

Program Script for Ercan Tural (Aired on 18 October 2009)

Category:

Social Justice

Location:

İstanbul

When we see them in the streets or meet them, the first thing that we think of is their disability. We do not pay attention to their names, ages or personalities.

They have a life beyond their disabilities, however. They have a name, a past and an ambition for the future.

They are not offered equal opportunities in daily life. And yet we may fail to notice, they overcome obstacles everyday despite all the difficulties they face.

Though we may not notice, **there are 8.5 million people with disabilities in Turkey.**

64% of people with disabilities are illiterate and only 7% graduate from high school.

And **only 40% of all people with speech disabilities can receive proper treatment**, leaving an overwhelming 60% untreated.

There is a need for 7000 teachers for students with mental disabilities in Turkey.

Only 22% of all people with disabilities are employed in Turkey. Meanwhile, in the United States, 83% participate in working life.

We all have good intentions for people with disabilities and want to extend our support.

Helping a person with disabilities cross the street or assisting someone in a wheelchair may make us feel good about ourselves. However, our small contributions do not make a great difference in their lives.

Although their rights are protected by law, it is mostly up to NGOs and nameless heroes to make life worthy for people with disabilities.

We remain unaware of their problems that are right in front of our eyes. However, some dedicated people are making an impact and changing the situation.

When Ercan Tural first moved to Germany in order to attend a university in his early 20s, his ambition was to become a translator.

While studying Italian language and literature in Germany, he was planning to return to Turkey and pursue a career in professional diving and eventually set up his own business.

However, his encounters and friendships with people with disabilities in university channeled his interest toward a field he never considered before.

As he observed how people with disabilities were participating in the social life in Europe, he started questioning why this is not the case in Turkey.

Interview with Ercan Tatal:

Ercan Tatal: “I had the chance to observe the active and equal participation of people with disabilities in social life and in German universities. In universities, libraries, sports activities, shopping malls and in any other social environment, these people were active and equal. This was very striking for me. Perhaps, it would be the first thing you would notice if you were coming from a country like Turkey. Most Turkish people who visit Europe would notice the high numbers of people with disabilities there.

People with disabilities constitute 10% of world population. And this ratio may even be higher in Turkey. But in Europe, people’s participation in social life is very high. They are out of their homes, in school, workplaces and in any other social field. I was very moved by this.”

After these experiences, Ercan decided that he wanted to do something about this in Turkey. Upon his graduation in 1998, he returned to Turkey to dedicate himself to people with disabilities instead of working as a translator.

However, he did not know where and how to start.

So, as a first step, he started with diving, which was what he knew best. And he started looking for a person with disabilities to dive with him.

Interview with Ercan Tatal:

Ercan Tatal: “At first it was not easy finding someone, because when I would bring the subject up, people would think that it is a luxury to dive, especially since there are more important issues to be interested in.

However, I raised the subject with Ayhan Metin, a very active person with disabilities, and we found ourselves diving 5-6 hours after that conversation. That was how we started diving.”

That was how the ‘Diving is Freedom’ project started. It was a small symbol for people with disabilities.

However, even though these people have lost their self confidence due to barriers set up by society, they realized that they could dive. That was a big step.

Interview with Ercan Tatal:

Ercan Tatal: “First, I started a program called ‘Diving is Freedom’. It became permanent and turned into a huge program that allowed around 1500-2000 people with different disabilities to dive. It became so popular that now, Turkey is currently the country where the greatest number of people with disabilities are able to dive.”

Underwater interview with a person with disabilities:

Diver: “I love life so much, I love myself so much. This is so much fun! I also love everyone and our teacher Ercan so much.

Diving is actually freedom! I don’t think there can be anything better than this in life. My friends, I just had one of the most beautiful experiences of my lifetime! I love you all. So much.

Life is the most beautiful gift a person can receive. I love life so much!”

Interview with another person with disabilities:

-Girl: I did not want to believe it at first, because I did not believe that life could present me such a gift. I never thought I could go to Bodrum. Also, swimming and diving seemed impossible to me. I started getting anxious about it. I did not expect such a comfortable environment. I was thinking we were going to be on a crowded beach, with all eyes on us. I was expecting to go through the same issues we deal with in our everyday lives.

-Interviewer: What do you go through everyday?

-Girl: Everybody looks at us when we are having difficulties getting on a bus. This applies everywhere; in school, in the grocery store... It can be said that we are only comfortable at home.

Now, Ercan Tatal is living in Kaş (southern Turkey) during the summer.

While giving diving lessons to make a living, he is also trying to develop longer-lasting and sustainable projects that more people could participate in.

The joy in the eyes of people with disabilities who achieved something they considered unachievable, encouraged Ercan Tatal to organize larger-scale projects.

Interview: Ercan Tatal:

Ercan Tatal: “Having a disability means being excluded from social life in Turkey. They cannot swim in public pools. Because when they go in, some people take their kids out of the pool. Such shameful incidents still take place. Because thousands of ignorant families who pretend to be knowledgeable think that disabilities are contagious.

People with disabilities face many obstacles in going to non-private swimming pools in Turkey. This also applies to all social spaces. There are people in nightclubs and beaches who would leave only because we were there, having fun with our volunteers and diving students. This, as a Turkish citizen, saddens me greatly.

This does not happen in Europe. Nobody turns around to look at a dwarf. A dwarf friend of ours once said something that made our hearts bleed. She said “there is a big difference between people on a wheelchair and I because people only pity them, but they make fun of me”.

There still are people who can make fun of dwarfs, who think people on wheelchairs are beggars, who insist on trying to help people with disabilities even though it’s against their will, and who think that all problems can be solved by donating or showing off on TV shows. There are people who clear their conscience by donating small amounts. And they do not follow up either.”

The idea of setting up a camp was starting to form in the minds of Ercan Tatal and his fellow volunteers. They started to work on organizing a complimentary camp where all people with disabilities could attend sports, swimming, diving and dancing lessons.

The first camp became active in Bodrum 8 years ago with the help of hardworking volunteers and support they received from different funds.

Interview with Ercan Tatal:

Ercan Tatal: “We designed the ‘Alternative Camp’ project by asking ourselves: ‘what sports could these people play? And where?’. This was a true social entrepreneurship story that started without any budget. And it proved its sustainability for the past 8 years.

During those years, we offered a free service to about 7.000 people. The fact that it was complimentary was a critical point. We helped them with sports, personal and skills development. We created a truly integrated atmosphere by getting these young people together, without the supervision of their parents or councilors.

In this accessible, obstacle-free environment, attendees start their day with a morning exercise, then they can swim in the pool or the sea. Afterwards, they can participate in sports, music and art activities led by experienced instructors and volunteers.

This camp has been active for 8 years, providing skills development and recreational activities to young people with disabilities.”

Interview with a camp attendee:

-Camp attendee: It’s really a beautiful place.

-Interviewer: Did you know how to swim from before?

-Camp attendee: I knew only a little, but I got better here. They also teach us diving.

-Camp attendee: I was depressed back at home. I got better here. I feel like I’ve been born again! I would freeze time and stay here if I could.

The ‘Alternative Camp’ project has been active consistently for 8 years now.

They set up other camps at the beginning of the summer in different places (all across Turkey) such as İzmir Şakran, Samsun, Fatsa and Van.

Accompanied by volunteers coming from all four corners of Turkey and the world, camp attendees enjoy their vacation and experience a new type of living for a week.

Hundreds of people with different disabilities benefit from this camp without paying any fees.

Following his return from Germany, Ercan Tatal ran after his dream along with his volunteer friends. And last summer, he put his latest project into practice.

He established an academy not only for people with disabilities, but for everyone who is unable to put their talents to use due to financial and other obstacles: “The Academy of Dreams”.

Interview with Ercan Tatal:

Ercan Tatal: “In Turkey, there are definitely people among these 8,5-10 million people with disabilities who know how to sing and paint. There are people who can learn how to play the piano, the flute and saz (reed), or prove themselves in visual or plastic arts. There are people who can play a part in society as artists.

In the past, all doors were shut for these people. We now have 11 art studios where people with disabilities get a chance to improve their painting, music, dance, drama, DJ’ing and photography. We offered them an opportunity to use their hidden talents. This intensive program has been active for a year now.

‘The Academy of Dreams’ was realized with the help of many sponsors and volunteers. Here, people with disabilities benefit from dance, photography and many other type of workshops. And they get to start a new life.

Interview with a visually impaired teen:

Visually impaired teen: “I woke up one morning and lost 90% of my vision. Every living person is a candidate for disability. And the most important treasure we have is our health.

There aren’t many options for us in as civil servants working in the public administration. Therefore, I want to study Political Science, Law or become the first person to study Artificial Intelligence in Turkey.”

Years ago, Ercan Tatal was an ordinary person. Just like all of us, he had daily issues and things to take care of.

However, he took a different path and followed his heart.

Without expecting anything in return, he decided to make a difference in the lives of less fortunate people.

He had faith in the joy in their eyes and made a huge difference in the lives of thousands.