bicskey kúria felújítása és új szállásépületek építése

ÉPÍTETŐ:
Egyenlő Esélyekért Alapítvány
2141 Csolbör, Ibolya u. 13-19.

A beruházás a Velux Alapítványok pénzügyi támogatásából valósul meg.

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MILIEUWENDEGEN EN VELUX FONDATEN

HATÁRIDŐK:
Készítés: 2017. június
Behajtás: 2018. augusztus

ÉPÍTÉSI ENGEDÉLY SZÁMA:
(ÉTOR azonosító) - 201600090174



FŐVÁLLALKOZÓ:
FILTÁR ÉPÍTŐ Kft.
5126 Jászfényszaru, Somogyi Béla út 69.
Nyilvántartási szám: 21A53001

FELELŐS MŰSZAKI VEZETŐ:
Fogarasi Balázs, MV-É-M 01-B105

MŰSZAKI ELLENŐR:
Patkó Ákos, ME-É-I. 01-5688

TERVEZŐK:
ZENING Kft. Kralován...
B. FUTURÁ Kft. Buzgó Csam...



Katalin Galambos from Equal Chances Foundation outside the building site in Tápióbecske where 24 young people soon will live and work

The farm that gives people with disabilities the chance to grow up

Country
Hungary

Website
www.egyenloeselyekert.hu

Funding from THE VELUX FOUNDATIONS
DKK 10,168,762

Project period
2017-2020

Project organisation
The Equal Chances Foundation
(Egyenlő esélyekért! Alapítvány)

Contact
Erzsébet Szekeres
info@egyenloeselyekert.hu

The Equal Chances Foundation is a rehabilitation centre that offers supported housing, employment and job training for disabled young people and adults in *Csömör*, just outside of Budapest. In a new centre in *Tápióbicske*, that is being built, it will provide job training and adult education in the agricultural field for young adults with disabilities.

After renovation of the existing buildings, and the addition of 2 new ones, it still retains much of the feel and function of the farm that was once located there.

Tápióbicske has a population 3,000, it is just 50km from Budapest, but it is unmistakably farming country. The location was chosen specifically: the training centre aims to prepare people with disabilities for agricultural jobs.

The centre is the brainchild of the *Equal Chances Foundation*, which has been working to improve the lives of

people with disabilities in Hungary since 2000. One group the foundation has come to focus closely on is children with disabilities living in child protection care state-run institutions. Many of them no longer have contact with their families; others never had family to begin with. From a modern perspective, the level of care these institutions offer is inadequate: too few and under-skilled, the people who work there are unable to provide the attention the children need, let alone any education or training. By the time they turn 18 and



Katalin Galambos and Erzsébet Szekeres talks with one of the building workers about the finishing of the building

must leave their institutions and start their adult lives, they have learned nothing about how to live on their own and how to be independent. Also, most often they do not have anywhere to live. Without a family or social network to rely on, most wind up living in isolation. Many fall into substance abuse and crime. Some find themselves being placed into some form of custody.

The Equal Chances Foundation wanted to do something about this situation and decided that the best approach was to provide the training and rehabilitation that institutionalised care did not.

“There are no services for these people,” says Katalin Galambos, a department head with the foundation. “In reality, they have two problems: they are persons with disabilities, and they lack the basic social skills they need to be able to interact with other people. Someone who has been mistreated by institutionalised care and hasn’t had proper, constructive contact with adults, who doesn’t have a family and who’s never been a part of society, is going to have a very hard time taking care of themselves. This is all something we need to teach them, at the same time as we provide them with job training.”

The Equal Chances Foundation is the first organisation in Hungary to provide services of this sort, but it is no stranger to working with people with disabilities. Its founder, Erzsébet Szekeres, was motivated to begin advocating for children with disabilities and their parents after giving birth to a son with multiple disabilities and discovering that the only form of care the state could provide was institutionalisation. Rather than subject her son to a life of meaningless activities



Equal Chances helps people with intellectual disabilities. They are given jobs and housing

and arrested development, she began organising other ways of support. But this was before the fall of Communism in eastern Europe, and their lobbying efforts were generally shrugged off by the Stalinist bureaucrats who controlled the country. She kept at it though, and eventually managed to land funding they could use for job-training and rehabilitation programmes. Later, they were able to acquire housing where people with disabilities could learn to live on their own.

Today, the Equal Chances Foundation provides services for 117 people with disabilities in the Budapest area (Csömör) in supported housing, owned by the foundation.

Some of the funding to establish these facilities came from THE VELUX FOUNDATIONS. So, when, in 2015, it came time for the Equal Chances Foundation to begin to look for the money it would need to get its new idea off the ground, it again turned to THE VELUX FOUNDATIONS.

Given the nature of the problem, as well as the Equal Chances Foundation's inspirational approach, the foundations agreed to make a grant that would facilitate the purchase of the farm in Tápióbicske and its five hectares of land.

Renovation of the farm began in 2017 and is to be finished this autumn. When the four units are complete, there will be an apartment for each of the 24 residents between the ages of 18 and 30. Residents will have their own room, bathroom and in a group of 6, will share a kitchen and common space. In addition, the facility has training centre, office space and living quarters for staff, as well as the farm's original barns, sheds and other buildings.

Galambos, who holds a master's degree in special education and has been working in the field since 2009, is slated to manage the centre. She appears to have all the qualifications needed to succeed: in addition to working directly with young people with disabilities, she



The buildings are to be finished in the autumn 2019



Many of Equal Chances clients have stated that they want to be a part of the new farm project

teaches special education to students at university. Her enthusiasm for the field is obvious, and she is clearly empathetic towards the young people she works with.

The project, she says, appears to have widespread support amongst people with disabilities.

“The reactions are all positive. The young people with disabilities, I meet, ask if they can move in right away. It won’t be a problem finding enough people to live at the centre, but we need to focus on finding the people that the place is most suitable for. The people we choose need to be able to live together as a group.”

To help select residents, Galambos will consult with psychologists.

The centre will be able to accommodate people with all forms of disabilities except people with severe disabilities. Training will consist, in part, of raising chickens and cows, fruit and vegetable farming and possibly cheese production.

“The truth is that we won’t know what the residents can or want to do until they move in and we get to know each other” Galambos says. “In the beginning, nothing is going to be set in stone.”



Over the years Equal Chances Foundation have helped many people with disabilities. Here one of them is seen in the centre in Csömör, just outside of Budapest

To place residents in jobs right away after they move in, the training centre will work in cooperation with a family-run farm-stay hotel and horse-riding centre, which is nearby, to provide initial job training. The hotel is one of the biggest businesses in the area and organises activities for guests to teach them about farming and nature. It also has programmes for school classes. Working there will introduce residents to the variety of service and agricultural positions the hotel offers, and then the centre will work with them to decide whether they should continue there or whether they would be better suited to another type of job.

Residents will be involved in job-training activities for four hours each day. In addition, they will attend school. Residents receiving agricultural training will also take classes to learn how to care for animals, how to farm and how to manage a farm's finances. The Equal Chances Foundation is seeking to become an

accredited agricultural training centre, in part because this would allow it to accept non-disabled students, which would expose residents to people from outside the centre.

Residents will also be given training in health, personal hygiene, housekeeping, communication, working with other people and other subjects that will help them become more independent.

"We're thinking that residents will live here for a couple of years. Mostly it will depend on how quickly they become independent and how well they respond to training. Some will be ready to move on after two or three years and find a farming job, or possibly even run a small farm, either on their own or with other former residents. Our counsellors will work with them the entire time they are here, and we plan on keeping in touch after they move out and establish themselves someplace else," Galambos says.

“While the goal is to have residents reach the point where they are able to live independently and hold an ordinary job, those who can’t won’t be forced out” Galambos adds. “They can live here for as long as they need.”

The centre will have a staff of 12. Five have already been hired and are being trained at the Equal Chances Foundation’s headquarters in Csömör. Most of the people that have been hired so far come from Tápióbsike, and Galambos expects to be able to find the rest in the area.

“That’s good for a number of reasons,” she says. “It gives a head start on establishing ourselves locally, while at the same time helping us to spread the word that much of

what people know – or think they know – about people with disability is wrong.”

Some of the people in the area have expressed their misgivings about having a rehabilitation centre nearby. Concerns about increased crime and noise are amongst the most common comments Galambos hears.

“I reassure them that we will keep a close eye on the residents and try to convince them they might actually benefit from having us here. We’re creating jobs and we’re going to need to buy things locally. We can also sell our cheese and our vegetables at the local market. I expect people are eventually going to accept that the training centre is there, and that we will be able to make a contribution to the community. Things are going to work out fine.”



Katalin Galambos will lead the new farm project. Erzsébet Szekeres is the founder of Equal Chances Foundation

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