

Program Script for Ahmet Besim Toker (Aired on 27 December 2009)

Category: Civic Participation

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Usually there is not much news about persons with disabilities in Turkey’s mainstream newspapers. However, this topic is very popular in Netherlands.

Many people ride their bikes around town in the Netherlands. Therefore, there are bicycle paths and stands in every city.

However if bicycles are not locked properly when parked, they tend to fall over to the sidewalk. Consequently, they prevent persons with disabilities from using that sidewalk.

An informative film has been prepared with the support of the Government of the Netherlands to be shown on national television. In this film, people are advised to lock their bicycles more carefully.

This collective effort in protecting the rights of persons with disabilities in the Netherlands also indicates how much Turkey has to improve in addressing this issue.

There is so much to be done about persons with disabilities in Turkey that, one does not know even where and how to begin. A sense of hopelessness takes over.

However, there are people in Turkey who never lose their hope. There are people and institutions who try to change the world even during the hardest and most hopeless times.

Ahmet Besim Toker is a psychological counselor who has been working on persons with disabilities since he obtained his university degree.

He has been working as the Manager of the Counselling Center for the Disabled of the Narlidere Municipality in Izmir.

One of his latest projects concerns employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

In Turkey, 78% of persons with disabilities are currently unemployed. Approximately 7 million persons with disabilities cannot participate in production activities and in social life. They live as prisoners in their own homes.

According to the law, companies who hire more than 50 employees are obliged to reserve 3% of their personnel contingent for persons with disabilities.

If companies do not obey to this law, they are penalized with a fine of 1,000 USD. And most companies choose to pay that fine rather than hiring persons with disabilities.

According to statistics provided by the Turkish Labour Association, there is a gap of 33,000 employees between the contingent and the current number of persons with disabilities who are employed in the private sector only in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir.

Despite this, only 6,500 are looking for a job as 50% of persons with disabilities believe that they won’t be hired anywhere. In other words, half of the population with disabilities feel that they are not welcome in the workplace and that employers and other employees will never accept them.

Interview with a person with disabilities:

Man: I am looking for a job but I never get to the interview phase. I only went on two interviews so far. They make me fill out a form and send me back home saying they will call.

Interviewer: And they don’t say anything else?

Man: No, nothing else.

Interview with another person with disabilities:

Man: “I made numerous job applications in the last 2 years. They don’t even pay attention to most of them, I’m sure. I can fill out the forms at home without any difficulties. I am struggling very hard under very tough conditions, but I never lost hope. I believe that one day someone will hire me. I try very hard but companies show no effort in that direction.”

The Narlidere Municipality is touching the lives of many persons with disabilities through an exemplary project.

A project led by Ahmet Besim Toker, the Manager of the Counselling Center for the Disabled of the Narlidere Municipality, is addressing the unemployment issue among persons with disabilities.

Interview with another person with disabilities:

Woman: I want to work as a front desk secretary. I applied to so many places but none of them wanted to hire me. I still continue to apply, however.

Interviewer: What kind of responses do you get for your applications?

Woman: It’s mostly negative. Actually I don’t even get a response most of the time. I don’t even know if they accepted my application, because most of the time I don’t get a response.

In the first leg of the project, persons with disabilities who are willing to work are offered seminars on working life.

For some of them who can never leave their homes, these seminars begin from teaching them the most basic skills.

Interview with a person with disabilities:

Man: “They taught me how to prepare a job application in this seminar. They also taught me how to prepare for an interview, how to dress up and to pay attention to personal hygiene. For example, they taught me how to shake hands with people at the workplace. I mean, you can’t shake hands at the workplace like you shake hands when you see someone at the marketplace!”

After the seminar, the Narlidere Municipality Counselling Center for the Disabled comes into play and assists seminar attendees in getting in contact with companies.

And with the help of cooperating companies, their lives start changing. They are no longer prisoners in their own homes, and become occupied by their responsibilities at the workplace, their new circle of friends and a social life.

Interview with Ahmet Besim Toker:

Ahmet Besim Toker: “We recieved a list of 2499 persons with disabilities registered to the Izmir branch of the Turkish Labour Association (TLA). We browsed the list and chose a group of 500 people, which consists of persons with disabilities who have a higher chance of finding employment. This group consisted of people with all type of disabilities. We gave

them a seminar. At the same time, we made contact with potential employers who are willing to offer employment to persons with disabilities.

Our project continues in 6-months-long cycles. It was deemed to be very successful by the TLA and its third cycle will begin in January 2010. And 145 persons with disabilities found jobs thanks to these efforts.

Fadime Gurdag experienced a huge difference in her life as she is one of those who found employment job. She works as a cashier for a supermarket chain.

The company she works for did not allow us to film in the workplace. Therefore, she comes to meet and tell us about how great the experience of working is for her.

Although we can’t film her at the workplace, you can see the positive change in her by the look in her eyes. .

Interview with Fadime Gordag:

Fadime Gordag: It’s a great feeling. This is my first job and it feels great to gain self-confidence. I am very happy and peaceful on the inside!

Interviewer: And you are earning your own money right?

Fadime Gordag: Yes I do. It’s really great to work for the first time and to earn my own money. At home, I was always with the same people. Sometimes I would have problems even with my parents. But now, my circle of friends expanded, I have a larger social circle, I can go out by myself and take care of my expenses. And that’s really great.

Actually, this project is only one of the many projects implemented by the Narlidere Municipality and Ahmet Besim Toker.

They created a huge impact in Turkey with a project they recently realized.

There are currently 780 rehabilitation centers for the disabled in Turkey. With a new law implemented in 2006, the Ministry of Health covers all health expenses of persons with disabilities.

According to this new law, families can send their children with disabilities to any rehabilitation center they choose to.

And even if they do not have any type of social security, their expenses are still covered by the government.

Unfortunately however, all rehabilitation centers close at 6 P.M. And when families have something to do at night, they have to leave their children with their relatives or neighbors.

Interview with the mother of a child with disabilities:

Woman: “You have numerous needs if you have a child with disabilities. You have to take care of their every single need as parents. However, you have your own needs as a parent also. You have to spend time with your other children and refresh yourself. Even if it is open until midnight, it is very important to have a center where we can leave our children, even for 3 hours. There are many rehabilitation centers in Turkey but they offer personal or group workshops for 45 minutes, 2 hours or sometimes 4-5 hours, but you have to pick your child up once they are finished with that workshop.

A family may want to go to the movies, and that’s their natural right. There are no places for that family to leave their child. And I think that’s very sad. I used to leave my daughter with her father when I wanted to go out, and vice versa. But after a while, it didn’t feel like we were a family anymore. Therefore, I think that it’s great to have institutions like this one. Now we can go out for a 2-hour lunch with my husband while our daughter is in a safe and cozy atmosphere under the surveillance of educated personnel who can offer her psychological support when needed. We trust this institution very much.

And that’s all a parent could ask for; a place that can take care of a child in the best way. I know that they take care of her like I do. And that’s all I could ask for.”

Ahmet Besim Toker identified this problem and started to work on a project so that families and their children can spend some quality time.

With the support of the Izmir Development Agency and the Narlidere Municipality, he founded the first evening childcare center in Turkey.

Interview with Ahmet Besim Toker:

Ahmet Besim Toker: “As part of this project, the Narlidere Municipality allocated us this building. It was restored and we provided the necessary equipment so that we can officially open in November. Families can benefit from our childcare center by leaving their children with us until midnight.

We received incredibly positive feedback since our first day. A family who lives in Frankfurt visited us the other day. The father is retired and they have a child with a severe disability. The only reason why they still live in Frankfurt is the fact that they did not know that there were education institutions who offer full-time education to children with disabilities and that there actually was a childcare center where they can leave him. After having met us, they went back to Germany in order to make preparations to move back to Turkey. That was a great compliment to us.”

Families can leave their children at this center anytime between 5 P.M. and midnight. All services offered are complimentary.

Thereby, families can spend some personal time while their children are taken care of.

Interview with an educator:

Educator: “Our families have to bring their children along when registering for our services. Our experts assess the children and if eligible, they can start attending our center. We accept everyone between the ages of 3 and 29. We watch films and play games together every Friday and Saturday between 6 P.M. and midnight. Our families get to socialize here also. Some children who aren’t disabled also attend this center. They all get to play together. Our center is open until midnight. We also have a shuttle service. Families give us their addresses and we drive their children back home.”

This evening childcare center operates in a 2-storey villa, with a game room where children can spend time together, a hobby room and a nursery where babies can sleep.

Interview with the father of a child with disabilities:

Father: “In order to socialize as a family, we have to take our disabled child everywhere we go. And according to the condition of your child, you may not be able to attend certain activities. For instance, if you want to go see a play or a movie, the child may react to certain scenes. Moreover, he may make a sound and distract other people. That would disturb you also. Therefore we don’t go to those places. Not because we are ashamed of our child or because we hesitate to go out together. And certainly not because we get annoyed by our child. It’s because our child gets annoyed.”

Ahmet Besim Toker’s next goal is to increase socialization at the childcare center. He strives to strengthen the communication between children with and without disabilities.

Interview with Ahmet Besim Toker:

Ahmet Besim Toker: “Beginning in spring, we will start showing complimentary films to the general public at our center. Our goal is to increase socialization and awareness. It is relieving for a family to know that their child is with other children with disabilities. And that’s what they normally expect. But if children without disabilities play together with their friends with disabilities at our center, other families will be encouraged to bring their children also. Thereby, they will learn to empathize with persons with disabilities. And that would be raising awareness and prove to be very beneficial for the society. It would inspire people to live together and produce better things.

Besim Toker never lost his ambition to make a difference in his society. He kept developing projects in order to touch the lives of persons with disabilities.

He mobilized socially responsible people and institutions for this cause and made a huge and sustainable difference in the lives of thousands of children with disabilities.