

# How can volunteers from a social vulnerable background get involved in a cultural heritage organisation?

Inspiring cultural heritage organisations and volunteers in Flanders sharing their experiences

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Over the last year 'Histories' sought out cultural heritage organisations which offer employment for people from a social vulnerable background and welcomed them into their voluntary workforce. In this article we will describe 18 'best practices' from various heritage organisations. We transcribed the interviews with volunteers and their coordinators and thus hope to provide inspiration, create enthusiasm and spread information. First, we need to clarify certain concepts and summarise why heritage organisations and volunteers like to work together. Then we will give 10 useful hints.

## INVENTORISING 'GOOD PRACTICES'

In January 2021 we started our research with a **consultation round**, a group within 'histories' called together for that purpose, to gather **input and advice** from the heritage communities (more information on <https://historiesvzw.be/consultatiecirkels/>). We **sent out an open invitation** calling for different organisations to share their positive practice.

We **proactively looked** for interesting experiences. This information enabled us to **contact heritage groups** and interview **volunteers** with problems entering the labour market and their coordinators.

The following **central issues** were addressed:

- \ **why** go for an inclusive voluntary workforce?
- \ how do heritage organisations **coach** volunteers with a vulnerable profile?
- \ what are the **challenges** the organisations will encounter?
- \ what are the **positive effects** of this cooperation, both for the volunteer and for the organisation?
- \ What **advice** can be passed on to other volunteers or heritage organisations?

\ Are you involved in a heritage organisation that employs vulnerable volunteers? Or is your organisation planning to do so? Would you like to learn from the experience of others? Do not hesitate to contact us, so others in turn can learn from your successes and experiences.

\ Are you considering working as a volunteer in a Flemish heritage organisation? You can always contact a local history group, 'Familiekunde' Flanders (Genealogy Flanders) or a museum.

## AIM OF THE ARTICLE

This article has several objectives:

\ We hope that practical advice from heritage volunteers and their coordinators will **encourage and motivate** other heritage organisations, whether small or large, working with professionals or with volunteers, to be more open and self-assured so as to employ a diverse and inclusive workforce. It is an opportunity for volunteers with problems entering the labour market to take on a voluntary engagement in an inclusive environment.

\ From our research it appears that already a large number of heritage organisations are quietly working on this 'inclusiveness' within their voluntary workforce. What is not clear is how this is done. Some volunteers work behind the scenes, sometimes their social vulnerability is not always apparent. In this article we would like to **stimulate the flow of information between the various heritage organisations**, both inside Belgium and abroad.

\ In focusing on good practice we stress the positive side without ignoring the **difficulties** arising and the **learning processes** involved, apparent in the interviews.

\ In this article we do not claim to have achieved a fully representative appraisal of inclusive heritage organisations in Flanders and Brussels.

## BEST PRACTICE?

By 'best practice' in the present context, we understand heritage organisations which engage in an inclusive way, **volunteers in a socially vulnerable position**, or **volunteers with difficulties entering the labour market** into their voluntary workforce. To obtain this goal, it is not up to the volunteers themselves to adapt, but rather to the organisation, so that diversity comes to be regarded as an added value. (Movisie, 2021). This voluntary task can be seen **either as short term, or as a project over a longer period of time or as structural**.

We focus on this group because voluntary work can improve a vulnerable position in society. For some individuals volunteering can be a **first step** into the labour market, however, **voluntary work in itself is also a relevant means of participation** (Movisie, 2021).

This definition allows a broad spectrum of **good practices** within the working of the heritage sector: such as documentation centres, museums, local history organisations, heritage groups, genealogical societies and citizens movements, it allows them to give examples of volunteers with a physical or mental disability, psychological problems, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), burn-out, sick leave, or people who do not have a full command of the Dutch language

While this article focuses on volunteers with a problematic access to the labour market, opening up your organisation to this group benefits all volunteers.



## CLARIFYING SOME OF THE KEY TERMS

### What is diversity?

We use the term diversity to stress that the **visible and invisible characteristics of people are different but also similar**. These diversities influence our position in society, our opportunities, our behaviour and our way of thinking (LKCA, 2019). If they are used to exclude a person, we call this discrimination (Movisie, 2011).

### What do we understand by inclusive volunteering?

The term inclusiveness has to do with the way differences and similarities are handled: in an inclusive organisation **differences and similarities form an asset, the power of diversity is put to use**. Everyone can be themselves in a protected environment and feel respected and valued. Moreover, capacities and qualities are stimulated and everyone gets the possibility to put forward ideas (LKCA, 2019).

### Vulnerable?

We concentrate specifically on 'volunteers in a social vulnerable position'. We borrow this term from the **theory of social vulnerability** (Vettenburg et al., 1984). According to this theory, the existing systems, groups and individuals fail to recognize the specific needs of people in a social vulnerable position, and as a result they run a greater risk **of being excluded and hurt**, even within a voluntary work force. An accumulation of this, together with negative stereotypes and prejudices, will in time undermine their own self-esteem, and prevent this group from seizing the opportunities offered (Samenlevingsopbouw, 2014; Samenlevingsopbouw Antwerpen stad & Atlas integratie en inburgering, 2016; Vettenburg et al., 1984).

Since the term 'socially vulnerable volunteer' could be seen as stigmatizing for the person involved, we add the following:

\ Every person, volunteer or paid worker, is in one way or another vulnerable. At the same time everyone has their own strong points. **An individual is in him/herself not vulnerable, however their situation within society is**. For this reason we use the term 'socially vulnerable volunteer' rather than simply 'vulnerable volunteer'.

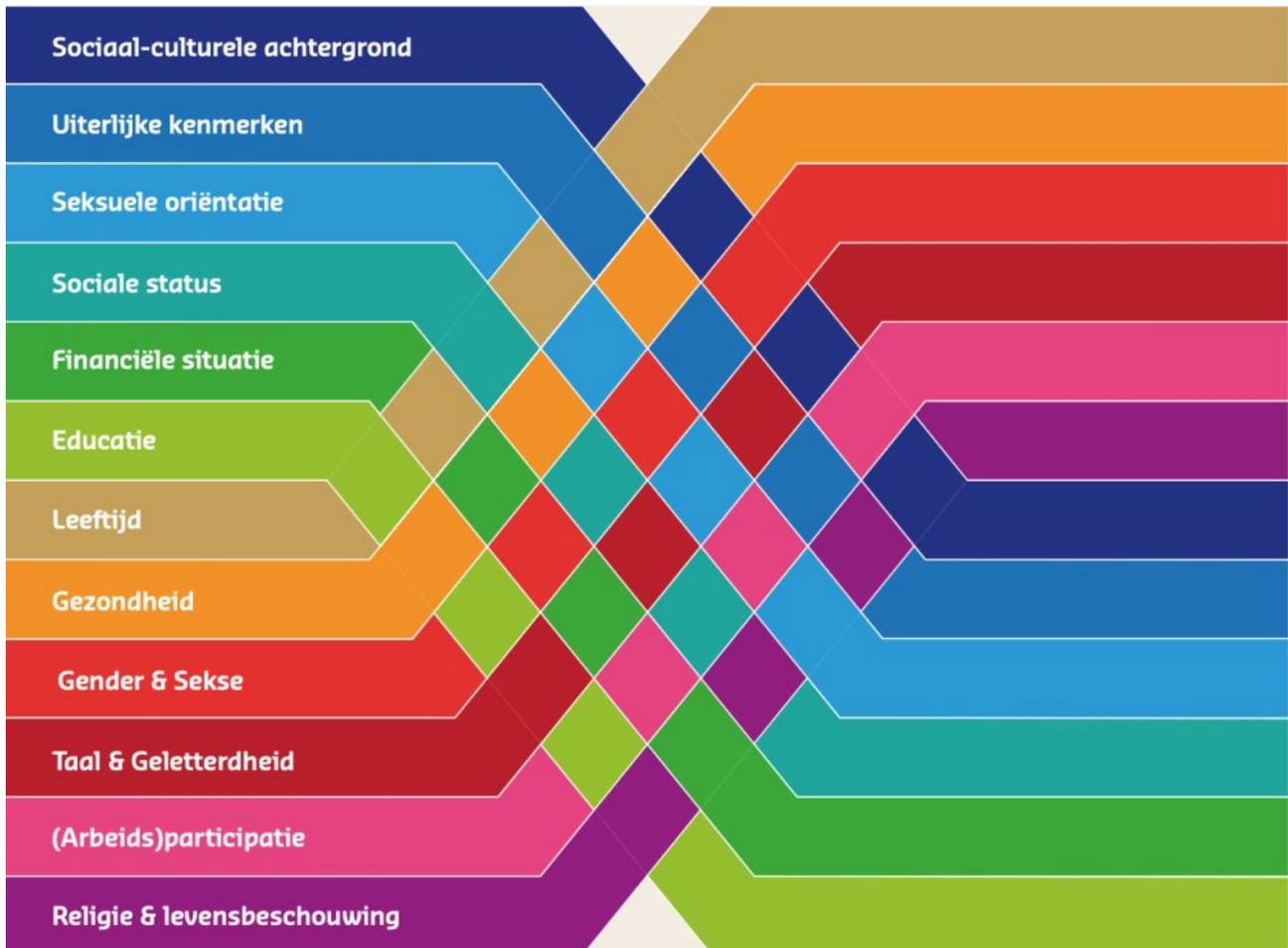
\ **People are not stuck in a socially vulnerable situation**. Particular difficulties within someone's social position need not last for ever; people can generate change, despite shortcomings. Volunteering can bring about a positive change.

\ It is not the idea to put people in one particular box, **they are more than just their social vulnerability**. For this reason we will only use the term 'volunteers in a socially vulnerable position' when it is required, to avoid confusion.

\ The psychological vulnerable volunteer or the foreign speaker do not exist as such. Each individual is different.

Research commissioned by the King Baudouin Foundation (Hustinx et al., 2015; Hustinx & Dudal, 2020) showed that in both 2015 and 2019, people who are active (excluding students) do more voluntary work than housewives and men, disabled and unemployed. People with a distance to the labor market are therefore under-represented in voluntary work in Belgium.

On the basis of these remarks, we have reversed the situation in our article: **we do not simply discuss volunteers in a social vulnerable position; instead we let them talk**. Seven volunteers, active in nine heritage institutions are interviewed and tell us about their experience, so we get to know the individual behind the definition of social vulnerability. Some of the volunteers interviewed preferred to remain in the background, they chose to testify anonymously or to use a fictitious name in the interview.



*The intertwined diversity model of Movisie (2021) with 12 diversity Factors (socio-cultural background, appearance, sexual orientation, social status, financial situation, education, age, health, gender & sex, language & literacy, (labour) participation, religion & philosophy). Every person possesses these factors. The interpretation differs per person.*

## SUMMARY

### What are the positive effects of voluntary work for people in a social vulnerable position?

The volunteers interviewed and their mentors indicated various ways in which voluntary work gives a feeling of wellbeing, keeps them occupied, strengthens and gives confidence for the future:

Volunteers are employed on the basis of their **qualities** and for once are not regarded as in need of help. Some need to (re)discover their possibilities gradually, but since they get a chance to work without overmany requirements, this process is often automatically generated. They become **proud** of their own experiences and/or capacities, their **self-confidence** grows and they **dare speak up**. Moreover, a lot of volunteers like the idea of **giving something back** to society - they acquire **positive self-esteem**. A warm welcome from the heritage societies makes them feel **part of a larger circle** and less lonely. They no longer need stay home the whole day, and they get a more **structured day rhythm** and social contacts as a result. For some who do not speak the language these **social contacts** offer **language acquiring possibilities**. Some volunteers need a **personal and intellectual challenge**, it stimulates further **development and further growth** at their own tempo.

'Everyone has got talents. Including those who come from disadvantaged groups. They are being pushed into it and have little chance to break out of them.' (Hambach & Matthijssen, 2011, p. 11).

In some heritage organisations it was the case that voluntary work even led to a (re)integration in the **labour market**. For other volunteers it forms **a suitable alternative for employment**. Moreover, in setting up a diverse group of volunteers and facilitating positive encounters between people from a different background, **prejudices, stigma and social differences are being challenged**. The heritage organisation will not only have a positive influence on the individual and the organisation, but also on society.

### Why involve social vulnerable volunteers into your heritage organisation?

The heritage organisations gave a variety of responses:

- \ Taking on a **social responsible** role by including everyone and giving everyone a chance.
- \ Providing the exhibition or collection with a more **diverse interpretation**.
- \ It is simply part of the **DNA or the central theme** of the organisation.
- \ Our modern (super) **diverse society is better reflected** in the volunteers and collaborators.
- \ Volunteers have **valuable talent or specific knowledge** which can be shared with the organisation.
- \ It can be a means to a **wider accessibility** for a diverse public.
- \ The possible need for **motivated volunteers** who can take on labour intensive tasks at their own tempo.

The above points show us that integrating social vulnerable groups does not only create possibilities for volunteers, but can also have a positive impact on heritage organisations themselves.

## 10 USEFUL TIPS

As mentioned above: if there is to be inclusive volunteering, it is not up to the volunteers to adapt, it is the heritage organisation itself that needs to adapt. On the basis of the various interviews conducted, we put forward **10 suggestions for and from heritage organisations.**

### 1.

**Read the brochure: 'Inclusive Volunteering: Recommendations for Volunteer Coordinators on How to Develop a More Inclusive Volunteer Programme'**

We advise all to read this brochure, both organisations who have already some experience in involving volunteers from a social vulnerable position, and those who have no such experience. Another interesting brochure written in Dutch is called **'Begeleiden van vrijwilligers in maatschappelijk kwetsbare posities'**. The first part of the brochure takes you through the practical steps when involving volunteers. Where do you find them? What agreements do you make? How do you give the necessary feedback? In part two background information of volunteers in a social vulnerable position is gone into. The guide is published by 'Samenlevingsopbouw Antwerp Town vzw and Atlas, integration and naturalisation' Antwerp (2009).

### 2.

**Work out your volunteering policy and communicate it in writing.**

The interviews show that there is a certain amount of discord or confusion among the volunteers about differences in fees between volunteers and staff and between volunteers themselves.

Heritage cell TERF experienced some friction among their volunteers. Volunteers coming from a social economic background received a one euro and a half remuneration from the centre for employment care, the other volunteers did not receive such a fee. They really felt the need to clarify this problem in their

**A clear policy or code of conduct can prevent such problems,** particularly when volunteers have a say in the policy statement and the agreements. The volunteer policy statement not only gives information on remuneration, but also describes the status of the voluntary workers within the organisation, their rights and duties, their tasks, the contract, how the organisation handles setbacks and conducts exit talks. (Hambach and Matthijssen, 2011) recommend working out a clear policy for volunteers, especially when working with social vulnerable volunteers. **It provides guidelines to fall back on, to ensure everyone gets a fair treatment.** For instance, it ensures that each volunteer is subject to the same agreement with regard to notifying in case of sickness or the consumption of alcohol at work.

**'The five V' brochure for volunteers, can be used as a guideline when drafting a policy (Maes et al., 2016). The five V's stands for the different phases a volunteer experiences within an organisation and uses the initial letters of the Dutch words for 'find', 'welcome', 'strengthen', 'improve' and 'leave' (vind, verwelkom, versterk, verbeter en vertrek). At each of these phases, strategies, hints, examples and points of concern are discussed which will help drive the code of conduct in the right direction.**

### 3.

**Make sufficient time for personalised guidance.**

Each volunteer is different, *the* volunteer with a psychological disability or *the* volunteer with spectre autism does not exist. They all come from different environments, social, cultural or economic backgrounds, have different disabilities etc. Moreover, each volunteer has different skills and ambitions. **It is important to get to know each volunteer to offer a suitable and personal guidance.** It involves making time for an evaluation talk or an informal chat over a cup of coffee.

4.

**Volunteer work should also be a bonus for the volunteer.**

Get to know the volunteer by engaging in a personal talk on an equal footing. Check why an individual wants to work for your group or organisation as a volunteer, what they would like to do or learn. Discuss together how the work might best be arranged to enable the volunteer to establish social contacts, learn Dutch or digitalise particular items. It will encourage them to persevere.

\ It is important that the volunteer receives **sufficient opportunity for personal development** by changing tasks, learning new things, but also by having a say regarding the execution of the work and the organisation.

\ It is precisely because a volunteer is employed **on the basis of certain skills and competences** that he or she will flourish. A volunteer in a socially vulnerable position **should not become a mere token**.

5.

**Seek cooperation between the various sectors.**

The interviewed volunteer-coordinators are clearly all fans of cooperation; It enables you to complement each other with **know-hows**. The partner organisation which has experience with volunteers in a social vulnerable position can:

- \ Facilitate the **access** and recruitment of a particular group.
- \ Give **support** with the mentoring of volunteers, give advice and participate during evaluation.
- \ **Take over mentoring when necessary**, while you can focus on task-supervision.
- \ Give **practical support**.

According to the FORD-method (Nassimi, 2021) family and friends, occupation or education, recreation and dreams are the best topics to break the ice during an introductory meeting.

6.

**Make sure everyone in the organisation is on the same wavelength**

It is important that the **present pool of volunteers as well as staff and management can agree on the principle of a varied group of volunteers**, so that they can be involved in an inclusive manner and have full opportunity to be themselves, to participate, etc. Increasing support in the organisation depends mainly on **good communication**. The Agency Integration and Naturalisation (2021) gives a series of **hints** which may help:

- \ **Make clear** to everyone why a particular **choice** is being made
- \ Communicate what is **expected** from volunteers or staff.
- \ **Seek help from** bridge-builders and others with vision who can support your plan. Talk with them and examine together for possible thresholds and opposition.
- \ **Listen** to opposition and try to understand its origin.
- \ Offer support, for instance by planning **courses**. Keep the specific training course 'clear language' in mind for foreign language newcomers.
- \ Once started it is important to **keep communication going**, so that staff/volunteers do not feel they are **being left to their own devices**.

7.

**Lower practical and psychological thresholds.**

Visiting a museum, archive, exhibition or cultural heritage site can cause threshold anxiety. Try to get to the root of this and reduce it. There are for instance **psychological barriers**: some people might never have entered a heritage organisation and will be little inclined to look for voluntary work within this branch, they might not even be familiar with the concept 'volunteering'. **What we don't know, we fear**.

Besides these psychological barriers, there are **practical** ones: what about childcare, dependence on public transport, the care centre, red tape and job interviews, it can be daunting. An **extra effort** will be needed to gain the volunteer's confidence and to motivate participation.

The yearly survey 'Statistiek Vlaanderen' (2013-2018) shows that approximately 60% of the Belgian population has never visited a museum in Belgium over the past 12 months.

When public relation manager Nadia from the Red Star Line Museum became involved in a project for foreign language newcomers, she became aware of the threshold the museum can present. 'Relatively speaking I have not been in the museum all that much with them, I have tended to stay on their terrain. Of course, there comes a time when the threshold to the museum has to be crossed.'

8.

#### Provide further opportunities

Some volunteers live **from day to day**, worrying, for instance, about their finances or health. It may be the case that a volunteer regularly **reports sick or does not turn up**. Especially at these moments it is important not to give up, but to **show the volunteer that you have trust in him or her by offering more opportunities**.

9.

#### Don't force

Supervising volunteers demands a great effort from the whole organisation as such, certainly when it involves volunteers from a social vulnerable background. It is important to check whether staff and/or volunteers are able to give sufficient time, support, empathy and flexibility. What are the limits of the organisation? How many volunteers in a social vulnerable position can be adequately mentored? **Possibly look for partner organisations which can fill this void.**

10.

#### Making mistakes is human

Setting up a voluntary workforce involving people from a social vulnerable position is a sensitive matter. You will make mistakes, but that does not mean the end of the world! It is part of a learning process, it must not prevent you from continuing. Support volunteers and staff by **creating a safe, open work environment with contact persons** so that challenges can be faced.

'Of course one makes mistakes, it is normal, we all do'. - Odette, Museum Plantin Moretus

'If I think I have said something stupid, then I just say, "deary me I had better kept my mouth shut".' - Ina, a Heritage cell Brugge

## BEST PRACTICES

### ‘We regard ourselves as a family-orientated heritage cell’

#### Heritage cell TERF



**Aline Verbeeck** is a member of staff and volunteer coordinator at **Heritage Cell TERF**. They are part of **BIE**, the culture and heritage platform of the Midwest. Since 2008 the heritage cell has been active in 7 municipalities, situated around Roeselare. This year an eighth municipality joined them.

Aline is the first point of contact at heritage cell TERF, however all staff are in touch with the volunteers. Since 2012 ‘office volunteers’ (volunteers who work alongside the permanent staff in the office) have been employed to make our rich regional heritage accessible via the image library [www.erfgoedbankmidwest.be](http://www.erfgoedbankmidwest.be).

The heritage cell joined forces with ‘Bieweg’ and other sheltered workplaces of various municipalities, to allow mentally or physically vulnerable people to digitalise, describe and put in heritage material as office volunteers. Those who have outgrown the workshop, but are not yet ready to function in a large organisation, feel totally at ease in the family-like heritage cell TERF. ‘We regard ourselves as a family, because everyone working in our office is part of the team.’

#### The heritage organisation as a social partner

Daily supervision demands a lot of effort from the heritage cell: ‘There are limitations, problems, things don’t go as they should and sometimes it is quicker if you do it yourself, but that is hardly the point. ... All extra work accomplished, helps us, leaving aside the speed at which it is done and how... sure, it is a bumpy road’.

As a heritage organisation they almost consider it a social duty to employ volunteers from a social vulnerable position. ‘As a heritage organisation we are the type of organisation people feel they can turn to because we work with soft material, with which they are familiar from their own surroundings.’ Office volunteer Nathalie agrees with this, she has been doing this work since 2013: ‘I work as a volunteer at the heritage cell, because it is interesting. All work regarding culture and history I find fascinating’.

#### Voluntary work as a lever.

Aline stresses that volunteers evolve in their work. When they arrive they are usually introvert, timid, nervous and uncertain, after a while their self-confidence grows and they dare answer questions, spontaneously greet others or participate in activities organised for volunteers. The know-how gained during the training, at university or high school, re-emerges and they begin to make suggestions. ‘They may have a vulnerable background, but they might have a good knowledge of word-processing’. One of our volunteers has made a move into the regular labour market as administrative employee through the experience she gained at our heritage cell. For her, the heritage cell must have been a welcoming place to work: ‘She regularly falls back on us, she sometimes phones us or drops by, because we are her trusted environment... so she can recharge her batteries or chat about her work’.

**Trusted, but not too much: a fine balancing act**

For many volunteers TERF is a safe haven, so it is not unusual for a volunteer to share a personal story or to ask for help regarding daily problems.

Not all heritage staff with a background in archaeology or art history have enough know-how or feeling to deal with this adequately of their own accord. 'Gradually we have learned how to react and we have even followed courses for this purpose'.

**'As heritage organisation we are the type of organisation people can turn to because we work with soft, familiar material from their own surroundings.'**

The coordinators learn a lot by experience. Aline, for instance, has learned to draw a clear professional dividing line with regard to her contacts. Moreover, for questions around certain problems or conduct, they can always resort to the employment service, which is in regular contact mentoring the volunteers.

**Contact**

[www.bienet.be](http://www.bienet.be)  
[www.erfgoedbankmidwest.be](http://www.erfgoedbankmidwest.be)



*Office volunteer Nathalie on the photo with her favourite picture from the heritage archive: a marriage telegram. These used to be prettily decorated with appropriate drawings.*

## ‘A dialogue guide is not *the Muslim* or *the Buddhist*’

### PARCUM



**Julie Aerts**, advisor for religious heritage and responsible for diversity within PARCUM, she monitors the dialogue guides.

**PARCUM** is a museum and expertise centre for religious art and culture recognised by the Flemish government. In the Louvain museum they organise thematic exhibitions around religion, art and culture.

In view of its success it was incorporated into the permanent set up and into other theme exhibitions. Indeed, the museum regularly turns to the dialogue guides when planning new exhibitions.

#### What is a dialogue tour exactly?

During the tour a permanent PARCUM-guide enters into a dialogue with the public and the dialogue-guide. The dialogue-guide is from a different cultural and/or ideological background, sometimes he/she is a foreign-language newcomer who wants to have a better grasp of Dutch. For both parties a win-win situation is thus created.

During the tour the dialogue-guide will be invited to share their personal experience and feeling regarding certain heritage objects and themes. Julie makes an important observation to prevent stereotypes creeping in: ‘A dialogue-guide is not *the Muslim* or *the Buddhist*, they do not exist of course, even within Islam there are different movements. The dialogue-guides tell us how they experience Islam, they don’t talk about Islam in general.’

At the moment PARCUM works with 6 permanent dialogue-duo’s, and hopes to expand this to 15. The idea is to find a match between the dialogue-guide and the PARCUM-guide once they get used to one another. Beside that, we are looking for a PARCUM-guide with educational experience, since the ‘I ASK’ method (Katzenstein & Koster) will be used during the guiding tours.

PARCUM has at present a largely Christian collection. In Flanders there are approximately 1800 parish churches, as against a hundred or so mosques. Many churches have had to close their doors, and as a result a lot of roman-catholic heritage artefacts need to find a new location and will end up at PARCUM. So, the question arose: how can we integrate the ideas of inclusion and diversity within this Christian, western collection? A first step was taken in 2017 during the multi-religious exhibition ‘Religion, healing, dividing’, where dialogue tours were offered.

### Thinking diversity

Julie stresses the importance of getting acquainted with the culture of the dialogue-guides, to make them feel welcome. For instance, she sends a card during the sugar fest. 'It is a basic principle within the organisation that everyone regards 'thinking in terms of diversity' as the norm within the daily work practice'.

**'A dialogue-guide is not the Muslim or the Buddhist, because they do not exist as such, within Islam there are different movements. The dialogue-guides tell us how they experience Islam, not how Islam is in general.'**

### Any hints for other heritage organisations?

'I would say: just start – it will come with practice. Work with partners who are already experienced. You might not have the know-how, but try and build a strong network. Here, in Louvain, the Diversity Service is an excellent partner. We have worked together with Orbit, a non-profit organisation and the agency for integration and naturalisation. Last but not least it is important to work with a long-term vision of diversity; it must not become a one-off project, but rather a built-in notion within the organisation.'

### 'We feel so much positive energy every time we take people on a guided tour,' - Testimony of dialogue guide Ithar

Ithar Sabeeb is originally from Iraq and has lived with her three children and husband in Belgium for 15 years. She has had different jobs and speaks reasonably good Dutch. Momentarily she is looking for work, but likes giving tours together with a guide from Belgian origin. She not only works as a volunteer for PARCUM but also in the M-museum. Ithar is Shia. During her tours in PARCUM she describes the works of art starting from her own experiences: 'I always need to figure out whether I have some sort of relation with an art work. Some pieces leave me cold, but others unleash many many stories from my background.'

When Ithar started guiding she already had a good basic level of Dutch and she was used to giving workshops in Dutch. Nevertheless, giving a tour for the first time was stressful. Over the years she has grown in her work and she has expanded her Dutch vocabulary in art and cultural fields.



*Dialogue-guide Ithar explaining a wall painting at PARCUM  
© Cederik Verhelst*

She is very committed: 'Yes, in fact I have got nothing to hide and that is what people appreciate.' She likes working with the guides from Belgian origin, they give her advice, are patient and understanding. 'We feel so much positive energy every time we guide people around.' Ithar likes guiding, it is a way of getting across the following message: 'we are all human, with our own culture, but we can live together as neighbours if we show respect for one another.'

### Contact

[www.parcum.be](http://www.parcum.be)

## ‘They really have a lot to tell, without it becoming infantile.’

COMEET en KOM vzw



**Louise Vermeersch** is project employee at **Heritage Cell Meetjesland (COMEET)**.

**Janny Devriendt** is coordinator for **vzw Kunst Op Maat (KOM)**. KOM’s mission is to make the regular cultural landscape more accessible for individuals with a disability, by preparing them and accompanying them during a cultural trip.

In 2018 COMEET started up a two-year project - ‘Meetjeslandse Meesters’ - focusing on the artistic heritage from the area. Two people with a mental disability from the local care home the ‘Triangel’ were prepared by Janny to guide visitors during the final stage.

### Looking at art without preconceptions

Janny has got experience in training and supervising guides with a mental disability from the museum ‘la Fondation Folon’ in Wallonia. She knows like no other the way they look at art with a completely open mind. ‘They really have a lot to tell... without it becoming infantile. They see and feel things which we no longer see or have forgotten.’ For instance, these guides react to sound within the paintings. ‘A particular painting depicted a landscape with a small house in the background, our guide said “In this painting you can hear the birds singing”.’ Individuals with a disability have an eye for the environment of the exhibition. The wall on which the painting is presented is as important as the painting itself. During their guided tours the visitors are encouraged to look at art in a different way.

### What is beautiful art?

The interaction between guides with a disability and children works very well. Children feel less inhibited to voice their opinion and to ask ‘silly’ questions, because these guides will respond in a natural way. Children can learn they do not have to find art beautiful. ‘Why do you buy a work of art? Because of its market value, perhaps by a famous artist or because you think its colours will match those of your living room. Perhaps we need to reconsider things and admit that this second opinion does not count for less.

It is just a different way of seeing things. Of course you can have a long drawn out discussion on this subject; as an art historian I do make the difference, but I also think it is important that the first argument should not be treated as the norm.'

'They really have a lot to tell... without it becoming infantile. They see and feel things which we no longer see or have forgotten.'

#### How do you train guides with a mental disability?

Obviously not everyone with a disability will be a good guide, but the same goes for those without a disability. As far as the 'Meetjeslandse Meesters' is concerned, one of our two guides is really interested in art..., it is her passion and hobby. It is great that she gets this opportunity within her field of interest'. We try to respect their spontaneous outlook; it is certainly not the idea that we teach them to use difficult terminology. In any case it is highly unpredictable what a guide with a mental disability will tell you. What is important is that the tour takes place within a framework where the visitor can empathize with the artefact.

Janny works towards this aim by offering the guides a basic training. She explains what a painting is and how one paints. She teaches what is important and how you look at it - she does not give them free rein. For every tour there will be the supervision of a regular guide, in case of unexpected incidents. Moreover, guides with a disability will need a number of tours to get used to being in front of a group. But after a while their self-confidence grows and they will take the lead.

#### Challenges

Janny and Louise faced a number of obstacles. The guides are subject to strict rules imposed on them by the care home. It takes longer to train guides with a disability, and time was not always available since this was a temporary exhibition. To prepare things, Janny had compiled a folder with photographs of the art works, she talked with the guides about them and they visited the exhibition area when it was still empty. The exhibits themselves were hung on the walls relatively late, and in real they look slightly different; the guides were somewhat perplexed.



Janny, Louise and two guides during the exhibition 'Meetjeslandse Meesters' © Cederik Verhelst

Fortunately, Janny as well as Louise accompanied them during the tours to cushion these surprises and come up with anecdotes. The end result was an interesting mix.

#### To be repeated?

A lot was gained from this cooperation. It might be interesting for other heritage organisations to get into contact with a care centre in their vicinity. They are often quite receptive for such cooperation. It is to the advantage of a heritage organisation too that they can learn how to work with people in a social vulnerable position without having previous experience. The heritage cell supplied background and expertise on the art works and gave logistic support, for instance with the distribution of easels, to enable the centre to exhibit the works of the clients to a larger public. A staff member of the care centre said during the evaluation: 'Society at large knows very little about our clients. It is part of our responsibility to open up the dialogue on people with a disability to a wider public.' The guides themselves felt they were really listened to and that they made a positive contribution towards the exhibition. For both parties it was a successful experiment, even if it took a lot of time to prepare the guides. 'According to us, this formula might be more interesting for a museum with a permanent collection'. It is Louise and Janny's dream to be able to work with a group of volunteers with a disability, who can guide in various museums.



*A guided tour during the exhibition of 'Meetjeslandse Meesters'*

**Note from the translator**

'Meetjesland' is a historical region in the north-west of the province East Flanders in Belgium.

Meesters is 'masters'.

**Contact**

[www.comeet.be](http://www.comeet.be)

[www.meetjeslandsemeesters.be](http://www.meetjeslandsemeesters.be)

**For your information**

'Meetjeslandse Meesters' is a countryside plus project and was realized thanks to extra funding from the Flemish Government and the Province of East Flanders.

## 'All help is welcome to reach a higher objective.'

Koninklijke Heemkring Hoghescote



**André De Vleeschouwer** has been chair of the **Royal Local History Group Hoghescote in Kapellen** since 2012. In their study and documentation centre you can find a vast historical archive where material is collected about the history of their village and their local area.

André was contacted in December 2020 by a job guidance supervisor looking for a mentor to accompany a refugee called Kiandokht who wanted to improve her Dutch. 'We are usually open to such initiatives and I thought that her background was compatible with our requirements. Our group had just inherited the extensive archive of author Paul Arren, who investigated and described the castles of Belgium and their inhabitants. It comprises 120 archive boxes lacking any kind of search structure. So, we had a choice: either we discard them or we get them into some kind of proper order.' This was time-consuming work, and they definitely needed assistance. 'We very much depend on volunteers and their perseverance; from small beginnings come great things, and every bit of help is welcome to reach our goal'.

### A stepping stone to the labour market?

André explains what Kiandokht does within the local history group: 'Kiandokht goes through the documents of the Paul Arren archive and notes down keywords. These documents are mainly in Dutch, sometimes in French, nevertheless she manages rather well in grasping the content and extracting what is most important'. For Kiandokht it is a means to practice her Dutch, by reading and understanding the language. According to André she is making progress, she is working faster and sometimes asks: 'could I have a look at last week's box again'. André would like to help her find a paid job. 'I gather from our conversations that she is looking for paid work. This of course we cannot provide, but I can bring her into contact with others.'



Archive photo from of the reading-room in the library in the Royal Local History Group Hoghescote  
© Royal Local History Group Hoghescote

**Goal-oriented voluntary work – Testimony of volunteer Kiandokht**

Kiandokht Torabi fled Iraq together with her son and has now lived in Belgium for a year and a half. She obtained her masters diploma in Iraq and has 20 years working experience in tourism and the heritage sector. She would love to find a paid job in this sector in Belgium. Since January 2021 she has been doing 3 hours a week of voluntary work at the local history centre. ‘A number of people have advised me to look for a paid job, but I want to do something which is related to my previous work experience. I like doing this voluntary work, time flies by and it is a way to obtain relevant experience in Belgium.’ Furthermore, she is very motivated and willing to learn: ‘Voluntary work helps me to read Dutch better. Some of the reports are in French, but my French is not very good. After I have mastered Dutch, I would certainly like to learn French, because in the tourist and heritage sector – in fact everywhere in Belgium – French is very important.’ Twice a week she follows a Dutch course and at home she studies it via YouTube and the television.

‘A number of people have advised me to look for a paid job, but I want to do something related to my own working experience. I like doing this voluntary work, time flies and it is a way to obtain relevant experience in Belgium.’

**Contact**

[www.heemkring-hoghescote.be](http://www.heemkring-hoghescote.be)

## 'You have to learn to deal with differences'

### STAM-Stadsmuseum Gent

**Bart Medaer** is coordinator of front-office and of the voluntary work at **'Het STAM-Stadsmuseum Gent'**. The museum first opened in 2010 and tells the story of Ghent as a city. 'The showpiece of many a museum situates itself within its walls. If you step out of the museum, our showpiece lies in front of you: the living city, Ghent itself'.

For a couple of years now Bart Medaer has been trying to open up their approach to volunteers at STAM to arrive at a new and diversified group.

STAM sees it as important to work with volunteers from a social vulnerable background, to give a signal. 'It mirrors society, there is no reason why foreign language newcomers should not be able to welcome museum visitors, just like someone from Ghent who speaks the broad Ghent dialect.' For the last two years trainee Afsar Un Nesa (Ruma) has been taking the lead when it comes to inclusiveness.

#### Recruiting volunteers

STAM has had a number of volunteers with various vulnerabilities like ASD, temporary unemployment, burn-out, or a physical disability. On the one hand, the museum receives spontaneous applications, like Amir's. As a newcomer he has difficulties finding a permanent job. 'You can feel it is not easy for him.' Within the STAM museum he occasionally interprets into Arabic, he translates texts and helps organise events. On the other hand, STAM cooperates with local organisations like Fiola, a non-profit organisation, which is training three volunteers in the museum who are no longer able to perform a paid job. More recently STAM has been working together with Refu Interim, an organisation focused on foreign language newcomers. Since the beginning of 2021 five foreign language newcomers have been employed on the reception at the museum.

#### Facilitating

Bart sees himself as a facilitator, in that he conducts the introductory talks with potential volunteers. According to Bart, the difficult bit comes later, namely to find a match between the person selected and a member of the staff at STAM. As he puts it: 'weighing things up to arrive at a modus vivendi.' It needs to be a win-win situation. STAM sees it in terms of both profitability in the time invested in this cooperation with the volunteer and the fact that he/she must feel useful. 'Once you have bridged these difficulties, it is very important to draw up a clear road map, it must be transparent for everyone involved. It would be awful to take on a commitment if the person involved does not get a proper task, that is lethal'. When recruiting foreign language newcomers we initially encountered some internal resistance, like "do they have enough Dutch?". For our part, we thought: ok, language is important, but, in the final resort, to welcome people with an open attitude is even more important". To back-up foreign language newcomers, STAM drew up a 10-point plan to make clear what is expected from the welcomer, which was translated when necessary, so that it was fully understood by each volunteer.

#### A Learning process

The social and economic background of volunteers may vary, so inevitably training volunteers is a learning process. Bart really gets annoyed when a new volunteer asks for his/her financial compensation in order to pay a bill, and it proves impossible to do this immediately because of red tape. When recruiting newcomers, Bart notices that cultural differences play an important role. 'We had a couple, she was Egyptian and he was Palestinian. We took them on a guided tour, and explained everything. She is super enthusiastic and says "I would like to do this, this is super", I look at him and ask, "is this ok for you?". He is startled and replies: "don't you want a woman, where I come from only women take care of hospitality?"



The STAM hosts

So I gave him the example of a super-STAM-host, namely a policeman on pension ... subsequently he decided to join as a welcomer too'.

#### Providing opportunities and attention

With volunteers - especially at the start - it is difficult to fathom each other out, not in the sense of pigeon-holing someone, but rather of taking each other into account. When a staff worker has put a lot of time into training a volunteer, and the volunteer only shows up irregularly, with no notification, tension will rise. 'I have to intervene and tell my colleague "do give him another chance". This happened and subsequently the volunteer said ... "these instances really helped me to keep going".' Bart thinks it is important to accept volunteers as they are. 'Dealing with people unconditionally, without prerequisites, without prejudices, and this is difficult. We give a number of basic guidelines, but otherwise they are who they are, as an organisation we do not impose. It seems to work, judging from an evaluation with the volunteers. In particular, the volunteers perceive the 'warm' direct contacts with the visitors as pleasing.

'Language is important, but to welcome people with an open attitude is even more important'

All 15 of them have their own style and all are warm hosts.' To conclude, it is important to involve them within the organisation, to make time to have a cup of coffee and have a chat. 'Our kitchen is a very important spot. All volunteers are invited to share the kitchen table with the staff (of course Covid threw a spanner in the works), read the paper or take a break. They can always visit the museum and read books from the shop. They get invited on team outings or to previews. The essence of being able to be part of an organisation, without "the stigma of being a volunteer" is crucial in our story.

#### Note from the translator:

Stadsmuseum means Town Museum

#### Contact

[www.stamgent.be](http://www.stamgent.be)

## 'We open up the discussion about the past'

### De Vierkante Kilometer (The Square Kilometre)



@Anja Hellebaut

Tina de Gendt is STAM's historian in residence'. Through her project 'The square Mile' she is trying to dig up the hidden past from the Ghent areas. At the time of the interview Tina is working on the Rabot neighbourhood. The area 'Neuseplein' and the 'Brugse Poort' had already been done.

Tina deviates from the 'classical heritage path'; for her the concept of 'sharing authority' is central. Inhabitants of mixed neighbourhoods are invited to the drawing table to (re)write and share the history of the city. The participants are not invited to the museum, no, Tina herself takes up residence for half a year in different square kilometre of Ghent's belt. So, she

can immerse herself within the neighbourhood and collect the oral traditions of the local inhabitants. According to her, hidden histories are not just to be found in archives and literature.

#### Conversations in depth and breadth

Per square kilometre, conversations take place in depth with a diverse and representative group of 15 'recallers' or connoisseurs of the neighbourhood. This group meets monthly for an informal gathering to decide what will be examined and how it will be made accessible to a wider public. It is important that the fruits of the project not only pay off for the museum, but also for the rest of the 'stakeholders'. It can lead to a variety of artistic and social projects centred around the heritage of the area. Furthermore, conversations are held across the quarter via neighbourhood walks, so in breadth too. Tina talks about the city's secret stories and the participants are invited to share their own.

#### Recallers, crucial connectors

Tina constructs a wide social network by walking for hours in the different quarters in Ghent, talking to people, asking about the history of their shop, social housing or the local square. She meets many different people, each with a different personality and background, including people in a social vulnerable position. 'Recallers' are not selected on the basis of their social vulnerability, but rather because they are interested in the history of the area and have an 'expertise' in the locality today. Local residents who speak several languages, build up a wide social network and tend to know the neighbourhood like the back of their hand.

Accompanying Tina on her walks, 'recallers' get to know a lot of new people within a different, non-vulnerable context. Tina tells us about a 'recaller' without documents: 'he was my righthand, so in fact we were colleagues, as a result of which he got a different status in the eyes of the others'. Enthusiastic 'recallers' go out on their own to follow up interesting stories of the neighbourhood. They discover their own specific skills which can help to further the project, and hence an added



Monthly a free neighbourhood walk is organised where-by the inhabitants get more questions than answers on the past history of the area. © Balder Deschildre



During an interview session in the local community centre the memory of the area around 'Neuseplein' is literally being mapped. ©Tina de Gendt

self-esteem. Moreover the project leads to cohesion between the residents: 'When you get together every month and you meet each other (another 'recaller') in the street, you grow closer... You not only share a past, but also an awareness and knowledge about that past... it means you have common ground from which you can take off.' New contacts in the quarter often lead to involvement. 'They (the recallers) get to know other inhabitants who are part of an association, and they, in turn, can get involved as a volunteer.'

**'I saw myself as an historical figure and I could choose which role I wanted to play, the owner of a night shop or someone who carries part of her culture with her.'** Recaller

#### Improve the neighbourhood, start with yourself

On one occasion Tina entered a night shop in the 'Rabot' area of Ghent and the owner tells her she is not happy in her environment: 'This is just a poor area, I'm stuck here, I'm really bogged down and cannot get out'. However, she becomes a recaller and via the project, she changes her way of thinking: 'Through the project I got to understand that the neighbourhood has not always been as it is now and of course it can change again, it all depends on the people who live here at the moment. I saw myself as a historical figure and I could choose which role I wanted to play, the owner of a night shop or someone who carries part of her own culture with her.' She is presently managing a small restaurant with East-Asiatic specialities and she is doing well.

The fact that they are conducting interviews – and this counts especially for the women in the group - means that they get recognition for the first time for the role they are playing in the development of the city.

#### A safe environment

But it is not always easy working with a group of diverse volunteers in a long-term project. Not everyone shares the same sympathy for the different levels of Dutch and sometimes someone loses their temper. These awkward situations disrupt the safe and open environment which is necessary to engage volunteers from a social vulnerable background on a Sunday morning. Some already have enough trouble in their lives, because of their situation at home or because they have a past. If their surroundings do not feel safe, they quit. When someone really goes over the top and the atmosphere in the group suffers, Tina might well ban the volunteer from group activities, but first she tries to engage with the person on a different level - through a one-to-one conversation or specific activities. Excluding someone is difficult, precisely because the local heritage and past of the area is very personal and this particular project can be very healing; it is chance to say good-bye to a bitter sweet past.

**Translator's Note:** In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this area of the town formed part of the industrial textile belt. A large part of the population now is of foreign origin.

#### Contact

[www.stamgent.be/nl\\_be/over-het-stam/erfgoed-in-gent/de-vierkante-kilometer](http://www.stamgent.be/nl_be/over-het-stam/erfgoed-in-gent/de-vierkante-kilometer)

## ‘We want to maximize their potential’

### Museum Plantin-Moretus



**Odette Peterink** has been a member of the Public Team for 15 years in the **Museum Plantin-Moretus**. The museum is the actual house and workshop of the printer family Plantin-Moretus, now a historic centre for book printing in Antwerp. It also includes a large print room, archive and heritage library.

At Museum Plantin-Moretus the staff monitor about 45 to 50 volunteers, among them some from a social vulnerable background, such as foreign language newcomers, a hostess with a visual disability, individuals with ASD in the print room and other volunteers who are currently jobless or on sick leave. They are not considered as vulnerable people. “In fact, we do not need to know their personal story. We simply want to use their capacities to the maximum, so that they can make a major contribution”.

#### A warm welcome

When Odette was on holiday in America, she visited Hirshhorn Museum where she was welcomed by a host. She showed her favourite piece of art to Odette and in passing also showed her the way. ‘I thought it was all very welcoming and thought: “This is what I want for our museum”.’ And this is precisely what happened. At the moment, volunteers - among whom foreign language newcomers - are there to greet visitors; it is an ideal situation to improve their Dutch, create regularity and fulfil a function in society. ‘Take the example of a recognised Kurdish refugee who two to three times a week is a fully committed hostess’. The staff who are regularly in contact with the hosts have all followed a Dutch language awareness course (Taalkracht), for sometimes you need to repeat things four or five times, using different synonyms and in a different context. That is all part of it.’

#### The power of volunteers

As well as working as hosts, Plantin-Moretus has print volunteers to give demonstrations, volunteers who research the archives and translate or help during special events. In total we have around 45 to 50 volunteers. ‘We have an incredible amount of work, because we have such a vast collection. A lot of work simply does not get done because it is not affordable. Volunteers can contribute something that would otherwise simply not happen.’ Besides, Odette likes working with volunteers, they are enthusiastic about the museum, a grateful public and with the magnificent artefacts they give the staff a lot of positive energy. ‘It is their gift to us; we get it for free’. Even so, it remains a challenge to make sufficient time to coach volunteers.

**Hints**

According to Odette, to work with a volunteer you need to click with someone. It is important to approach a volunteer without preconceptions and with empathy. ‘Approach people as human beings, each with his/her unique attributes. Try to reposition yourself within the other person. Naturally you will make mistakes, that is normal, we all do, but since we all have our own unique story as human beings that does not really matter, I suppose’.

**‘Approach people as human beings, each with his/her unique situation. Try to reposition yourself within the other and of course you make mistakes, that is normal, we all do’.**

**Blindly at home in Plantin-Moretus - Testimony of a volunteer**

One of the volunteers used to be a fervent history teacher until she began to lose her sight. After a while she tried to find a new meaning to life and began to follow courses, but this hardly gave her social contact. Then she stumbled over a vacancy for a host volunteer in Plantin-Moretus, a museum she had been fond of since she was 15, when she first discovered it. She got the opportunity to work as a host and subsequently helped to guide people with a visual disability. Her experience within education and her own language ability made her a very suitable guide, not just for people with a disability, but for all our visitors.

**One thing leads to another**

Very soon we realised that here was a woman who can inspire people. She was asked to help with the development of activities for blind people in St. Paulus church in Antwerp. She really went for it and then applied as host and guide at the DIVA museum in Antwerp and was accepted – in spite of the fact that she knew nothing about diamonds! Having done her traineeship at DIVA, she made up for her partially sightedness by memorizing the collection pieces. Here too she organised small groups for blind visitors. At present she is being trained as voluntary guide in Antwerp cathedral.



*A foreign language host in Museum Plantin-Moretus  
© Museum Plantin-Moretus*

**Stimulating guided visits for the blind**

She prefers guiding blind people in small groups, so they can feel and discover things which people without a visual disability cannot touch. The Plantin-Moretus museum has a braille touch book. ‘This book is a real benefit for visually impaired visitors; they feel they are being specially cared for’. Other objects she describes in detail or shows under a magnifying glass. ‘It is important that one can smell and feel, precisely because these senses compensate when you cannot see so well’. She prefers to do her tours in the morning; stress and exertion tire her eyes, and as a result, the light sometimes figuratively goes out.



*Foreign language newcomers, © Museum Plantin-Moretus*

**Revived joie de vivre**

Doing voluntary work at Plantin-Moretus not only enabled her to guide in other heritage organisations with confidence, it also helped her to blossom at a personal level. ‘I had never heard of the term vulnerable, I had never even given it a thought. Still, that is how I felt before I came into contact with Museum Plantin-Moretus. Doing voluntary work has helped me reinvent myself and take on intellectual challenges again, building a wide network of social contacts once more’. Even in times of Covid she does not feel isolated, she regularly phones people whom she has met while volunteering and she helps from home with the transcription of a 16<sup>th</sup> century text via PC. She is very grateful to Odette, because she always said: ‘We can work it out somehow, don’t worry.’

‘Discovering the world, life past and present via art, via beautiful objects, via museums, means forgetting your own misery for a short while and making time to enjoy. And that is important, no matter what language you use, no matter whether you are a foreign language newcomer or not, no matter whether you are in a wheelchair or not!’

**Footnote:** name and contact info of the volunteer at the Public Team of the relevant museum and heritage organisation.

**Contact**

[www.museumplantinmoretus.be](http://www.museumplantinmoretus.be)



*A printer volunteer, © Museum Plantin-Moretus – photo Noortje Palmers*

## ‘I treat all volunteers equally, whether they are vulnerable or not’

### National Documentation and Study Centre for Family History



© Documentation and Study Centre for Family History at Merksem

**Rik Van der Krieken** has been director of the **National Documentation and Study Centre for Family History at Merksem** since 2019. The centre was founded in 1968, it collects and retrieves genealogical data.

At the moment some 50 volunteers are involved, mainly digitalising and labelling prayer cards, death announcements, obituaries, birth cards, electoral lists etc. Volunteers from a social vulnerable position also contribute, each with their own specific needs and requirements. We have volunteers who are not always allowed or able to take on too great a workload, since they will need to recuperate for a couple of days afterwards. Recently someone with ASD joined us. If there are any questions or problems, the organisation involved can always get in contact with the mentor. Some do voluntary work at the centre itself, others, whom you perhaps seldom see or hear, do a huge amount of work from home.

Over the last few months, we have increasingly been confronted with people out of work or on sick leave who need to be individually mentored by a volunteer. Some take this task seriously, others only show up monthly to ask for their hours. In the past, Rik supervised two trainees who still had to finish their secondary school. With one trainee this did not go well and proceedings had to be interrupted prematurely, but cooperation with the second one went very smoothly. ‘She scanned the census from the year 04 of the French Republic for the province of Brabant in its entirety and digitally tagged it, so now the files are accessible for the municipality, canton by canton’. In our documentation centre she learned to work with software such as Microsoft Access and Excel. Currently she is working at a human resource office where she does the input of staff working in shifts.

#### A variety of volunteers, a variety of hours, but equal Treatment

Rik, in early retirement, has for years been a trade union representative, so he is well equipped to deal with different characters. He almost does it without thinking; it is largely up to the volunteer to decide what exactly and how much they are planning to do.

#### Hunger for knowledge – Testimony of heritage volunteer Natalia

Natalia is 56, from Russia, and she has been living in Antwerp for 17 years. The last 7 years she has been working as a volunteer at various organisations: for Family Solidarity (now i-mens), the Permeke Library, Museum Plantin-Moretus and currently she is occupied at the Red Star Line Museum and the Documentation and Study Centre for Family History in Merksem.



*Volunteers in action in the Documentation and Study Centre for Family History at Merksem.*

*© Documentation and Study Centre for Family History at Merksem*

Via her Dutch course she established contact with the Red Star Line and became a host- volunteer on busy days. She contacted the Documentation Centre herself, after she saw a vacancy on 'vrijwilligerswerk.be'. She helps to select old documents, scans them and sorts them in a folder on computer. She is looking for voluntary work in a heritage centre because she is keen to learn about history and traditions. 'I am 56 and at my age during these times of Covid I cannot find a job. Just being at home and doing nothing is not an option as far as I am concerned, I need to be occupied. That is why I am working as a volunteer, but it is important that the work is interesting'.

#### **Contact**

[www.centrumfamiliegeschiedenis.be](http://www.centrumfamiliegeschiedenis.be)

**'As far as I am concerned, everyone is equal, so I do not even consider whether they are social vulnerable or not. Everyone volunteers according to their own capacities. If it is only for two hours, so be it, if it is a whole day, so much the better. Even simple tasks need to be done. The appreciation remains the same.'**

## ‘Telling my [migration] story is important.’

### Red Star Line Museum



**Samuel Pinellos** is responsible for embedding language practice opportunities in the **Red Star Line Museum**. One of the practice opportunities they offer is the position of reception volunteer.



**Nadia Babazia** is a museum public worker. In 2019 she worked closely together with a group of Moroccan women for the temporary exhibition ‘Destination Sweetheart’.

The story of the Red Star Line is used to talk about migration today. ‘We do our utmost to relate this historic event to the present; the interchange of migratory heritage has a central position in this narrative. As an inner-city museum we think it is very important to connect with the city and its citizens. Volunteering plays a key part in all this’, says Samuel.

#### Focal points

They have only just started supervising volunteers who want to practice their Dutch. Nevertheless, Samuel, from his experiences during the festival ‘Zomer van Antwerpen’ (Summer in Antwerp), can give some indications. ‘A close supervision is of the utmost importance.’ The first time round a new volunteer usually accompanies a buddy, someone who is familiar with the job. ‘We take ample time to get to know the volunteers properly and to make them feel welcome in the museum. We walk with them to familiarize them with the museum, to give them time and space to identify with the migration stories from then and now. It is very important that they realize the museum is about them.’ Furthermore, Samuel is in regular contact with the volunteers to find out how their day has been. This is important, especially for foreign language newcomers. ‘Some will say, yes, I have taken it all in, I’ve understood everything’, when in fact that is not the case. You need to check; “just go over again what you have to do?” - only then can you be sure whether the person has grasped it. Indeed, that is just part of voluntary work; it is not always a success story’. There are other requirements: ‘we need the full commitment of our staff to the broad idea that social vulnerable groups should be fully involved. At the same time the staff should not expect all volunteers to be equally capable of taking on tasks or to be equally alert or quick.’



*Two receptionist volunteers in conversation © Samuel Pinillos*

### Partner organisations and lasting contacts

‘Full cooperation with reliable partners can help a lot’. Samuel, for instance, works closely with NT2 partners and LIGO (formerly Open School). ‘We are setting up a project in which foreign language newcomers follow classes in the museum about voluntary work and about the museum itself, so that they are fully immersed in the environment. Subsequently, they can put these lessons into practice as host or hostess. They might, for instance, take up a place in the exhibition area and relate their story - this is a good way to involve them completely within the workings of the museum. We must not get paternalistic about it or act as though we are doing them a favour. In point of fact, their presence here is an extra bonus for us, and the museum becomes part of them.’

**From the historical building of the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp, nearly 2 million people left between 1873 and 1934, in search of a better life in North America. Via the personal stories from these migrants you can follow their paths.**

### Overcoming thresholds

Nadia follows a similar strategy and looks out for long-term cooperation with volunteers and partner organisations within her inclusive projects. The aim is to give people with a migration history the floor. For the exhibition ‘Destination Sweetheart’ she has found a group of Moroccan women via an external organisation. ‘They usually met together at midday Friday, so I joined them for a period. We chatted about marriage, love, dating, arriving in Belgium and past memories’. Then I deliberately approached them. ‘The museum might well have been a psychological threshold, like: “Is this place something for us?” In the beginning, before they had ever visited the museum it was certainly not their chosen terrain, we had to build bridges and I tried to clarify: ‘this is a museum, it deals with migration in the past, but also with the present. I only seldom visited the museum with them. As I said, I usually met them on their terrain. But obviously there comes a moment when a bridge must be made with the museum.’

### The importance of heritage

Workshops have been held and trips organised to the Story House (Het Verhalenhuis) in Rotterdam where they had an opportunity to talk to Moroccan women who had donated their story to this institution. ‘And it was at this precise moment that awareness and pride took root: “telling my (migration) story is important in putting a face on history and passing it on to the following generations” - whereas people usually consider their own story as trivial: “how could this be interesting?”. As a result, three Moroccan immigrants have donated their life story to the temporary exhibition ‘Destination Sweetheart’.

### Long-term participation projects

Nadia is looking forward to inviting the women to come in person and bring their story with them during the exhibition. ‘Via participation projects I myself and the participants are trying to evolve further and consider how this journey might expand and grow into something more than simply someone telling their life story and us staging it? How can we make sure that the persons involved gain something out of all this and get recognition for their tales. How can we broaden their world when they only take part once in the process of an exhibition? We try to keep an eye open and watch out for specific talents, perhaps we can use them in some other way within our organisation, to broaden the museum community.’

### Contact

[www.redstarline.be](http://www.redstarline.be)

**‘We must not get paternalistic about it and act as though we are doing them a favour. Their presence here is an added bonus for us, and, in turn, the museum becomes part of them.’**

## ‘A personal approach works best.’

### GUM and EVUG



**Pauline van der Zee** has been curator of the **Ethnographic Collection of the University of Ghent (EVUG)** since 2009. The collection includes non-western objects accumulated since 1825 by some of Ghent’s professors. This ethnographic collection is now part of **GUM (the Museum Ghent University)**, which was inaugurated in October 2020. It is a merger of the various academic museums, to be found at various locations in and around town. The independent working of these museums has ceased due to this fusion. The academic heritage collection will now be moved to a depot.

Pauline organizes research projects and public events for which she tries to cooperate with source organisations in and around Ghent. Pauline applies three core principles to reach and involve everyone successfully within a community: to keep an open mind, make personal contacts and give personal attention.

#### **Europalia Indonesia: a warm community fills the exhibition**

By having an open attitude Pauline creates room for the special capacities people have, and this results in creative, new initiatives and ad hoc co-operation. During the art festival ‘Europalia Indonesia’ in 2017, she started up a project, together with Indonesian students and the Indonesian community in and around Ghent. These volunteers took on a large slice of the exhibition’s organisation. They staged a spectacular party at the opening of the exhibition in the Cultural centre in the Zebrastraat. In addition, they took care of a guided tour in the botanical gardens of Ghent University, they had students talking about Indonesian plants starting from their own cultural point of view. On the Ghent Bicentennial Community Day they did catering for a food festival, with Indonesian snacks, musical entertainment and a traditional dance for the visitors. ‘It was like a warm bath and that is how it goes in a community; you involve one individual and before you know it you involve the whole community, since everyone is in contact with everyone else’.

People from a social vulnerable background also got involved in the exhibition. ‘But who do you meet first? Obviously people who are not in a social vulnerable position. So, my feeling is that you can only reach this second group by engaging people from the first category’. A personal approach works best, soon you are in touch with those who ‘can participate with your ideas and who would like to give more structure, with pride and a new meaning to their life’.

This is especially the case in cultures with a strong oral tradition. Word of mouth works a lot better than a call for volunteers via flyers and posters. Finally, it is important to invest energy and attention into the volunteer project. 'Try and be genuine in your interest, these people hanker for attention, so give it them. It might take more time to reach the volunteers, true, but showing this interest is an asset, I see it as something that can grow into something beautiful, I certainly don't regard it as a waste of time'.

**'Who do you meet first? Obviously people who are not in a social vulnerable position. So, my feeling is that you can reach the second group only by engaging people from the first category'**

### Object handling

Object handling is a method where the therapeutic value of objects occupies centre stage. Touching objects, connecting with other people via objects or 'being occupied with objects' yields positive results as far as general wellbeing is concerned. Her various projects in combination with the resource communities have given Pauline a lot of insight and connections. 'You develop an eye for the right things, through practice.' In 2016 during a project on Heritage Day, inhabitants of various neighbourhoods in Ghent were asked to think about rituals, both close to home and further afield. This was in cooperation with LECA (Landelijk Expertisecentrum voor Cultuur van Alledag) and another nine organisations. People with a migratory background talked about objects from non-western collections. Via contacts within this community Pauline encountered someone who suffered mentally. Working with traditional stories, objects and rituals had a therapeutic effect.

### The power of the language

Pauline remarks that stories differ depending on the language in which they are told. When someone with a migrant background narrates in their own language, the tale is much more vivid and the facial expression a lot richer. 'Telling the story in their own language, people go back to the essence. Their mother tongue gives them a kind of security'. Especially with volunteers from a social vulnerable background it is important to make them feel at ease and create a feeling of safety. People are moved by stories. In Africa raconteurs-storytellers are considered as custodians of oral tradition and history.

### Making stories accessible

Pauline prefers to work with people of the same origin as the object, when describing and digitalising the collection. Artefacts collected during colonial times thereby acquire a polyphonic character. Trainees and students who have family members with a migratory background are asked to look out for personal stories with regard to the heritage objects within the collection. 'In this way we get to know more about the perception of the community and what the objects mean for a specific culture. For instance, the father of one of our trainees was educated in China as an accountant using an abacus. The father told us that in the eighties contests were held to see which was faster; a digital device or the abacus? Sometimes the latter won. This is a nice bit information - one won't find it in the literature'.



*The display cabinet by 'ambassador' Kiem Ferrijanto Setijoso made for the exhibition 'Hidden Rituals' on the occasion of Heritage Day (Erfgoeddag) in 2016. © GUM*



*Ambassadors and organizers from de exhibition 'Hidden Rituals' (Verborgen Rituelen) on the occasion of Heritage Day (Erfgoeddag) in 2016 (<https://youtu.be/frG2-c5RvYU>), a production by Ine Van den Heede, trainee from the section Eastern Languages and Culture, can still be accessed.*



**Photo left:**

*Subtitle: Regular volunteer Griot Tshitenge in action on 'Science Day' at Parkbos in Ghent. Griot Tshitenge was ambassador for the collection of Congolese objects of the ethnographical collection. He is an inspiration for the trainees. <https://www.ipg.ugent.be/nl/blog/%E2%80%9Cvoices-past%E2%80%9D-tussen-object-herinnering-en-identiteit>  
© GUM*

**Contact**

[www.gum.gent/nl/deelcollectie-etnografische-verzamelingen](http://www.gum.gent/nl/deelcollectie-etnografische-verzamelingen)

## ‘We have a very wide voluntary working group.’

### M Leuven



**David Somers** is volunteering coordinator for **Museum M in Leuven** (Louvain). The museum has grown out of an 18<sup>th</sup> century ‘cabinet of curiosities’ in the townhall of Louvain. Apart from the permanent historic collection there are regular temporary exhibitions putting old masters as well as modern artist’s work on display.

David has a background within social work, which is a big advantage when coordinating some 100 volunteers, to be found in the many sections of the museum. ‘Working with volunteers is really my main task and takes up most of my time, because we have an enormously wide voluntary working group.’ Volunteers support our staff, back stage, for administrative tasks, the print room and the library, and at the same time they take care of welcoming visitors and support during special events. Each volunteer is monitored in their task by a member of staff responsible for the content, David makes adjustments and gives advice where extra support is necessary.

This interaction gives room for the museum to coach volunteers with difficult access to the labour market, for instance volunteers who are psychologically vulnerable or with a burn-out.

#### Positive effect

In M Louvain everyone can start as a volunteer if there are places available, but at the moment there is a waiting list. After the initial interview a work package and job description is set up and expectations formulated. The volunteer can decide for him/herself how much to disclose about their vulnerability and how this can be communicated to the organisation. This works well for people who have not been able to work for days, months or even years because of their health. They get an energy boost since they can give something in return. If it does not work out, there are scores of other voluntary tasks in the museum where they can help. But it can happen that all of a sudden a volunteer simply packs in, and that really annoys David. On the other hand, there are volunteers who have found a regular paid job after their volunteering work at the M. They will tell you: ‘Through this work I regained my confidence. I went to apply for jobs and I found one.’

#### *Creating structural language practice for foreign language newcomers*

During events this summer they have worked ad hoc with foreign language newcomers. The museum would like to structurally embed foreign language speakers in their voluntary team; for many tasks, such as in the library, the print room, etc. a good command of Dutch language is necessary. On the other hand, this task does not offer a lot of practice, it is mostly independent work. At the moment M Louvain together with organisations like Refu Interim are reviewing how this can best be approached.

Drawing up a plan for foreign language newcomers is essential for David. The aim is that they not only take on new tasks, but that they also come into contact with the museum and the staff. 'What in fact defines a museum? This concept is clear to us, but it might not be the case for those with a migrant background.'

'What in fact defines a museum? This concept is clear to us, but it might not be the case for people with a migrant background.'

### The advantages of Covid

Even Covid had some positive effects. We are now trying to speed up the switch to digital voluntary work from home. Up to now this was limited to volunteers who already had computer skills, for instance to take on administrative tasks, digitalisation of the library and the print room. In addition, David has found time to send an enquiry to all of the volunteers to sample their degree of satisfaction regarding volunteer work within the museum. To conclude he remarks: 'It is now clear to me that (because that I know that a particular person might have more problems than first assumed and that they might need more support.'

### Contact

[www.mleuven.be](http://www.mleuven.be)

## ‘Heritage has been a catalyst.’

### OpgewekTienen (‘Cheerful Tienen’)



**Philippe Liesenborghs** is chair and co-founder of the citizen’s movement **Opgewek Tienen**. They are involved in a range of projects which strengthen social coherence in Tienen. Among others heritage projects.

‘**OpgewekTienen** organizes events that promote neighbourhood initiatives and strengthen social coherence within the town’. Despite the fact they are not a heritage organisation they quickly came into contact with the heritage sector because of the way they have involved themselves in social awareness and social cohesion in the locality. They brought tatty giant puppets back to life by involving a team of volunteers to stitch and sew and act as bearers. ‘That was the start and the rest followed. For example, a network emerged that set up among other things, a meeting place (Pand 10), allotments, neighbourhood and village games and contests. Heritage was the catalyst.’ The giants are part of the five yearly parade Kweikersparade) on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October during the

town of Tienen’s celebration - created by ‘Opgewek Tienen’ in cooperation with the town of Tienen.

#### Drawing limits and borders

‘Some volunteers have been through an emotionally difficult time and, partly via us, they have discovered a new purpose in life and have managed to find their feet again. They now form part of a group and some even take on serious commitments.’

‘Opgewek Tienen’ manages to engage volunteers with a vulnerable background (people living in poverty, with a burn-out, psychological vulnerability, autism). This inclusive side is deeply anchored within their DNA. In the past, various aid and support organisations attracted volunteers, but there was a lack of long-term guidance. The team of volunteers realised they had not the necessary skills and know-how to deal with a range of vulnerabilities. Philippe stresses the fact that as a voluntary organisation you do not necessarily need to have an inclusive voluntary team, you can still aim at an inclusive public. ‘Trying to make your own voluntary team more inclusive is a difficult path, to follow’. Besides it is not fair to compare a team of volunteers with a team operating in a professional context. With professionals the team is quite often uniform, with collaborators from a similar background and with a similar profile. When someone does not perform properly or is not accepted in the group, that person will leave the team. ‘With volunteers it is often more difficult to reach a consensus; you learn to live with each other’s differences and you realise that people see things very differently’.



*Giants Jan and Mie during 'Kweiker'day in 2017.*

### Open and free

The organisation is open and free. 'You will always find someone willing to lead a group, and we try to use a rota system to avoid a fixed structure.' Through organising ad hoc projects together with local societies, the volunteers are open to new initiatives and target groups. A good example of such a cooperation, 'Erm 'n Erm' (Arm in Arm) is an organisation in which people in poverty take the floor, and were trained to become bearer of the giants. Some of them today still form part of the voluntary group, or in another branch.

### Positive impact

Voluntary work has helped some find a new purpose in life: 'People who had been through an emotionally difficult time and, partly via us, have managed to find their feet again. They now form part of a group and some have even taken on serious commitments. Other volunteers are students who have only just finished their studies and come to us to gain experience - which they can put on their cv. Everyone tries to gain something from it, for their own sake, and that is not a bad thing, it should not accrue solely the organisation.' So, 'Opgewekt Tienen' continues to work with a variety of groups in a social vulnerable position.

And they feel a positive effect: 'I think is an added bonus... in the sense that one becomes more relevant as an organisation and you are able to reach a broader public.'

### Contact

[www.opgewektienen.org](http://www.opgewektienen.org)

### Note from the translator:

The 'Kweikers'parade' commemorates a 1000 years of City Charter. This event is regularly repeated.



*Volunteers from the Guild of Giants dress Giant Jan*

## ‘Our aim is to get them completely ready for the labour market.’

### Local Heritage group Wesalia II Wuustwezel



**Jan de Meester** is chair of the Heritage Group Wesalia II at Wuustwezel. Their aim is to get to know as much as possible about the local history and folklore of the area and its inhabitants, for it to be collected together and stored for prosperity.

In cooperation with Education for those with Special Needs (Dutch: BUSO) and the local council of Berkenbeek and Wuustwezel, pupils with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) are busy assembling the archives of local societies and the commune.

#### How did it all start?

During his time as chair of the local history society, Jan became department manager of tourism and heritage in Wuustwezel. His position in the library brought him into contact with

young volunteers with ASD. Since the heritage society had an old, paper archive, the society decided it would be an idea to supervise a group of youngsters for a year to digitalise the archive.

#### A win-win situation

They often like the work they are doing and the skills they acquire are useful for the labour market. ‘One of the students who was with us last year, is now working for a solicitor in Antwerp where he is also responsible for digitalizing material ... and a number of students are working in different town archives to help with similar projects, which is very gratifying for all concerned.’ Just take the example of our local history society and the mass of public records which were digitalized by the students. Without them, we would never have got round to digitalising all that material. And the same goes for other cultural organisations in Wuustwezel who can now get on with digitalisation, thanks to the fact that the municipality has made its infrastructure available.

#### How did things progress? Was it easy? Did you find solutions?

‘Well, the root problem is that the work supervisor of the project has to come from within the organisation, so from the local heritage group. I noticed how time and again things would go wrong.’ The youngsters could manage the work, but communication between the generally older supervisors and the young autistic pupils was often difficult. ‘The pupils felt they did not get enough feedback pointing out what was expected from them, or they felt nervous because someone was constantly looking over their shoulder’. The volunteers from the local heritage society simply did not have enough knowledge on how to deal with ASD, or how to support them. The term ASD covers various forms of autism: ‘and this calls for many different approaches, doesn’t it.’

### Working together helps

Together with BUSO Berkenbeek and the municipality they were able to work out an alternative. For pupils who have finished the normal school subjects at 18, an extra year was introduced offering practical subjects to prepare them for the labour market. Within that extra year BUSO created the course 'digitalising'. The municipality with subsidies from the

**'A number of students are working in different town archives to help with similar projects, which is very gratifying for all concerned.'**

King Boudewijn fund and the province, has provided for premises and material. 'My position in the local government is a great advantage; they provide a lot of logistic help, and that is more than necessary.'

Each year, half a dozen pupils, accompanied by a teacher, come together each week and digitalise the documents of the local heritage group or the municipality. Jan is responsible for supplying new material. They also meet with the local heritage group to decide what should be digitalised first and who does what. That takes up quite a lot of time and it is important that all volunteers within the local heritage group are fully behind the initiative, so we are all on the same wavelength.

### Slowly and steady

'Of course, this digitalising work goes less quickly than we would have done it. But you must give pupils time, be patient and trust that it will be okay. While a job student would have done it quicker, he might pack in after a month and what then? We simply have to weigh things up.'

### Contact

[www.heemkundewuustwezel.be](http://www.heemkundewuustwezel.be)

## ‘Of course, we are the museum where anything goes.’

### Museum Dr. Guislain

**Kristine Timperman**, once worked for the psychiatric hospital, but for the last 20 years she has been working at the museum. She is currently responsible for the volunteers, public activities, and community-projects. The **Dr. Guislain Museum** is connected with the psychiatric centre Dr. Guislain as a ‘lieu de mémoire’ or memorial site. The museum holds a unique collection of cultural heritage artefacts connected to the history of psychiatry and care, but also on art and madness.

Welcoming volunteers from a social vulnerable position, and specifically mental vulnerability is a logical and deliberate choice for the museum. Our broad volunteering work has organically grown with the change over from psychiatric hospital to museum. ‘We are a museum about psychiatry: if we don’t work with (social vulnerable) people and work inclusively, I honestly would not know who would give a good example.’ Putting Covid regulations aside, they welcome about 50 volunteers, take care of reception, run the museum café, take on administrative tasks and offer guided tours. ‘We have a lot of volunteers who have been coming here for years, which is a good thing; it means they feel comfortable and find volunteering useful.’ Kristine conducts job interviews with volunteers, manages administrative business and maintains contact with the supervisors. The daily job guidance of the volunteers is taken care of by the staff. For some volunteers the aim is,



© Museum Dr. Guislain

by a step at a time, to return him/her to a regular job, for others ever functioning within the normal paid labour market is highly unlikely. Whatever, within the museum they will perform useful work.

### Meeting a volunteer

The volunteer must meet two basic requirements: 'The theme of the museum interests you, you need to feel okay with it, and you need to recognize the importance of the museum.' Moreover, we expect a minimum commitment of 8 hours a week from each volunteer. Working together with different partners from Ghent there is no need for the museum to place ads or a call for new volunteers. During an introductory talk, often in the company of a supervisor, the tasks

*'We are a museum about psychiatry: if we don't work with social vulnerable people and work inclusively, I honestly would not know who would give a good example?'*

are tailored for the volunteer, taking into account his/her vulnerabilities and interests. 'People present themselves at their best during a first talk; it is only when they start working that you notice the problems and difficulties. You need to take that into account.' Sensitive issues that come up during that first conversation, are not passed on to colleagues, unless difficulties occur. 'This is a matter of professional confidentiality – of which there is a lot'.

### Supervise with empathy and patience

After doing Social Studies, Kristine herself worked in the Psychiatric Hospital Dr. Guislain - an experience she can put to good use when working with volunteers. 'My colleagues often say "you must have a lot of patience, I would not be able to do it. ... Some are scared having people around who behave oddly or show erratic behaviour. But for me, that is psychiatry'. Even so, the museum is proud to work with volunteers from a social vulnerable background. 'We are after all the museum where anything goes. And the public likes it too that we give these people a fair chance. It fits our identity'. But there are limits, if someone constantly underperforms the cooperation is stopped.



© Museum Dr. Guislain

'Once we came across one of our volunteers sleeping at the entrance'. It is a constant weighing up of how tolerant we can be. As a supervisor you also need to show empathy. 'A lot of people don't understand how difficult it is for some to even get out of bed or to stay off the alcohol.' For assistance on the work floor she can count on the support of paid receptionists who have followed courses in social studies and sometimes have work experience. 'We don't leave our volunteers to fend for themselves.'

### 'I have come a long way' - Testimony of multi-deployable volunteer Yvonne

Yvonne was an academic research worker at the University of Ghent and the VUB (Flemish University of Brussels) within the faculty of Language and Literature. Ten years ago she suffered from a major depression. She received treatment, and is not supposed to take on stressful jobs. During her treatment, she visited the Dr. Guislain hospital, an experience which made a profound impression. 'You are so touched by the art and artworks that you start reflecting on the difference between pathology and normality within yourself. At first you are so sick that it seems that the world around you is sick too. But looking at art you get a shock; you recognize the fictional and the real within art and (sick) people. It is as though you are looking in a mirror.'



*‘What intrigues me in the work of Joris Coudeville’s “Self-portrait as prince Carnaval” is the self-irony, the audacity and simplicity of a few broad strokes, which leave you pondering on the brink between humanity and madness –  
Yvonne*

### Making resilient progress

Yvonne likes to train her social flexibility ‘by dealing with different people, working in a team and having to meet deadlines’. She practices her mental suppleness with online conversations in French. ‘I have a medical condition, but I’m making progress, and it’s very nice to see that reflected within your work. I can only advise someone in a similar situation, to persevere. It takes its time, I still go to the psychiatrist for check-ups and I still have to take my prescribed dose of anti-depressants, but it is doable. I have come a long way; I couldn’t speak anymore, nor move, I was totally blocked, but now I can express myself in another language even in front of a screen. Five years ago that would have been impossible.’

### Contact

[www.museumdrguislain.be](http://www.museumdrguislain.be)

### Multi-tasking

Yvonne decided to register as a volunteer and she could start working as a public guide, she is a compulsive talker and likes chatting with the visitors. Later she started working in the library doing registration and archival work, she translates and researches for exhibitions, and beside this she trains new volunteers for the museum. In this way her workload has grown considerably over the years. Each week she puts in 18 hours, divided over half days. ‘I find it most enjoyable to alternate my research or translation work with reception.’ The latter takes a lot of energy: ‘The most exhausting work is at reception.’ She does not come to the museum to relax, for her it has the feel of a real work floor. ‘I am part of a dynamic whole, which gives me a feeling of usefulness.’

## 'It requires a lot of tailor-made solutions, but it's worth it.'

### Heritage cell 'Kempens Karakter'



**Jeroen Janssens** is general coordinator of the heritage cell '**Kempens Karakter**', a cooperation involving 12 municipalities in the area of the Kempen in the province of Antwerp.

'Kempens Karakter' functions as a re-integration location for psychologically vulnerable or disabled people. More recently family replacement home for people with an intellectual disability 'De Troon' and home guidance service for people with autism 'Het Raster' have also become involved. As a result, about fifty volunteers from a social vulnerable background have worked, sometimes for years, for the heritage section. They usually come one day a week to the office and make old photographs, films and newspapers digitally accessible.

#### Tailor-made

In addition to making it accessible, each item is further given a classification card with title, collection, keyword and description.

Every volunteer has different capacities. One or two can describe a photograph and do some independent research, 'but for most of the volunteers I have worked with, we need to provide standardised sequences from already existing material, which they can fall back on.' This comes from the selection process: 'De Troon' matches the volunteers with the heritage cell on the basis of their interests. Volunteers who enjoy feeding in computerised data end up at the heritage cell. Some volunteers regard the volunteer work as their job, they realize they will never get into the regular labour market, nevertheless they like doing something useful for society. So, the aim of the reintegration process is not necessarily to (re)enter the labour market, although it did work for one volunteer.

#### Gut feeling

The volunteers make a valuable contribution to the heritage section. 'Through our volunteers, thousands of objects are now online.' Still, it demands a great effort on the part of the organisation and its staff to offer tailor-made supervision. 'One is confronted with such a variety of problems, and as an organisation we don't have the backup.' True, the partner organisation gives us an advance briefing by way of caution, 'but the daily monitoring relies chiefly on gut-feeling and learning by practice'. We have volunteers who cannot take the hustle and bustle and prefer less social contact. Some make this very clear, but usually there is no direct feedback or communication from the volunteer. The staff learns to interpret the volunteer. Jeroen gives us an example: 'We quickly notice if something is up; it could be trouble at home or they might have just bumped into someone in the street who they have been avoiding. Such things can result in a lot of mumbling and grumbling or sudden outbursts.'



*At the annual network and thanksgiving meeting, we invite all involved with heritage in our region, including all our volunteers (edition 2019).*

Having a fixed place in the office and a contact person can provide a bit of peace and tranquility. 'We will persevere along this route as long as it is feasible for us to give proper supervision.' It certainly requires time and constant monitoring. But the added value for the organisation *and* the volunteer make it all worthwhile.

**Contact**

[www.kempenskarakter.be](http://www.kempenskarakter.be)

[www.kempenserfgoed.be](http://www.kempenserfgoed.be)

**Note from the translator**

'Kempen' is a region of Flanders, in the north-east of Belgium.

## 'In fact, my dream partly came true.'

### Familiekunde Vlaanderen region Ostend



Bernard Legrand is chair of the documentation centre **Familiekunde Vlaanderen Region Ostend**. Volunteers commit themselves to making a mass of genealogical information accessible online.

It has long been Bernard's dream to incorporate the indexes from the books of their rich library, which contains more than 15.000 books, in a databank. In theory this is not so difficult, but in practice it means a lot of work. Bernard has been on pension for a couple of years. 'I was employed in a secondary school for pupils with disabilities; the deaf, the blind and those with ASD. For the latter, the school relied on exercises on Access, and the drills turned out to be rather repetitive. ... So, I thought, this could be something for them; typing in an index'. Later Bernard came into contact with a project for adults with autism. They were looking for work these people could do at their own pace and in a suitable setting.

For those with a mental disability this often involves routine work (e.g. folding papers, ...). People with autism, however, are of average intelligence; they are as clever as we are, but because of their disability a daily working environment is out. The supporting centre was pleased with the computer work from the heritage centre which Bernard could provide.

#### Typing in 100.000 names without mistakes

Bernard supervised the copying of indexes from the books in the documentation centre. He brought them in batches himself to the workstation where the previous ones were already done. Four people managed to put in 100.000 names in one year. 'Not one mistake was made, everything was correctly done, I didn't even have to check it.' For the moment we have about 2.700.000 family names in the digital database. 'Indeed my dream from a couple of years ago had materialised, largely thanks to the modest project we had set up.' After a while this cooperation came to an end. The workstation asked for remuneration for the use of work materials, but the documentation centre did not have the means. Bernard still hopes to start up a similar cooperation. 'It is my aim to digitalise our 500.000 obituaries, perhaps through projects subsidised by the government of the Flemish region, is this a possibility?'

#### Modus vivendi

The documentation centre has managed to get reinforcement from a young volunteer, someone who could not find a place in the regular labour market. He came as a trainee and he stayed on as such, but with a remuneration. 'This volunteer is particularly skilled in IT. We have a fleet of about 12 computers, and he provides the necessary software and does the maintenance work. For instance he has installed a virtual server, and improves the website and the database. When he completes a certain task, he reports it via email and often he makes suggestions for improvement of his own accord. The cooperation is excellent.



*Volunteer day March 2020 in the Familiekunde Vlaanderen Region Ostend.documentation centre .*

It is important that only one person gives the assignments. And he feels comfortable with us. The situation is beneficial both ways: it is an opportunity for our documentation centre to follow the evolution in the IT world, while our volunteer has not only a worthwhile daily occupation, but also an opportunity to develop further at his own rhythm in IT - with a social input.' In a way Bernard has found a modus vivendi to cooperate within the best possible conditions: 'Perhaps from my professional background, I can judge the situation.'

I think you always need to take the kind of disability into account. Indeed, at present we can see an evolution within the supporting centres for adults on work projects. More and more they look out for useful and appropriate work tailored to the capabilities of the person with a disability. And it is of paramount importance to have this insight when employing people with a disability...'

**Contact**

[www.fv-oostende.be](http://www.fv-oostende.be)

## ‘No volunteer should be employed as a mere token.’

### Heritage Cell Bruges



**Ina Verrept** works for **Erfgoedcel Brugge** (Heritage cell Bruges), she regularly sets up projects for special target groups. At the moment she is occupied with recollection activities in care homes and with the collection of the Spermalie-institute (now the non-profit organisation vzw De Kade).

#### Evaluation process

The Spermalie-Institute is a school founded in 1836 for the visually and auditorily impaired. The institute has in its possession the library of Charles-Luis Carton, its founder, and also of a collection of tools used as an aid for the different school subjects. Once the collection had been inventoried by volunteers, an evaluation was made of the aids for the visually impaired by a group from differing backgrounds; art historians and educationalists – including some with a visual impair-

ment. They rated the collection with the help of a varied questionnaire. ‘As an art historian my heart just went out to older objects, real heritage stuff, in the classical sense of the word. But, you could see that these objects meant very little to the visually impaired, they could not connect with these things; on the contrary, with a braille typewriter, a machine which they had used themselves in the past, they could.’ Some had their doubts at first about a theoretical evaluation approach and really only got interested when theory made room for an exchange on practical experience. ‘Now you really have to *persuade* people, perhaps because they are on firmer ground than we are; those were my private thoughts’.

**‘It is important for a volunteer to be involved in a project that forms part of their environment, so they can reflect on how to share with others.’**

#### Presentation of the collection

In late May 2021 the collection is to be exhibited in Louvain (KADOC) and in Bruges (Arentshuis, Musea Brugge), under the title ‘The world within reach’. ‘The curators have chosen about 40 objects from the collection; aids for the visually impaired with the emphasis on emancipation of the blind. How in education these devices have enabled them to participate within society.’ Piet Devos and Tonia In den Kleef are curating the exhibition. Piet is very much involved in the history of education for the blind and inclusion, Tonia is committed to make museums and exhibitions accessible for this group. Peter de Cupere, an aroma-artist, inspired by the search for an alphabet for the blind, came up with the idea of creating a ‘fragrant’ alphabet, to accompany the exhibits. He worked together with seven voluntary ‘scent ambassadors’, people with a visual disability.



*An example of the aid-collection; the 'Picht' typewriter. The machine has a keyboard of six keys and a space key. By tapping one or more keys simultaneously, dots (letters in braille) are pressed into the paper.*

*Date: 1901-1950*

Some of them will take care of a restricted number of guided tours (Covid permitting) during the exhibition. So, listening, feeling and smelling will form part of the visit (following covid restrictions). Some of the volunteers, already mentioned, will share their experience with the machinery by audio headphones. 'It is important for a volunteer to be involved in a project that forms part of their personal environment, so they can reflect on how to share this with others.'

#### Hints

Ina emphasises that it is of the utmost importance that no volunteer should be used as a token. Everyone has their own personality, input and interest. It is self-evident for her that you take time for the project and the volunteers, that you show respect and remove any fear of saying the wrong thing.

#### Contact

[www.erfgoedcelbrugge.be/nl/projecten/collectie-spermalie](http://www.erfgoedcelbrugge.be/nl/projecten/collectie-spermalie)



*An image of the old school museum in Spermalie*

© vzw De Kade / Matthias Desmet

## 'We do not want to be a factory.'

Huis van Alijn



**Anne-Greet Denolf** is coordinator public activities, communication and volunteers.

**Liesa Rutsaert** is staff member for accessibility, participation and 'outreach'.

Visiting the **House of Alijn** in Ghent you are catapulted back into daily life and its traditions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

'**Huis van Alijn**' aims to be a place where everyone feels welcome. They are known for their inclusive work policy and their accessibility for various target groups within society. It aims at diversity and organizes exhibitions on everyday themes; Huis van Alijn is a low-threshold museum which attracts volunteers. Anne-Greet: 'We get a lot of spontaneous job requests and we always bear our volunteers in mind during our external communications on social media and on our website, to thank them for what they accomplish - and this not just during the week of the volunteer. We like to see ourselves as an organisation that is volunteer friendly, because without volunteers, no house of Alijn. As a result a number of intermediary organisations know us well and send us volunteers from re-integration schemes or with refugee status. Our name is to be found on the public data bank for voluntary work from the city of Ghent.'

'Our volunteering policy is based on our first priority: customization first. We don't have a fixed format for every voluntary job. Rather, we ask the prospective candidate about his or her preferences, and that might be something in a public-oriented domain or a job behind the computer.'

### Customization our first priority

Anne-Greet: 'In the museum everyone is welcome as volunteer on condition that they are fully motivated, show enthusiasm and that colleagues have space enough to provide an adequate supervision. We do not wish to be a factory with a surplus of voluntary workers.'



*Team photo of the volunteers © Willem Van Cauwenberghe*

‘Our volunteering policy is based on our first priority: customization first’. ‘We don’t have a fixed format for every voluntary job. Rather, we ask the prospective candidate about his or her preferences, and that might be something in a public-oriented domain or a job behind the computer.’ That is the starting point for a job description. We have – leaving covid aside – about 20 volunteers in the museum occupying themselves with the café, in the summer we have another 130 volunteers helping us during festivities. Liesa: ‘We don’t always know what is happening back-stage, but as organizers we are all too aware that some of our people are carrying a problematic past. We are part of their life without patronizing them, but when we detect a real problem, we can always refer them.’

#### A recognizable museum

Anne-Greet: ‘People recognize themselves in our activities and can associate with our collection’. This is also the case for one of our visually impaired guides. When she visited us with her school for the blind, her enthusiasm was immediate and afterwards she asked whether she could come and guide. ‘She used to have a newspaper shop, so she could add personal stories to the museum story.’

For instance; in the ‘happy room’ she tells visitors about the lottery tickets she has sold. On top of this, she described the route from the station to the Huis van Alijn and back for the blind and partially sighted.’

#### Dreams for the future

Anne-Greet and Liesa would like to offer more structured voluntary work for volunteers with special needs, but that takes careful monitoring and involves making choices: ‘We always find ourselves having to weigh things up; working with our partners there are lots of possibilities, but we have got to be realistic. Of course, we always hope that we shall see our dreams fulfilled in the next policy plan’.

#### Contact

[www.huisvanalijn.be](http://www.huisvanalijn.be)

## 'We're all in the same boat'

DSMG, documentation centre Ghent, consciously opts for inclusive volunteering



**Bert Vervae**t has already been active for 16 years as chair of DSMG, when he took up this post he placed his volunteers high on the agenda. This proved to be a wise choice, for under his supervision the DSMG-team has grown from four to the present 45 volunteers.

At the same time his colleague **Louis Gevaert**, became vice-chair, and together they are jointly responsible for the management and the voluntary work within the organisation.

Beside the 'regular' volunteers, Bert also works with volunteers from OBRA/BAKEN, while Louis is the contact person for people handed a community service within the organisation.

In the 'Groot Begijnhof' in Ghent, the non-profit organisation (NPO) DSMG (Centre for Documentation and Regional History Maurits Gysseling) runs a library and archive on the history of Ghent and the surrounding areas from 1970 onwards. While DSMG is best known as a historical and topical documentation centre, we were keen to find out more about their unique way of working with volunteers.

### A varied voluntary team

Bert and Louis have a shared vision of volunteer work; they feel a responsibility towards their fellow-beings within the community of Ghent. *"As an organisation which has received a lot from the City, we find it our duty to commit ourselves in return."* It is a path which Louis and Bert have chosen themselves, but fortune had a hand in it as well. Six years ago they were approached by OBRA/BAKEN NPO, also located at the Groot Begijnhof; they help adults with special needs to find a worthwhile recreational activity. In this way, a number of people have been referred to DSMG, indeed at present about 15 per cent of the team are people with a physical and mental impairment, and the long-term unemployed. At the same time there were those referred to the DSMG by the Ministry of Justice. Currently more than thirty people are active within the organisation who have been handed a community service order ranging from 80 to 400 hours. *"They have committed a crime. We don't always know precisely what. Some will tell us, but the majority doesn't"*, adds Louis.

A varied team, in other words, but no information is passed on to the other volunteers on the background of the new volunteers and/or those 'sentenced'. More often it is not even apparent to our employees who precisely is active on the basis of community service within the organisation. Louis: *"We don't inform our staff when someone new joins, they will notice in due time. It is only when people have left after a short working period that their co-workers realize that it might have been someone serving a community sentence."* It is the idea that people with a sentence get the same treatment as all other co-workers. There is no instructing our volunteers on how to behave towards those sent to us by the Ministry of Justice. According to Bert Vervae't this would be impossible, since everyone is and reacts differently; the first might be rather posh, a banker, say, with an educated background, the next person might be completely different. Thus, there is no sense in trying to write a manual for this group of employees. Most communication is informal and takes place during the communal coffee and lunch breaks. These are the moments when personal experiences are shared and friendships formed, and sometimes they serve to pass on important information. A man suffering from epileptic fits used such a moment to tell the team how he could best be helped when he had a bout.

### Everyone is welcome

Louis and Bert take a pride in all DSMG co-workers, and these are not just words, the result can clearly be seen in the annual 57-2018 report from the Heritage society 'De Oost-Oudburg' in which all volunteers are listed alphabetically. Bert: *"We are all in the same boat, we are all volunteers and in fact no one is boss."* Everyone is welcome, whether it be short-term or for a longer period or integrated in a project. It is essential that volunteers can work as independently as possible. Bert: *"People who carry responsibility for their own department are better motivated. We have experience with staff who have worked here for fifteen years with great enthusiasm, because they were allowed to run their own branch. Some come here for the social dimension it offers, they come here to escape their isolation. That's fine. As long as we can be there for someone, mean something for someone, it does not matter whether that person just pops round to have a coffee. The little work that is taken care of, is done, isn't it."* DSMG does not have a real policy for volunteers, if they had to summarize their mission in one sentence, it would be something like *'giving people work they enjoy doing'*. The volunteers should not always be occupied with the same tasks, variety is important and this also counts for those serving a community sentence. Louis: *"When they have had enough of copying and pasting, they can always take a broom or vacuum cleaner, they needn't ask permission."* So far, the workload of those in community service and the 'regular' volunteers supplement each other well. The experience of Bert and Louis is that the first group prefers doing light domestic work. This is great for the others - it leaves them with more time to file and manage the archive.

**DSMG**  
 een bron van  
**informatie**

**'Working with a varied team of volunteers has a lot of advantages. Each volunteer comes with his/her own expertise, network and personality, enriching the organisation.'**

### The total sum is still positive

It is Louis and Bert's deliberate choice to extend inclusive volunteering. On balance it has worked out very positive, which is not to deny that there have been challenging situations. Once a community service worker created difficulties for the organisation: *"He threatened us, tried to give us a negative image and contacted the labour inspection, the fire brigade and heritage protection to have us inspected. (...) In the end the report of Health and Safety was very positive, it allowed us to prove to the City Council that we were all in good order"*. Remember too, that the work output within the group can vary greatly. Louis: *"We have had those who started using their phone as soon as our back was turned, but others have shown initiative and have achieved more than expected. As long as the total sum remains positive, we shall continue working the way we do"*. Bert and Louis strongly believe in creating opportunities, and while it is not always a guaranteed success, that is not the end of the world. Bert: *"We had an autistic young person referred to us by BAKEN, he was only here a couple of hours and we could feel it coming - it was far too crowded here for him"*. Even if cooperation does not work out, as in this particular case, each meeting provides an opportunity for the volunteer as well as for DSMG.

Working with a varied team of volunteers has a lot of advantages. Each volunteer comes with his/her own expertise, network and personality, enriching the organisation. Within DSMG we have volunteers performing tasks which they used to do as their job. One of our former volunteers arrived here after a burn-out, two years later he was on the mend and ready to integrate fully in the labour market once more. This is exactly the mediating role Bert and Louis like to take on. *"We try and help people to develop their overall life, and I think we are reasonably successful. Within our organisation people forge friendships and there is a lot of camaraderie, these contacts can be enriching and of lasting influence"*.

### Contact

[www.dsmg.be](http://www.dsmg.be)

## Outro

During our search for best practices, we also encountered heritage organizations that try to involve people in socially vulnerable positions in their heritage (organization), but do not do this through voluntary functions. Lokeren's city museum, for example. Due to the (mandatory) school context of the OKAN youngsters, this does not fall under the voluntary work that this article focuses on. We will mention this example briefly, because it could inspire you to work with these young people in socially vulnerable positions.

Young people who have lived in Belgium for less than 12 months and who do not have a good command of Dutch, end up in a Welcome Class for Foreign Language Newcomers (OKAN). There they practice Dutch intensively for a year before entering secondary education. Every year the City Museum of Lokeren sets up an exhibition with these young people in collaboration with Vagevuur Open Jeugdwerk vzw and the OKAN teachers. It is an excellent way to work outside the school walls in a playful way with their new language and their talents. In previous years, for example, they worked on their favorite object from the museum collection or their favorite place in the city. This year the students were challenged to work out their biggest dreams in a suitcase that will then be displayed in the 'suitcases full of dreams' exhibition. The students between the ages of 12 and 18 also guide other non-native speakers through their exhibition. A serious challenge for those who have only been learning Dutch for a few months!

### Contact

[www.staging.lokeren.be/vrije-tijd/stadsmuseum-lokeren/okan-in-het-stadsmuseum](http://www.staging.lokeren.be/vrije-tijd/stadsmuseum-lokeren/okan-in-het-stadsmuseum)

## A Group project

This brochure was produced as part of the European Erasmus+ project 'Inclusive Museums' (inclusivemuseums.eu), in which Histories is one of five partners. The aim of this project is to exchange best practices on diversity and inclusion regarding the volunteer work of heritage organisations.

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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