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Erasmus+

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The project, part of the **Erasmus +**, which brought together **former ESC/EVS volunteers,** invited participants to reflect on how the European volunteering experience has contributed to developing greater awareness of the **importance of active citizenship.** Through the exchange of experiences, participants explored how their time in volunteering has influenced their involvement in the communities where they currently live and their sensitivity to the needs and challenges of their surroundings.

The project also promoted connections with the local community through the organisation of a **"Human Library**", an event where former volunteers shared their personal experiences with the aim of highlighting the impact of the ESC and encouraging new forms of active participation at local and/or European level.

Furthermore, the project sought to strengthen and expand the **network of European former volunteers** by creating connections among people with experience in international projects who are interested in continuing to participate in initiatives, training opportunities, and activities at European level. Finally, the meeting allowed participants to reconnect with their former projects and provided time for informal exchanges, as well as the opportunity to rediscover the city of Santander and the Cantabria region from a shared perspective.

FINAL EVENT

“Human Library”- Stories that cross boarders

ACTIVITY OBJECTIVE:

This activity invites participants to share their international volunteering experiences by becoming “living books”. Through sharing their own stories and engaging in dialogue with other participants and the local community, the activity promotes peer learning, empathy and reflection on the impact of the ESC, encouraging the exchange of experiences, challenges and learnings.

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1. Introduction

1. Introduce the concept of the **Human Library**: instead of borrowing books, participants will be able to "read" other people's stories through conversation.

1. Explain that each participant will become a **"living book"**, sharing their volunteering experience with the European Solidarity Corps.

3. Remind participants that the activity is based on **respect, active listening and curiosity**. Questions should come from genuine interest, always respecting each person's boundaries.

2. Preparation of the "Living Books"

1. Invite each participant to take a few minutes to **reflect** on their experience.
2. Ask them to prepare their "living book" in a **creative way**. They can choose the format that best represents their experience: a written story, a collage, a drawing, or any other artistic or narrative expression. The aim is to create a starting point for the conversation.

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3. If they wish, they can choose **a title** for their book that represents their story.

3. Reading of the "Living Books"

1. Place the "living books" in different spaces around the room where the event takes place.

2. Participants will take on the role of **"books"**, while external people from the local community will participate as **"readers"**, approaching them to listen to their stories.

3. The activity will be divided into **rounds**.

4. At the end of each round, invite the "readers" to rotate and discover new stories, allowing each "living book" to engage in dialogue with different people from the local community.

Tips for facilitatorsxs

Whenever possible, organise the activity in a space open to the local community. Opening the activity to people from outside the group encourages intercultural dialogue and increases the visibility of the ESC. It also strengthens the connection between the project and the local community, extending the project's impact beyond the group of participants themselves.

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4. Group Reflection

Bring the group back together. Facilitate a reflection by asking questions such as:

- *How was it to share your story with other people?*
- *How did you feel when listening to your peers' experiences?*
- *What common learnings emerged from the different experiences?*
- *What value does sharing personal experiences have in inspiring other people?*

5. Closing

Conclude by highlighting that **each volunteering experience is unique** and that every story brings valuable perspectives.
Sharing personal experiences not only helps participants make sense of what they have lived, but can also **inform and motivate others** to take part in mobility and solidarity experiences such as the ESC.

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FINAL RESULTS

Stories about Volunteering

This section brings together the stories created by our former ESC volunteers during the “Human Library” activity.

Through different creative formats – such as written stories, drawings, and collages – participants reflected on their European volunteering experiences and shared the learnings, challenges and most meaningful moments of their journeys.

These stories do not aim to represent all volunteering experiences, but rather offer personal perspectives on international mobility, intercultural learning, solidarity and personal development.

Together, they showcase the diversity of paths within the ESC and the impact that these experiences can have both on individuals and on their respective communities.

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Introduction, Jovana (Serbia)

"Santander is a city that will remain in the hearts of many young people (or at least they were young when they discovered La Marinera).

It was not the beaches, the mountains, the tortilla pinchos, the rabas, or the calimochos that stayed with them forever, but rather the people and the uniqe experiences they shared.

This book is filled with memories, hugs, smiles and friendships. So, pour yourself a glass of wine, make yourselves comfortable, and enjoy."

1. *Take the leap*, Marina (Italy)

"My story begins like so many others: with a little bit of fear, but also with a lot of "curiosità".

In 2024, I finished university and started thinking about how to enter the much-feared world of adulthood. I didn't feel like doing it at all; I felt a lot of pressure and saw only one possible option: working for a company in my hometown, probably the first one that offered me a position. This was because the world of productivity does not allow for pauses, nor does it leave any time to think about what one truly wants to do.

That was exactly when I decided to stop: everything was moving too fast, and I had no interest in passively enduring life. That was how I discovered the ESC, and it seemed like the best option to escape the cycle of obligations where you are always doing things, but never really taking the time to think.

I arrived in Santander in October 2024. At first, starting something completely new was a little difficult, but little by little I realised how beautiful it was to step away from the usual path and from my own comfort zone in order to learn a new language, discover a new place and make new friendships.

I shared this experience with wonderful people. I met the members of ONCE, where I carried out my volunteering, as well as other volunteers and friends. Each one of them taught me so much, including how to be happier and less attached to duties and obligations. Some taught me to be a little kinder, others a little braver and others more understanding towards those around me (and many, many other things).

After these eight wonderful months came to an end, I had to return to Italy because I needed to build my independence. However, the fear I had after university had already disappeared: today I feel fortunate to be able to start truly living my life, making my own choices and deciding for myself what I should and what I want to do."

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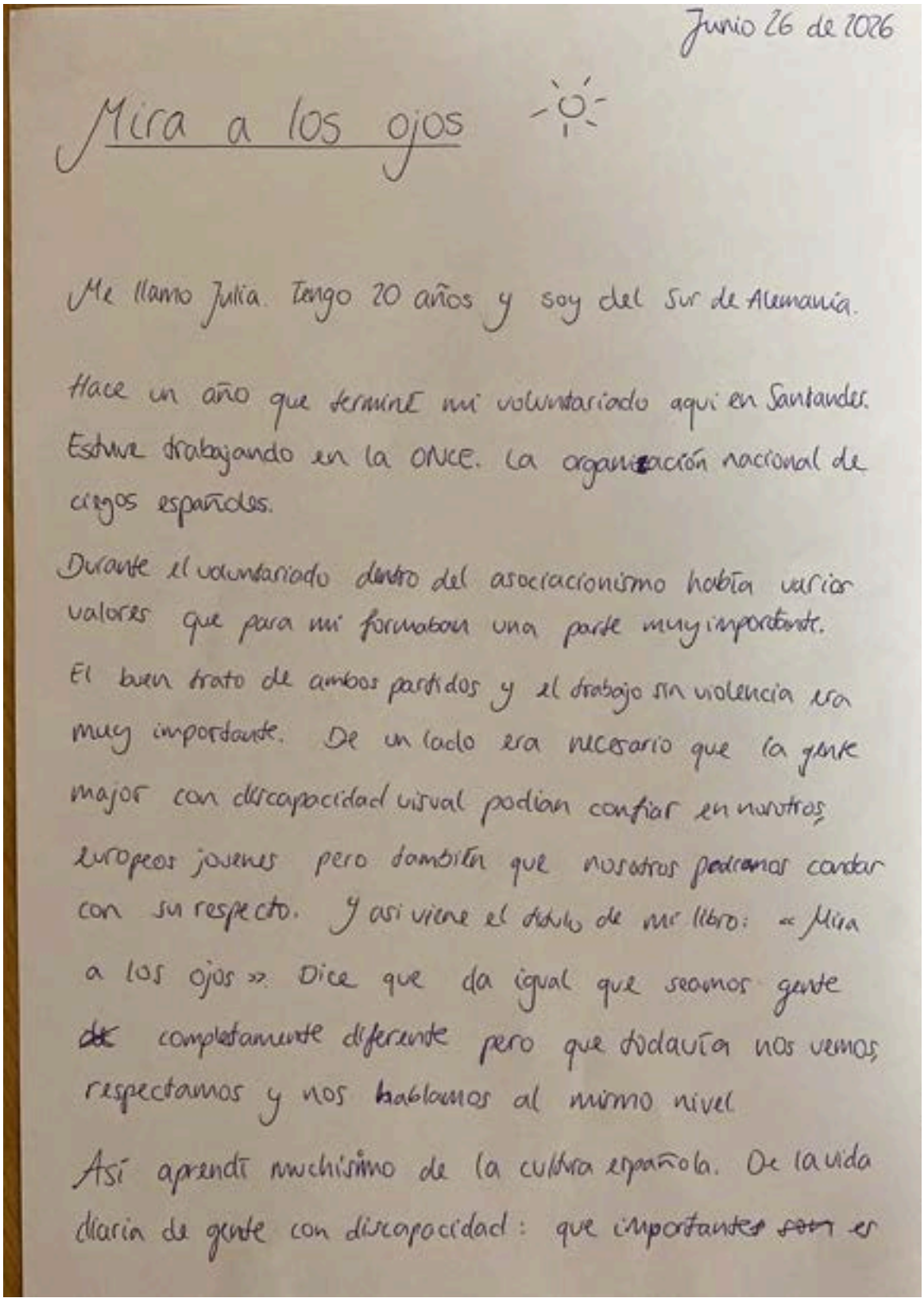
2. *Look into the eyes*, Julia (Germany)

My name is Julia, I am 20 years old and I am from southern Germany. One year ago, I finished my volunteering experience in Santander. I worked at ONCE, the Spanish National Organisation for Blind People.
During my volunteering experience, within the association, there were several values that were very important to me. Mutual respect and treating each other well, as well as working without violence, were essential. On the one hand, it was necessary for older people with visual impairments to be able to trust us, young Europeans, but we could also count on their respect in return.
That is where the title of my book comes from: "Look into the eyes." It means that, even though we may be completely different people, we can still see each other with respect and communicate on the same level.
Through this experience, I learned so much about Spanish culture and about the daily lives of people with disabilities: how important accessibility is, both at home and in public spaces. We spent many hours together – us volunteers and the ONCE members. While they attended their reading classes, Pilates and yoga sessions, we learned a new language, took part in training workshops, and, in the end, we went together to see theatre performances or concerts at ONCE.

I live about 1,550 km away from Santander. But during my volunteering period, Cantabria became my new home. My endless life.
Of course, there are differences between Germany and Spain – many of them. But there are also shared values. Look people in the eyes and you will find a new family.

You have to face the challenge. It is worth it.

2. ***Look at the eyes*, Julia (Germany)**



Junio 26 de 2026

Mira a los ojos

Me llamo Julia. Tengo 20 años y soy del Sur de Alemania.

Hace un año que terminé mi voluntariado aquí en Santander. Estuve trabajando en la ONCE. La organización nacional de ciegos españoles.

Durante el voluntariado dentro del asociacionismo había varios valores que para mí formaban una parte muy importante. El buen trato de ambos partidos y el trabajo sin violencia era muy importante. De un lado era necesario que la gente mayor con discapacidad visual podían confiar en nosotros, europeos jóvenes pero también que nosotros podíamos contar con su respecto. Y así viene el título de mi libro: «Mira a los ojos». Dice que da igual que seamos gente ~~de~~ completamente diferente pero que todavía nos vemos, respectamos y nos hablamos al mismo nivel.

Así aprendí muchísimo de la cultura española. De la vida diaria de gente con discapacidad: que importantes ~~son~~ es

las accesibilidad en el hogar ~~pero~~ y también importante la accesibilidad en los entornos.

Así pasamos muchas horas juntos. Nosotros voluntarios y los afiliados de la ONCE. Durante ellos tenían sus clases de lectura, de pilates, de yoga, nosotros aprendimos un nuevo idioma, participamos en talleres formativos y al final fuimos juntos para ver obras del teatro o conciertos en la ONCE.

Yo vivo unos 1550 km de Santander. Pero durante esta temporada del voluntariado Cantabria era mi nueva casa. Mi vida infinita. Claro que hay diferencias entre Alemania y España. Igual muchas. Pero también hay mismos valores. Mira a los ojos de la gente y ya encuentras una nueva familia. Hay que hacerlo frente, ¡vale la pena!

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3. *Lost in Translation, Found in Connection. ¡More than words!*, Hannah (Irland)

"Chapter 1: About Me
Hello! My name is Hannah. I'm from Ireland, and in 2024 I completed my European Solidarity Corps (ESC) volunteering project here in Santander.

Chapter 2: ONCE
During my time in Santander, I volunteered with la ONCE. My role was to support people with visual impairments in their everyday lives.
For example, I accompanied the users from their homes to the supermarket, the bank, medical appointments and to many other activities. I also attended activities at la ONCE with them, including yoga, book club, Braille classes, and many other social and support services.

Chapter 3: Translation
When I first arrived in Santander, I spoke very little Spanish. This was a huge challenge because most of the people I accompanied didn't speak English, so I had to learn the basics very quickly.
I remember one of my very first services. I accompanied a user to the supermarket, but I didn't know the names of many products, and I could only count to 10! As you can imagine, I needed a lot of help from the shop assistant.
After that service, I went straight to the library. I sat down and learned the numbers up to 100, along with the names of common supermarket products, fruit, vegetables, and anything else I thought I might need.
Another story that always makes me smile when I think about things getting "lost in translation":
One morning I had a service with a man in his eighties. He enjoyed walking from the city centre to El Sardinero (the beach). When we arrived to the beach he wanted to go to a small park nearby.

Once we got there, I asked him them what he wanted to do.
He replied, "Quiero un banco."
I thought, "Perfect!"
I took out my phone, opened Google Maps, and started searching for the nearest bank.
I asked him, "Banco de Santander? CaixaBank? Which bank would you like to go to?"
He kept saying, "No, no... un banco."
This went on for about ten minutes while we wandered around the park. Finally, I asked one of the gardeners who was working nearby.
I said, "No entiendo..."
He smiled, pointed to a bench, and said,
"Banco."
That's when I realised that banco has two meanings in Spanish - a bank as well as a bench!
From that day on, it became a word I'll never forget.

Chapter 4: Connection
The most important thing I took away from this experience wasn't just learning Spanish - it was the people I met.
Before coming to Santander, I thought that speaking the same language was essential to building meaningful relationships. But I soon realised that connection goes far beyond words.
Patience, laughter, kindness, and simply spending time together can communicate more than perfect grammar ever could.
As my Spanish improved, our conversations became easier, but the connection had already been there from the beginning.
Some of the strongest friendships and most meaningful moments of my time in Santander didn't happen because I spoke fluent Spanish. They happened because we were willing to understand each other.

Chapter 5: Reflection

The users weren't just the people I supported - they became my Spanish teachers.
They taught me the language, introduced me to Spanish culture, recommended the best places for a café mediano, and showed me what everyday life in Santander was really like.
In the end, this experience was about much more than volunteering.
It was about people.
It was about connection.
Although at times I may have been lost in translation, I found the most meaningful connections during my time in Santander."

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4. *From the ESC to the UN. A book about opportunities that once seemed impossible*, Ana (Serbia)

"I am Ana, I come from Serbia and I carried out my European Solidarity Corps (ESC) project in Santander six years ago. During my volunteering experience, I worked at the Ser Joven office, developing European projects aimed at young people in Santander.

The most unique aspect of my experience was that I lived it during the second wave of COVID-19, when restrictions, masks and curfews were still part of everyday life. Despite all these challenges, that experience marked the beginning of a journey that, years later, would take me to the United Nations.

During my stay in Santander, I found a master's programme that perfectly matched my interests. I applied for a European Commission scholarship and was awarded one of the five places available in the Erasmus Mundus programme. Thanks to this opportunity, I completed my internship at the United Nations Office in Vienna. After finishing my master's degree, I obtained a position in the same team, where I had the opportunity to work with diplomats and professionals from all over the world.

That is why I always say that everything started with the ESC. What seemed like a volunteering experience ended up becoming the first step on a journey that took me all the way to the United Nations.

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5. *The Art of Unlearning*, Héctor (Spain)

Chapter 1: The Irony of the Straight Line

Since we are born, there is an invisible straight line that marks out the steps we are supposed to follow in life: go to school, high school, university, get a job, get married... Okay, I'll stop.
If we don't make curves, we miss the landscape and we don't experience life. We miss everything.

To me, everything felt like apathy inside until, at the least expected moment, during my last year at university, I met an AMPROS volunteer who introduced me to the world of curves: a new world.

Chapter 2: A New World

After leaving behind my social experiences in education—by the way, toxic experiences—I entered a wonderful period of my life.
I met volunteers from ONCE, AMPROS and Ser Joven in Santander and my personality began to show itself. It had always been there, but at that moment it truly started to awaken. Unlearning is the key to personal growth.

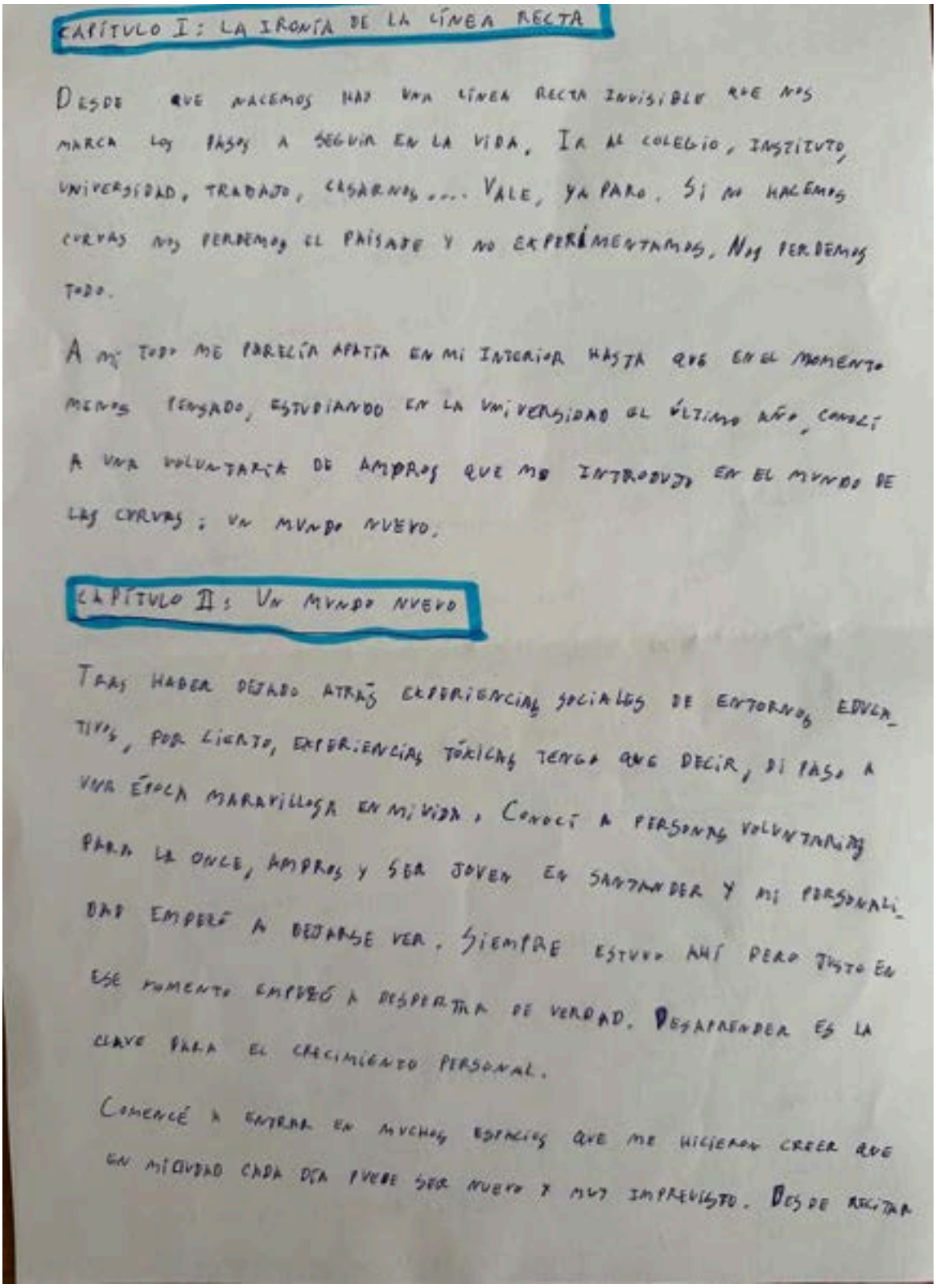
I started entering many spaces that made me believe that in my city every day can be something new and unpredictable. From poetry readings in places like El Bolero to attending political meetings and demonstrations on international conflicts such as the genocide in Gaza.
It became a combination of a social life—exploring the beach, travelling, having a beer—and, at the same time, a proactive life, in which getting involved in the problems of the society we live in is the most important thing.

Places are the tool and the environment. But what I have learned the most from and what I think we always learn the most from, is people.
All the volunteers I met and who are still part of my life, have passed on to me humility, empathy, authenticity and a very positive, radiant energy.

Chapter 3: Shedding Skin

Each generation of volunteers lasts eight months. I hate goodbyes.
I am the person who entered this environment through a beautiful coincidence and during this last year I have been the one who welcomed the people who were arriving, just as I have also been the one who has suffered the departure of those who were leaving.
Now the roles are changing.
I shed my skin like snakes do and I begin my own path, one that I hope will continue to transform me.

5. *The Art of Unlearning*, Héctor (Spain)



CAPÍTULO I: LA IRONÍA DE LA LÍNEA RECTA

DESDE QUE NACEMOS HAY UNA LÍNEA RECTA INVISIBLE QUE NOS MARCA LOS PASOS A SEGUIR EN LA VIDA. IR AL COLEGIO, INSTITUTO, UNIVERSIDAD, TRABAJO, CASARNOS.... VALE, YA PARO. SI NO HACEMOS CURVAS NOS PERDEMOS EL PAISAJE Y NO EXPERIMENTAMOS. NOS PERDEMOS TODO.

A MÍ TODO ME PARECÍA APATÍA EN MI INTERIOR HASTA QUE EN EL MOMENTO MENOS PENSADO, ESTUDIANDO EN LA UNIVERSIDAD EL ÚLTIMO AÑO, CONOCÍ A UNA VOLUNTARIA DE AMPROS QUE ME INTRODUJO EN EL MUNDO DE LAS CURVAS: UN MUNDO NUEVO.

CAPÍTULO II: UN MUNDO NUEVO

TRAS HABER DEJADO ATRÁS EXPERIENCIAS SOCIALES DE ENTORNOS EDUCATIVOS, POR CIERTO, EXPERIENCIAS TÓXICAS TENGO QUE DECIR, DI PASO A UNA ÉPOCA MARAVILLOSA EN MI VIDA. CONOCÍ A PERSONAS VOLUNTARIAS PARA LA ONCE, AMPROS Y SER JOVEN EN SANTANDER Y MI PERSONALIDAD EMPEZÓ A DEJARSE VER. SIEMPRE ESTUVO AHÍ PERO JUSTO EN ESE MOMENTO EMPEZÓ A DESPERTAR DE VERDAD. DESAPRENDER ES LA CLAVE PARA EL CRECIMIENTO PERSONAL.

COMENCÉ A ENTRAR EN MUCHOS ESPACIOS QUE ME HICIERON CREER QUE MI CIUDAD CADA DÍA PUEDE SER NUEVO Y MUY IMPREVISTO. DESDE RECITAR

POLITA EN ESPACIOS COMO EL BOLERO, HASTA ASISTIR A REUNIONES POLITICAS Y MANIFESTACIONES CON IMPLICACIÓN ACTIVA EN CONFLICTOS INTERNACIONALES COMO EL GENOCIDIO EN GAZA. UNA COMBINACIÓN AL MISMO TIEMPO DE VIDA SOCIAL EXPLORANDO LA PLAYA, VIAJANDO, TOMANDO UNA CERVEZA Y DE OTRA PARTE DE VIDA PROACTIVA EN LA QUE IMPLICARSE EN LOS PROBLEMAS DE LA SOCIEDAD EN LA QUE VIVIMOS ES LO MÁS IMPORTANTE.

LOS LUGARES SON LA HERRAMIENTA Y EL ENTORNO, PERO DE LO QUE HE APRENDIDO MÁS Y CREO QUE ES DE LO QUE SIEMPRE SE APRENDE SON LAS PERSONAS. TODAS LAS PERSONAS VOLUNTARIAS QUE CONOCÍ Y SIGUEN FORMANDO PARTE DE MI VIDA ME HAN TRANSMITIDO HUMILDAD, EMPATÍA, AUTENTICIDAD Y UNA ENERGÍA LUMINOSA MUY POSITIVA.

CAPÍTULO III: MUDAR DE PIEL

LAS GENERACIONES DE VOLUNTARIOS Y VOLUNTARIAS DURAN OCHO MESES. ODIO LAS DESPEDIDAS. SOY LA PERSONA QUE ENTRÓ EN ESTE ENTORNO POR UNA HERMOSA CASUALIDAD Y EN ESTE ÚLTIMO AÑO HE SIDO EL QUE HA RECIBIDO Y ACOGIDO A LAS PERSONAS QUE LLEGABAN COMO TAMBIÉN EL QUE HA SUFRIDO LA MARCHA DE LAS QUE SE IBAN.

AHORA CAMBIAN LOS ROLES, MUDO LA PIEL COMO LAS SERPIENTES Y COMIENZO MI PROPIO CAMINO QUE ESPERO ME SIGA HACIENDO UNA TRANSFORMACIÓN.

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6. *LET YOURSELF GO… Without fear, volunteering changes lives*, Luboš (Czech Republic)

"I chose this title intentionally because, above all, I wanted to express that European volunteers are very well supported and cared for thanks to Ser Joven and ONCE. So, don't be afraid. You can let yourself be carried away by a new culture, create new friendships, discover a different city and even a new country and live countless unforgettable experiences.

But I also don't want to mislead you. I have to admit that starting to work with blind people while having only a basic knowledge of Spanish was not exactly easy. Finding the right way, accompanying them to where they needed to go, or describing the surroundings we were in was quite a challenge. However, thanks to their patience and their willingness to teach us their language, everything progressed much faster than I had imagined. After only three months, I was already able to communicate naturally and hold conversations.

Thanks to the ONCE members, I had the opportunity to visit, for example, Santander City Hall and even sit in the mayor's chair. I walked along El Sardinero beach with my feet in the fresh seawater, discovered rural life and explored the impressive mountains of Cantabria. With my friends, we travelled throughout the region and across Spain, talked about everything, shared our different ways of seeing life and learned so much from each other. We built a friendship that I know will last forever.

This experience has a power that is difficult to explain. It is unique and unrepeatable. That is why you should leave your fears and doubts behind… and take the leap.

Yesterday, I met several ONCE members again after twelve years. It was a very intense moment, much more than I expected. I am not someone who usually cries, but this time I was close to doing so.

Would I do it again? Without a doubt. Yes. A thousand times over."

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7. *A Bosnian in Cantabria*, Eldin (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

"My name is Eldin Spahić, and I am a former volunteer with Ser Joven in Santander.

It feels unusual to tell this story because it is not the typical story of someone coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Two unfamiliar worlds met in the north of Spain. It has now been more than four years since a young Bosnian arrived in Cantabria to take part in a wonderful project dedicated to solidarity.

At the time, volunteering in a project like this was completely new to me, as it was my first encounter with the world of blind and visually impaired people. The group of people I spent time with every day, supporting them so they could be fully included in society, carry out their daily activities, and enjoy their free time, undoubtedly changed my life.

It was with these people that I learned Spanish, so our connection grew stronger day by day. Through many different activities, I had the opportunity to visit almost every town, city, and village in Cantabria. Along the way, I developed not only deep bonds with the people but also a profound connection with the entire region of Cantabria.

Today, after everything I experienced, I always speak about this project with carefully chosen words. My time in Santander and Cantabria became one of the most beautiful chapters of my life.

Through this project, I left a small mark that one Bosnian came to Santander, contributed to the community, helped others, and lived in that place. I arrived carrying a backpack full of solidarity, and I returned to my country carrying a backpack full of love.

Today, I am ready to help anyone in need. Never before had I felt so useful to others, and solidarity has become an essential part of my everyday life. That is why I believe the Ser Joven project deserves the highest praise and it has a meaningful purpose, so that new generations of young people have the opportunity to gain a life-changing experience—one that can only be found through this kind of volunteering.

Thank you for everything, wonderful people. As long as I breathe, every person I met through this project will always hold a very special place in my heart."

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8. *Pierogis with a Taste of Rabas. My Year of European Volunteering in Santander*, Ania (Poland)

"*What is the book about?*

"Pierogis with a Taste of Rabas" tells the true story of a Polish girl who, in 2021, decided to be brave, leave her country and move to Santander for a year thanks to the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme. Through these pages, the author describes the cultural shock, adapting to the pace of life in northern Spain and her daily life as a volunteer at the NGO Ser Joven.

The mission of the ESC: bringing Europe closer to the young people of Cantabria

My main mission at the NGO was a great responsibility: to convince young people in Cantabria that travelling and taking part in European projects can change their lives. To achieve this, I gave talks in schools, organised workshops and created content for social media.

At the beginning, it was not easy. Imagine having to talk about important topics in a language you are still learning. The book is full of funny moments, misunderstandings and mistakes in Spanish, but it also shows how speaking from the heart helps us connect with people beyond words.

Living in the moment: friends, beaches, and food

However, volunteering was not only about work. The best part was everything that happened outside the office. The book describes how much fun it was to share a flat with volunteers from different countries, the international dinners where we mixed Polish pierogis with Santander's rabas and the trips around Cantabria.

It is a story about friendship, discovery, and cultural exchange. Thanks to this experience, I met incredible people, discovered the beaches of El Sardinero and understood that, in the end, young people from all over the world look for, dream of and feel the same things.

How it changed my life

Today, four years after packing my bags to return to Poland, I look back and realise that I am no longer the same person. This book is also a reflection on personal growth. That year in Santander taught me to overcome my fear of the unknown, to trust myself much more and to become more independent. I learned how to adapt to change and, above all, I discovered that a part of me stayed forever in that bay of Santander.

What was meant to be a one-year adventure ended up changing my destiny forever. At the end of my volunteering experience, I realised that I did not want to leave Spain. Everything I had learned at Ser Joven opened the doors for me to cross the country from north to south and settle in Seville. There, I started working for a company managing Erasmus+ projects, professionally applying everything I had learned during my experience as a volunteer.

My connection with Spanish culture became so strong that I decided to put down roots. Today, I still live in Seville and enjoy the life that began thanks to that decision to spend a year in Santander."

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9. *A Hug Called Volunteering. A Journey of Solidarity from Greece to Santander*, Maria (Greece)

"Hello, my name is María, I am from Greece and I am 25 years old. I did my volunteering project in Santander from January 2025 until August 2025.
I was a volunteer at the ONCE organisation, where I accompanied people with visual impairments in their daily activities.
Before coming here, I lived in a small city in Greece with my family and worked at a children's activity centre. I had just finished university and had left the city where I studied to return to my hometown. However, I felt that life there was not fulfilling me, that there were many things I wanted to do. I wanted to discover new things and live new experiences. In general, I felt that I needed a change and that it was the right moment to step outside my comfort zone. That is why I started looking for volunteering opportunities in Europe, and eventually I found this project.
During my volunteering experience, I discovered a version of myself that I did not know existed. I learned that I was much more capable than I thought, and I learned to trust myself more. I also started doing things that truly fulfilled me and made me feel happy.
One of the best parts of this experience was the people I met. I had the opportunity to meet so many different people. I met other volunteers from different countries, international students living in Santander, Spanish people and also other Greeks who were here. In addition, I spent a lot of time with ONCE members, from whom I learned so much. From the very beginning, they made me feel very welcome in a country that was not my own."

Before coming to Santander, I did not speak any Spanish. I learned the language here, little by little, thanks to the people I met during my volunteering experience. The ONCE members, in particular, were very patient with me and helped me improve every day. Thanks to them, I learned a new language and today I can communicate quite well in Spanish.

In the end, I had the opportunity to travel around Cantabria and other parts of Spain. I was able to get to know the country, its culture, its traditions and its people better. It was an experience that allowed me to understand the Spanish way of life much more deeply.

To conclude, this volunteering experience has been one of the most important experiences of my life, full of learning, personal growth and wonderful people. I take with me unforgettable memories and many positive things that will stay with me forever."

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10. *From Volunteering to the European Parliament in Brussels*, Makbule (Austria)

"How volunteering changed my life and took my story to the European Parliament?"

How much can a life change thanks to volunteering? At the age of 19, right after finishing school, I embarked on my first volunteering experience in France. There, I not only learned to step outside my comfort zone, but, above all, I discovered myself. That first experience completely influenced my choice of university studies. Later, the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) brought me to Santander, Spain, for eight months, where I collaborated with the organisation for blind people, ONCE. This stage opened my eyes to inclusion, empathy, and non-formal education, definitively shaping my professional path.

When I returned to Austria, I started working for an NGO while completing my master's degree: first as a mentor and later, for four years, as a volunteer project coordinator. What began in Spain as a personal experience became my area of expertise. I developed my knowledge in the field of inclusion and started delivering my own workshops and awareness-raising activities. During my four years as a coordinator, I supported countless young volunteers through their moments of joy, adaptation processes, and cultural discoveries. Experiencing their excitement firsthand and witnessing their personal growth was an incredibly enriching experience.

However, I wanted to create an even greater impact, so I founded my own solidarity project: "ClayConnects – Töpfern auf Rädern" (Pottery on Wheels). With our mobile pottery studio, we offered free workshops for marginalised groups and people with disabilities or experiences of trauma. We reached almost 300 participants, who found in clay a safe and creative space for self-expression.

In recognition of all this commitment, I was appointed an official ESC Ambassador in Austria in 2025. This role brought me wonderful opportunities: I was able to present my project in Helsinki, travelled to Brussels and my personal ESC story was showcased directly in front of the European Parliament as part of the European Youth Week.

Today, I work as a trainer and facilitator in the field of non-formal education with children, young people and adults in various areas. This journey has not only influenced my career, but also...

It has shaped my entire life in a sustainable way. My firm belief after this journey is that everyone should experience volunteering at least once in their lifetime. Because solidarity is not just an action: it is an attitude towards life."

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your impact

11. *Volunteering Pays My Bills*, Julia (Germany)

"Fifteen years ago, I would never have imagined myself being where I am today.

I was 19 years old and I had just finished high school. I had no money in my pocket, but I had big dreams of travelling the world and dedicating myself to something meaningful before starting my graphic design studies, for which I had already passed the entrance exam.

When I was offered a six-month placement in the Ser Joven programme, it seemed like a great opportunity, as I did not want to stay away for too long because I was desperately in love with a German boy.

With my limited knowledge of Spanish, I took a flight to Santander without knowing what I was getting myself into. I could barely speak any Spanish. Since I was going to work with blind people, I could not use my hands or gestures to make myself understood.

And so, during the first months in my new job, I went on without being able to really communicate with anyone.

The first weeks were the most difficult. I felt very isolated and wanted to go home. But over time, the situation started to change. I began to understand more and more and I even started having conversations in Spanish.

By the end of my volunteering experience, Spanish came more naturally to me than I had ever imagined (while, in exchange, my English skills had almost disappeared).

Fifteen years later, I am still in love. Not with the German boy, but with the Spanish language. Today, I am a Spanish teacher and I teach young people between the ages of eleven and eighteen at a German school.

I am sure that my school's director is very grateful that I decided to become a Spanish teacher rather than work as a graphic designer, because Spanish language teachers are slowly becoming a rarity. Even today, there are very few Spanish teachers compared to the enormous interest among students in learning the language.

And for my part, I am very grateful for the kind of work I have (except for the early hours I have to wake up). I already know that I would have become very depressed sitting in front of a computer all day in my graphic design office."

12. *From Depression to Cantabria: How Blind People Guided Me Through the Fog and Changed My Life*, Luka (Serbia)

"Everything started at the moment when my own room became too small for me. The struggle with depression and anxiety had turned me into a complete introvert; I was closed off, afraid of the world, and unsure of what tomorrow would bring. And then I made a decision that sounded completely crazy for someone in my situation: I packed my bags and went to Spain. For the first time in my life, I became independent, and I did so by moving straight to the beautiful and green region of Cantabria as a volunteer with the ONCE organisation, which supports blind and visually impaired people.

When you have anxiety, the first experience of living alone abroad with flatmates from different parts of the world sounds like a recipe for panic. But the opposite happened. Sharing a flat with girls from different cultures forced me to open up. Step by step, my inner shell began to break, and I came out of it much more relaxed, open, and, to my own surprise, more extroverted.

Working with people at ONCE taught me empathy in a way that no book ever could. I learned how to approach people who face enormous challenges in their daily lives, but who, despite everything, carry an incredible strength and vitality. I heard stories that inspire you and change the way you see the world.

One of the most fascinating things was their sense of orientation. The blind people I worked with had such a perfect mental map that I could literally "follow them blindly." They guided me through the city without making mistakes, especially on the journey from their homes to the organisation. I was there only to support them, but in reality, they were the ones guiding me.

However, that rule of 'following blindly' once led me into a rather absurd situation. I went for a walk with an elderly man. Besides being blind, he was also a wheelchair user and suffered from dementia. Out of habit, I let him navigate and tell me where to turn. Of course, we ended up completely lost in the middle of the city: me, blindly following the directions of a blind man with dementia in a wheelchair! Today, I laugh wholeheartedly when I think about it, because it was a moment of pure and touching humanity.

And then, right in the middle of my new life, the global crisis began. My Cantabrian adventure took a turn worthy of a Hollywood thriller: the coronavirus outbreak in Spain started.

Suddenly, the phone rang: it was the National Health Agency calling. People completely covered in protective suits entered through the door, as if they had walked straight out of a science fiction film about the end of the world. General panic broke out. I personally had to take two volunteers to the hospital because they had symptoms – and me? By some miracle, I survived the whole chaos completely healthy; I was tested twice, and both times the results were negative.

Cantabria is a beautiful land of green coastlines and a powerful ocean, but for me it became much more than just a geographical place. It became the place where I overcame my own demons. I arrived there as a frightened young person struggling with depression, and I returned enriched with incredible friendships, unforgettable lessons in empathy, and the certainty that not even a global pandemic at ground zero could break me.

It was an experience that, in every sense, completely changed my life."

Conclusion, Amiel (Spain)

"For some, a year has passed. For others, as many as fifteen years have gone by. But once we were all gathered together in that room, we became once again the enthusiastic young people who sometimes dream of changing the world.

Listen, it may seem silly that a group of people comes together for a few days to remember past experiences. But with memories comes the small hope of continuing to help people:

By coming together and exploring our world and its possibilities, sharing our stories, spending time with people with visual impairments at ONCE while accompanying them from their homes and creating a beautiful reunion; spending an afternoon with the people from Ampros; meeting local (and not so local) initiatives focused on Active Citizenship, collectives, and NGOs; and even bringing our own stories to the people of the city in the form of a Human Library.

We have learned that even the smallest action can create a small change, and that change, regardless of its scale, is always necessary. That by giving a small part of ourselves, we can bring happiness to many people, and that when we mobilise together, we are always stronger.

Thank you, Ser Joven, for fighting for a future full of young people who are ready to make a difference."

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ASOCIACIÓN SER JOVEN

Ser Joven is a non-profit organisation made up of an interdisciplinary team of educators, youth workers and facilitators who, through different personal and volunteering experiences, come together with a common goal: providing quality non-formal education at both national and transnational levels.

We hold Erasmus+ accreditation and a Quality Label for the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme.

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