



Beyond Erasmus

# Stories From Outside The Box

A Legacy Project Involving  
Youth Work Practitioners  
and Trainers from Erasmus+

**2**  
Volume



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“The aspiration behind this project is to capture stories that reveals the ‘ah ha’, the ‘I never knew that’ or the ‘I only discovered this after they were gone’ moments. It was about capturing stories that demonstrate members of the wider Erasmus Youth Work and Training family are more than just Youth Workers and Trainers, Policy Makers and Strategists, Mentors and Coaches. It was an attempt to shine a light on their more humane side, a side that gets little or no attention, a side that offers a glimpse of people we know but don’t really know.”

## Introduction

**Welcome to Stories from Outside The Box, Volume 2. If you haven’t had a chance to check out the first volume, then you can access it here:**

**<https://www.docdroid.com/GJzbFmt/beyond-erasmus-stories-from-outside-the-box-vol-1-final-ii-pdf>**

Following a very positive response to Volume 1, I’m very happy to present to you the second volume in this series. Volume 1 has been viewed over 1700 times (incredible!). While I tend not to put much emphasis on figures, it does indicate that there is plenty of interest in what practitioners from Erasmus+—at least the non-formal educators in Erasmus—do outside of organising training programmes, seminars, and other similar events, as well as contributing to policy, strategy, and the development of various models of practice.

To all of those who contributed to this volume, I want to offer my heartfelt thanks. Just as with Volume 1, there is no obligation and certainly no compulsory element to this. The nature of this project is 100% voluntary. Without their willingness, support, cooperation, and commitment, it does not work, and ultimately, there are no stories. Everyone who took part gave of themselves fully and freely, even if there was a little encouragement at times to make the final step to take part.

I mentioned in the introduction of Volume 1 that there was much curiosity about what contributors were being asked to do, and whilst there was still an element of that, the opportunity to see how the first version looked certainly offered much more reassurance to those contributing on this occasion.

Even though I have emphasised that no one is being asked to ‘bare their soul’ and they should only share what they want to share, it’s not until you read the first edition and see who has jumped in that you become a little more convinced.

A project of this nature requires risk-takers if only to provide the basis from which others will ‘jump in,’ but practitioners now view the initiative as more of an opportunity to share something interesting, if not less revealing.

On one occasion, when I sent back a story to one of the contributors to check for accuracy, I was told, ‘it has a little bit of crazy about it; stories should have a nice dynamic about them, so thanks for allowing the story to remain as it is.’

Sometimes, it can be a bit of a challenge to capture the stories as accurately as possible, for different reasons. Online meetings can be tricky, and connections can be a bit fraught at times. Wifi isn’t always as good as the stories, but thankfully, all those that contributed very kindly took time to check over the version I had constructed for them, and where changes were needed, they felt comfortable enough to advise. All contributors have a final say on what is released, which is part of ‘the deal’ for their involvement.

In Volume 1, I mentioned that a story is merely an experience, and we all have different experiences. Again, I keep that quote in this volume because I truly believe it and, therefore, I stand by it.

I know from the reactions and responses from the first edition that there were many surprises. The desire to create moments of surprise—the ‘a-ha,’ ‘wow’ or ‘I had no idea’ moments—was accomplished. I’m pretty sure that once more, there will be a few of those among readers.

There were, of course, still some who felt perhaps they didn’t have a story to offer, or their story didn’t merit telling, or they felt the only story they could offer was something connected to Erasmus. While Erasmus is a thread that connects all contributors, you will no doubt see that everyone has their own unique story.

Again, the idea that someone does not have a story to offer is more of a reflection that they are rarely asked for one, and if asked, their contributions normally resemble or reflect programmes, strategies, policies, and models, etc., whether that is for an NGO, SALTO, a National Agency or something similar.

Once again, I'd just like to say it's been an honour to collect stories, and I am humbled by those that have shared space with me or have 'put pen to paper' and submitted their story. I am grateful for their willingness to take a risk, jump in, and make the time to not only support the process but to share, to be curious, to be receptive, and to give of themselves freely and honestly.

Like last time, no conversation lasted less than one hour, some stretching to almost two, and no matter how long the conversation lasted, it was worth every moment!

Appreciating that people have not only made time but have all exhibited a willingness to be 'exposed' and embrace a degree of fragility and vulnerability, they have entrusted me to nurture and curate their story, and I have endeavoured to honour that commitment.

To all those who made time, trusted the process, and jumped in, – THANK YOU!

Fergal Barr

February 2024

Please take a moment to like, share, and tag colleagues from Erasmus+ and let them know about this project.

#BeyondErasmus

#StoriesFromOutsideTheBox

## Project Overview

### Rationale

Starting out as The Erasmus+ Human Legacy Project, this voluntary initiative was designed to capture non-work stories from Youth Work practitioners and Trainers connected by their involvement in Erasmus+ over the last number of years, and even, in some cases, decades.

The aspiration behind this project is to capture stories that reveals the 'ah ha', the 'I never knew that' or the 'I only discovered this after they were gone' moments. It was about capturing stories that demonstrate members of the wider Erasmus Youth Work and Training family are more than just Youth Workers and Trainers, Policy Makers and Strategists, Mentors and Coaches. It was an attempt to shine a light on their more humane side, a side that gets little or no attention, a side that offers a glimpse of people we know but don't really know.

### Context

The fragility of life is not a conversation we tend to have too often. It is without doubt a sensitive subject and by no means easy to talk about. Loss can have a devastating impact on even the most resilient among us. The nature of loss and the circumstances that surround us can have a profound effect, leaving us feeling deeply wounded.

Loss is not something that the Erasmus+ collective—at least among the youth work and training fraternity—experiences and shares regularly. Notwithstanding the loss of colleagues in our own respective work settings, the Erasmus+ family has been fortunate in that many colleagues have had the opportunity to work and grow together over a sustained period, building many strong relationships whilst working on multiple projects.

We often become accustomed to seeing colleagues at annual and bi-annual gatherings and working on a range of initiatives together, often through innovation, creativity, and imagination or in response to policy decisions.

The fragility of life was highlighted in 2023 with the untimely passing of Leo Kaserer, an experienced and committed practitioner from within the Erasmus family. Leo was well liked, respected, and very well thought of at both a personal and professional level, and his passing caused some of us to reflect on what our contributions or legacy might mean, but more than that, how we are known to our colleagues, beyond the role we fulfil when working on projects, programmes, policies, and strategies.

This initiative was not about necessarily paying tribute to Leo – there are many more much better placed to do so - but if anything, perhaps his passing can be a catalyst for not only acknowledging that all life is fragile but that the many connections built up through involvement in Erasmus will inevitably end at some point.

The fragility of life was echoed once more at the beginning of December 2023, when Martin Kimber passed away suddenly. Martin had been involved in Erasmus for a period, primarily within the UK, but to those who knew him and had worked alongside him, they had only good things to say about him. His passing came as a shock to all those who were acquainted with him. They looked upon him with fondness and appreciated him a lot in a personal and professional capacity.

In the year that this work was initiated, Erasmus has lost two members of 'the family', and whilst not known to all, they are known to many.

Perhaps we can begin to think about not only the impact this has by looking at ways in which we not only capture legacy but, in doing so, make a solid commitment to capturing that legacy—a legacy that focuses much more on the individuals that make up the collective and not only the numerous policies, strategies, models, and initiatives that tend to bind us. This is not a criticism of any of those initiatives, but that we are simply much more than these, and they do not or should not define us.

Policies, strategies, models, and initiatives will of course evolve, and they'll be replaced over time, but when those members of the Erasmus family move on (to other things) or pass on, their legacy will only survive in the impressions and memories of others unless we commit to documenting them.

### Project Aims

This project was not in receipt of any funding and is and continues to be delivered entirely on a voluntary basis. It was created in recognition of two key elements:

- (i) the need to create an enriching archive full of stories about the person behind the practitioner before they are lost through the mists of time and**
- (ii) recognition that life is fragile and in any given moment, we might lose that person through illness, natural circumstances, or suddenly and unexpectedly.**

### Who was involved?

A small working group consisting of Peter Hofmann (Austria), Jo Claeys (Portugal), Simona Molari (Italy), and Fergal Barr (Northern Ireland) was established at the outset to set in motion the process of beginning to capture non-Erasmus work stories from colleagues within the wider 'Erasmus Youth Work family.' Peter, Jo, and Simona are no longer involved.

### What the stories should or might look like?

The emphasis on each story was to capture and reveal the person's more humane side, sides that we might never have occasion to see due to the normal Erasmus 'demands,' i.e., time-bound, intensive, outcome-focused, and so on. It might be a story that we only learn about after their passing, or after they retire, or perhaps they are simply no longer part of Erasmus+.

They might have played in a band, published a book, starred in a film, been a fabulous artist, changed the law, climbed Everest, saved a life, and we might never know this, which of course would be a shame, but it's the sense of discovery that this project wants to nurture, that each person is more than merely the practitioner we know in the working context, that context being Erasmus.

We know a lot about each other in terms of the projects that practitioners from the Erasmus (Youth Work) Family coordinate, or perhaps lead on, initiate, and develop, but not a lot about the non-work side, and this project was designed to capture that.

Colleagues were approached to share a story, something that no one really knows, or at least very few beyond the Erasmus bubble do.

## Practicalities

Stories were captured in two ways – documented through informal conversation – in person or on-line, or stories were submitted. Any stories documented were returned for final approval with any amendments at the request of practitioners implemented.

It was always designed that each story should be no more than 1-2 pages long, or approximately between 500 and 1500 words (4000 – 6000 characters including spaces). It was to be a non-work story, something that individuals were willing to share and at no point should ever compromise anyone or any other colleagues.

Participants were also asked to submit a black and white head and shoulders photo of themselves without any props as such, e.g., hats, sunglasses, etc, nor should the photo be of a 'professional nature' but rather convey the essence of each person, a truer reflection of them without any filters as it were.

The photo would give a sense of the 'true' individual, revealing their humane side, in a way that we have not seen or might not expect, or just with a sense of the true self.

The idea was to collate all the stories into a pdf file with perhaps hard copies following in due course. What you are now reading is the outcome of that work.

“Cyclists used the bikes to transport documents between Rome and Tuscany. They rolled up the documents and put them inside the frames of the bikes. The documents were not just messages. They were legal documents, designed to protect Jews.”

Silva Volpi

## Silvia Volpi

Partner, Sister, Athlete, Trainer, Teacher, Coach, Counsellor, Writer, Upcycler, Mathematician, Lover of High Heels, Logical, Lover of the seaside music, Dreamer, Human Rights Defender –  
**SAILOR, CYCLIST!**



**Cycling—yes, cycling! I love cycling! There is nothing better than getting out and connecting with the world around me. In my free time, I like to cycle, especially in nature, particularly along Maremma in Italy. It's the most beautiful place to go, to be, and to connect with. I used to cycle in Florence, but now that I'm close to the coast, it makes me feel free, connected, and close to nature.**

Florence isn't that far from the coast, but to be able to step outside and know that within a few moments you can breathe in the sea air, foray along the coast, see the sun light up the rock face, and join with it is an immense feeling of joy, calm, and serenity.

Cycling is really relaxing, which is quite ironic because, of course, it requires a lot of energy, but it's a happy energy, an energy that captures the moment, an energy that allows you to flow, and when you cycle the routes that I have had the pleasure to cycle, the energy is reciprocal. Your eyes capture the landscape, and in turn, it motivates the legs to keep going.

But this love of cycling only started in later life. Interestingly and ironically, I assumed I didn't like cycling. I had tried cycling with my friends, but I denied liking it. Why might you ask? One of the reasons was that my father and grandfather were both professional cyclists. When I was a child and teenager, the conversation was always cycling.

You know how this goes: when everything evolves around one subject, and when you're young and it's your parents, you tend to rebel. The conversations about cycling were too much for me, and I didn't want to be seen. I did start to cycle between the ages of 18 and 20, but just using my bike for daily life to get from place to place.

My father and grandfather won lots of competitions, including the Tour of Europe. The European Tour was created in 1951, around the same time as the creation of the Council of Europe. My grandfather won the first edition, which, when you think about it, is quite an amazing achievement. There has been no other edition after this. All the tours since then have been at the national level.

My grandfather passed away in 2016, and I was researching his past. Cycling competitions still took place during World War II, and as I searched his history, or 'his-story' if you like, I was discovering a little more about the person behind the professional.

Cycling was more than just cycling. It was a form of resistance.

**Cyclists used the bikes to transport documents between Rome and Tuscany. They rolled up the documents and put them inside the frames of the bikes. The documents were not just messages. They were legal documents designed to protect Jews.**

The cycling teams were well known, and therefore nobody stopped them because they were in 'training.' I got to know a lot of these stories; it's very interesting to discover this side of my grandfather. It said a lot about him as a person and the values that he held. He played his part in opposing Nazism and fascism by doing something he loved—cycling. Perhaps this is a reason why it was so much a part of the conversation.

Perhaps I inherited in my DNA some of his values that I use in my work, but I have also now embraced a love of cycling. Rather than just an 'ordinary' bike, I now have a

professional bike, although I don't have any real intention of using it for competition. It's now a form of relaxation—cycling, along with walking—and sailing too. Sailing has entered my life.

When I was a child, I spent the summer in a small house on the beach. I love to be near the coast. It has had a big influence on me. It always has. I love what I call 'seaside music.' The sounds, the smells, the rhythm, the feel, the vibe, and the music I associate with being close to the coast, close to the beach—everything and everyone feels brighter and better, and they carry with them a sense of vitality that comes with breathing in the sea air every day and hearing the seaside music.

Not only have I embraced my inner-cycling mode, but I now sail with my partner. We bought a sailing boat; it's 8 metres long and is a four 4-berth. My partner has a licence, and he's a sailor, and we have lots of friends who sail also. We only got the boat in May '23. It was one of my dreams to sail. We make small journeys now, but we'd like to embark on a much larger journey at some point in the future along the coast.

The most important bit is that I just enjoy it—all of it—the walking, the cycling, and the sailing. I'm lucky that I get to choose these experiences close to a place that I love—the coast. As I get older it's these things that even matter more to me.

Looking back, while resenting the cycling conversations at the time when it felt like the same stories were being re-cycled, if you pardon the pun, I'm glad that I was part of it and that my father and grandfather passed on their love affair with bikes onto me.

I was so happy to learn that cycling was more than just cycling, and it demonstrates that even where there is intolerance and suffering, you can fight it, just as my grandfather did, along with others, creating their own form of resistance to fight the oppressor.

On learning this, I saw cycling in a new light, and now I embrace it and what it has to offer me. And in embracing cycling, it also opened my eyes to sailing. Both offer me a sense of freedom close to a setting that I love.

When I was younger, I had different ideas of what I might be—neither cyclist nor sailor were on my list back then.

I am Silvia; I am a sailor; I am a cyclist!

“I remember the first time I was paid, I proudly presented the achievement of my labor on our home table, immediately after I got back from my 'gig'! This money didn't have much of a life together with me; it was spent the next day. To buy vinyl records of course.”

Sakis Krezios



A blue-tinted portrait of Sakis Krezios, a man with short hair and a slight smile, wearing a collared shirt. The portrait is partially obscured by a blue speech bubble on the left and several yellow starburst shapes scattered across the background.

## Sakis Krezios

Night Owl, Youth Trainer, CEO, Skier,  
Cold-Water Showerer, Mountains'  
Lover, Wine Drinker, History  
Digger, Future Wanderer - MUSIC  
AFICIONADO!

**“Nothing beats a glass of wine in the company of people who have mastered the art of feeling comfortable listening to each other’s unhindered thoughts.”**

I think it was either 1991 or 1992. Two of my cousins, a bit older than myself, had a special relationship with vinyl records. One of them was more into 1970s rock. The other one, being a disco/nightclub owner, is mostly into several forms of electronic music.

My memory is weak, I admit; however, I think the first ever vinyl record I held in my hands was ‘Pampered Menial’ by Pavlov’s dog. Or, maybe, ‘The Good Son’, by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. The feeling was inimitable, and the sounds were heartwarming. And then one night! at the club, I pleasantly stayed at the DJ booth for a while.

I kept digging into records frantically, almost feeling like I had stepped foot on Mars! Then, whenever I could spot something that I knew, I would try to bring it up and show it to my sister! She was staying with family and friends on the other side of the venue. My efforts to share the happiness were in vain, though, amidst the darkness and blinking lights within the club. Still, a never-felt-before rush was pumping into my heart! For the music aficionados reading those lines, I guess there were some vinyl records from Yellow, Depeche Mode, Erasure, Pet Shop Boys, or similar.

It didn’t take me long after that moment before I would nag in front of my father, asking for ‘money to buy vinyl records’. He would react like, “do you still use vinyl records”? You, meaning my generation!

I didn’t know what to say; I didn’t care. He never said no. My mother was offering words of support, saying, ‘You know, in the 60’s and 70’s, me and my siblings would buy those 7” (45s) vinyl records’.

Around 1995 (being 15), I already had a small collection of vinyl records, and I was invited to DJ at the new bar that my ‘rock’ cousin had started back then. For that endeavour of mine, I was told ‘no’ several times by my parents; I was still at school and the place was completely on the other side of the city.

**I remember the first time I was paid, I proudly presented the achievement of my labour on our home table, immediately after I got back from my ‘gig’! This money didn’t have much of a life with me; it was spent the next day. To buy vinyl records, of course.**

A little while later, I had already started joining youth projects across the continent. During the first trips, I was always like, ‘Oh, I need to buy something from the city I am visiting and gift it to my loved ones’. This thought didn’t have much life as well (same as my DJ labour money!) and the action, as such, was also limited.

What a shame! Why? The little money I had available was spent on vinyl records. I believe I have at least one from most of the cities I have travelled to!

I think the great love and passion I shared for DJing lasted around 10–12 years.

Part of all the things I have been doing in my life is that now and since 2015 I operate, together with friends of mine, a sports and culture venue where loads of concerts are taking place. I have also DJed there a few times. Nonetheless, I now know that my love for music cannot be expressed through DJing anymore, or that it is just a ‘limited edition’.

I much prefer, when a concert of my liking takes place in my venue, to go and buy the records of the band (hint: more and more alternative bands have been printing vinyl

records for the last 10–15 years, and vinyl records are the only music medium not in decline!) and then sit in front of my turntable (I have an interesting story for that as well!) and listen to every song, while mostly sticking to the ones I know and love and putting them on repeat. I know you do that too!

Now that I've mentioned the turntable, it was the end of the 90s, and radio stations would throw their Technics SL1200s (note: they are gems!) deep into the storage room. One of these radio stations had some sort of affiliation with the youth centre I was active in at the time.

One evening, after I had spotted them in said storage room, I called my youth worker and said, 'hey, we are celebrating something, and those 2 turntables can be of help for our party'; I believe my youth worker barely understood what I was talking about but said yes, anyway.

Around the same time, my friends and I from the youth centre spotted in its dungeon's boxes of vinyl records! The building, a huge one, used to be a seaside disco club in the 80s! I still possess and cherish those records! As for those two turntables, they were never returned. One stayed with me forever, and the other was gifted to a very close friend of mine after he also discovered a love for vinyl records.

Those two turntables were fundamental for the development of one of my very first youth exchange projects. I used them to bring a group of young people, aspiring DJs, together and learn how to DJ. On top of their learning journey, we also organised a bilateral youth exchange with a similar group from Scotland. Life-changing experiences for everyone! Some of these young people still DJ nowadays, with great success!

And now that I said that these 1991/92 moments have been life-changing for me as well, it seems I never thought of that to this extent!

It now feels like I have just put the needle back at the beginning of the record.

“When I was aged around 15-16, I was playing bugle with six music bands and at 18 I had to decide what career I should choose. I passed my music exams, but I decided to ‘change the world’ instead. In college I saw that everyone in the room was nerds, so I decided to study political science in Leuven instead. I saw what I didn’t want to be so yes, I opted for the world of politics.”

Dirk De Vilder



## Dirk De Vilder

Born and raised in Vossem Belgium, Father, Lover, Friend, Optimist, Beer Lover, Trail Runner, Coach, Experiential Group Facilitator, Passionate in Helping Individuals, Teams and Organisations to Grow and Develop, Youth Worker, Passionate Outward Bound Practitioner Via Experientia - TV STAR!

Here in Belgium, we have a famous TV sitcom from the 1990s. Of course, Belgium is not quite known for its global sitcoms, unlike in the US, where Cheers and Friends, among many others, have been entertaining millions for many decades. But there was one famous Belgian sitcom.

Between 60 and 70% of the population were watching it at its peak. It was even popular among children. Its name? FC de Kampioen, of course. Didn't you know? What do you mean you don't? You can name some Belgian chocolates, right? Why not Belgian sitcoms? Am I expecting too much?

FC de Kampioen doesn't quite role of the tongue like Cheers and Friends, but how many sitcoms can say 60–70% of their population was watching at its peak? Exactly!

Ok, what's happening here? Is the revelation that Dirk De Vilder—Outward Bound Dirk De Vilder, lover of nature and all things outdoors—has suddenly become an expert in Belgian sitcoms no less?

Of course not. My revelation is that I was in the sitcom. Yes, you heard that right! Dirk De Vilder, lover of nature and all things outdoors, leads, or rather led, a double life for a period—outdoors lover during the day, secret TV star at night.

I'd love to say it was a little like this—that TV stardom was how I made my fortune, but not exactly. I love the outdoors too much, and the part I had was quite small but incredibly intense. Even though it was only for a few minutes in a single episode, it still endures. Even now, some still ask me about it!

To be honest, I tend to forget about it until it's mentioned, but it stays with me like a travel companion on each journey. My foray into the world of television was, I guess, a little part of my journey, which stretches beyond my so-called acting skills. I'm not Robert De Nero, but I am Dirk De Vilder and have a few strings to my bow, or if not my bow, at least my bugle.

My house, or rather, my family, was very musical, and I learned bugle at an early age. Not only playing bugle but also acting on stage. I grew up in a village and started playing bugle at 8 years of age. We had an annual concert at the funfair, and I played at this but was also part of the local theatre group, taking part and performing every year. Sometimes I played the main character. The idea of performing in front of an audience was always just part of my life.

**When I was around 15 or 16, I was playing bugle with six music bands, and at 18, I had to decide what career I should choose. I passed my music exams, but I decided to 'change the world' instead. In college, I saw that everyone in the room was a nerd, so I decided to study political science at Leuven instead. I saw what I didn't want to be, so yes, I opted for the world of politics.**

I have to say that being a politician doesn't hold so much appeal for me either! Even though I chose to study political science, I still played music in all kinds of bands throughout the years and on stage, performing in theatre until I was 28. Not only bugle but bass as well.

I played bass for a long time in a swing time jazz band. I was maybe 25 when I started playing there; the other guys were older, 58 years of age and older. They were all good musicians, but they were not successful because they enjoyed alcohol too much. One of the band members, Albert, who was a trumpet player, was 75 when I started playing there. Imagine for a moment that I was 28 and he was 75. We had a lot of fun. We got on great. They even played at my wedding.

My family was musical. My father played bass clarinet. He was 90. My two brothers also played clarinets. For four years, we had a family band—my cousins and my uncle. Music was in the blood.

A funny story happened to us once. We were asked to play at a wedding, and of course we agreed. We set up in the church, on the balcony. We were 'looking down' on the wedding, although from such a height and at a distance, people are small and not so familiar. We played all the arranged songs, and then once the wedding was over, we packed up and headed off to play at the reception.

We got to the venue, and again, we set up and started to play the list of songs as requested. We played happily for about 90 minutes, and once finished, we went off to find the bride to get paid. It took us a little time to find her; as you can imagine, everyone wants to chat with her, and so it's not so easy to get the attention of the bride and groom when they are in demand.

We found her and, of course, asked her to pay us. She said, 'What are you talking about?' We didn't know what she meant and said, 'Well, we just want to get paid for doing the music at the ceremony and

reception.' She looked at us oddly and said, 'You didn't play at the reception.' We said, 'What are you talking about? We've just played for an hour.' She said, 'No, you didn't.' Of course, we were surprised to hear this, and you can imagine what we were thinking until we discovered we had played at a reception, but at the wrong wedding!

Yes, we had the right venue and the right building, but two weddings were happening simultaneously! We just happened to pick the wrong one! How is this possible? Well, when you set up early for the ceremony but you don't know the guests—they're all at a distance and you can't really see them—you then head off to the reception, not knowing, of course, that there were two weddings. That's how!

You might be thinking, didn't the other reception party find it strange that a band was playing at their wedding if they had no music arranged? Perhaps they thought the venue provided free music!

Theatre and music provide many funny moments, but let me return to where I started: TV. FC de Kampioenen! I played a postman, Facteur, with a French dialect. I was 30 at the time. The sitcom was so popular that a football team of the same name was created. I played about thirty times for them.

How did I end up in the programme? Well, one of my best friends was the producer, and he of course loved my acting skills; that's what I tell myself. The last time I was delivering a course, one of the participants found the clip online and asked me about it. There you have it, Dirk De Vilder TV Star!

“So, I guess you could say I was trading somewhat illegally when I was a child but equally, I was also developing my business sense and had my own business. I guess you could say I was an entrepreneur. I learned the values of hard work – founded on the need to survive. Times were beginning to change around 1990, and at 10 years old I was trading with old ladies in an open market.”

**Laimonas Ragauskas**

A blue-tinted portrait of Laimonas Ragauskas, a man with short, light-colored hair, looking slightly to the right with a faint smile. The background is white with several yellow stars of varying sizes scattered around him.

## Laimonas Ragauskas

Trainer, Curious about Education, Future, Innovation and Technology, Father, Husband, Traveller, Clubbing Culture, Explorer - DJ!

In my younger years, between the ages of 13 and 20, I worked as a DJ. That might not come as a surprise to anyone, but did you know I also studied international business and for six months I worked in a bank? As you can imagine, I didn't leave banking to end up in youth work for the money!

My journey is an interesting one because, as some will already know, I was a DJ; even at some international youth work events, I have looked after the music. Perhaps what people know less about is the journey. They may see me on the decks and conclude that I'm a good Youth Worker who dabbles on the decks, or the other way around, I'm a good DJ who dabbles in Youth Work.

What some might forget is that I grew up as a child in the Soviet Union. And while growing up in this system was more than challenging, in the modern era, it is quite easy to forget how much of a challenge it was.

In 1988, just when change was coming and the system was beginning to collapse, I was around nine years old, and when the old Soviet currency had lost all its value, we had to use a bartering system to get things; for example, I had to collect bottles to exchange them for soap. There was nothing in the shops. I'm not talking about two hundred years ago, but less than forty years ago.

To survive, my parents started a business. They sold animals from South America—coypu. They set about breeding them and essentially created a farm of nutria (rodents) to sell them illegally at night in Kaunas from the boot of our car.

They were being sold for their fur. Of course, this sounds wrong and unethical, but back then, it was about survival. There was no other option to choose. Quite simply, if you don't have something to sell, you don't have any income. If you have no income, you don't survive. The choice was simple. In some ways, ethics are fine if you have a choice.

So, I guess you could say I was trading somewhat illegally when I was a child, but equally, I was also developing my business sense and having my own business. I guess you could say I was an entrepreneur. I learned the values of hard work, founded on the need to survive. Times were beginning to change around 1990, and at 10 years old I was trading with old ladies in an open market.

My father had his own business—two businessmen in one home—and we would both go to the market at night. It made an impact on him and how he is now. Quite simply, you make a product, and you can sell things, and he went on to sell many more things in later life. Effectively, he became a salesman.

Around 1991, my grandma was gifted a small piece of land from one of the collective farms from Soviet times as 'compensation' for the collapse of the Soviet Union. She got a few animals, and she gave me a present—a young bull (a very thin one). This was not your typical present—not a computer game, not DJ Decks, not even a football—but again, survival was paramount.

Living on the outskirts of my small town, I took care of the bull for one year. I sold the bull, which incidentally was called Zero. In 1991, we had a new currency in Lithuania, and with the money, I bought a computer.

Close to my hometown, there was a secret military factory; it had closed, and, in its place, it started to produce Spectrum computers with a memory of 48 kilobytes. Not a lot, of course, and this was also at a time when we also had to buy cassettes to run programmes. But if you have cassettes, you can copy them, and in turn, you can sell the cassettes.

From computers, I made the transition to music. I turned to DJing. It was all low-tech, but of course, to DJ, I had to use cassettes. I had about 300 cassettes of music to DJ with, and I would bring about 50 or 60 to DJ with me on any occasion. And not forgetting, you need something to play them on. So, I had to bring the cassette player as well.

I recall one event I was partly responsible for organising—a dance marathon—where between 10 and 15 couples started until the last couple was standing. It was never ending with only 5-minute breaks. My sister brought me food because no one thought about the DJ—he was the only one playing!

The dance marathon was never-ending. Incredibly, 30 hours later, the dancers were still dancing, so I had to find a way to end the marathon. I wanted to go home, take a break, and sleep, so I decided I would introduce those on the floor to hard-core techno. It had the desired effect.

Back then, the rate of pay for DJing was 30 Litas which is the equivalent of €7 per day. As you can see, I wasn't motivated by money!

My passion for music started with a humble cassette player. It was the prize for being confirmed a Catholic! Yes, religion contributed to my DJing career. I'm joking a little, but when I was making my First Communion at the age of nine (my parents were not so religious, but my grandparents were good Catholics), the deal was that I would get a cassette player for making my first communion. Business is business!

I used this equipment at a local vocational school where my friends were studying. It got so much use. My friends were borrowing it when I was around 14, and then I started playing even when friends went out of school. I was left playing on my own.

But as with all technology, you have got to keep improving it to keep up with the times. I had to find a way to make more money to buy better equipment. That's when I started to make flowers to sell at the cemetery on All Saints Day.

Most will probably know already that music and DJing are part of my story, but the details of the journey and how I got there maybe not.

“Working in residential care is immensely tiring. Having been someone who also came through the system and carrying that with me also is somewhat of a ‘burden,’ that you need time to process and come to terms with.”

Sandra Zoomers

## Sandra Zoomers

Compassionate Youth Ally, Non-Formal Achiever, Global Youth Work Facilitator, Connector of Communities, Learning Enthusiast, Badge Innovator, Assistant Dog Supporter, Urban-Rural Connector – YOUNG PERSON IN CARE!

**I grew up in an environment that, to put it simply, was not the best. It wasn't the best upbringing I could have hoped for. I spent part of my youth in care, and unfortunately, I broke up with my family. I am or was effectively 'one of those' young people that youth workers work with.**

But this is what has shaped me and made me the person I am today, and I have embraced it. It would have been preferable that it were not like this, but it is, it was, and it's part of the journey that I have had to navigate and accept. But I don't view it as some kind of disadvantage or some kind of disability, if you take my meaning.

This 'black side' has influenced me so much that it's like a thread running through all my stories. While it has a 'black side' there is also a positive side to it. It has encouraged me to think in different ways, to deal with different situations and scenarios, and ultimately to think out of the box which I now consider my specialist skill.

It's somewhat funny—ironic even—that these stories are called 'Stories from Outside the Box' because that's exactly what my experience is—my own unique experience—one that spending time in care has taught me. So, it fits and is in keeping with that idea of thinking differently.

I have an instinctive feeling for things, especially when I meet people. I think I'm often touched by who I meet during my life, and to see when they struggle, they must think outside of the box to survive, and how this gives them chances to grow. This grew stronger in my job as time progressed, but it's not limited to my work; it's something that is with me, something I've garnered from my own experience.

Almost fittingly, I worked in youth residential care for 10 years. In 2010, I was awarded as Best Care Worker. I became an ambassador for my work. When I was on stage with policymakers to receive my award, I brought a few young people living in care that I worked with and asked them to do the ambassador's tasks together with me.

Not long after the awarding, while it was undoubtedly a positive recognition externally, I found myself grappling with internal doubts and a lack of positivity about my own capabilities. The disparity between the acknowledgement from others and my own self-perception created a sense of confusion and inner conflict. This led to a state of 'burnout.' I felt that if people nominated me, I must continue, and thus became burnt out even though I had the other young ambassadors to work alongside me.

I gained valuable insights from these relationships, working alongside other ambassadors and the individuals who joined me on this journey. I am very grateful for those who walked the path with me. One of those supporting me was on the board of the organisation that I am part of. I am professional, though, and I had to keep my 'distance' from them.

**Working in residential care is immensely tiring. Being someone who has also come through the system and carrying that experience with me is somewhat of a 'burden' that requires time to process and come to terms with.**

You might think, having come through it as a young person, you would want to stay clear of it as an adult, but to return to it felt natural. To be able to support others, navigate difficult moments, negotiate, persuade, create, and imagine things in another way is a journey I had to travel.

Because I didn't have a 'normal' upbringing, it helped me think out of the box. My childhood taught me how to be creative and how to use that in my life to face the various challenges that I have. I saw how some colleagues I worked with were not always as empathetic to the young people in care that I was working with.

The young people we work with don't choose to be there. There are multiple reasons why people end up in care, but it is our duty and responsibility to make their involvement as smooth as possible.

One project we were involved in had 25 leading managers from all the top banks working with 25 young people. It was these kinds of projects that were slowly helping me make the step towards Erasmus+. The programme had the potential to provide life-changing opportunities for those who were in care.

My lived experience of being in care motivated me to remain in care, even though I still don't know why I chose to go into social work. I understand and feel the struggle with it.

Again, my lived experience is a factor. I grew up in my own family, but I almost grew up on my own, if you know what I mean. At one point in my life, I ended up being homeless.

An adult (teacher) going home from work would see me regularly in the central station in a big city and engage with me, thus beginning my journey into youth care. I was afraid to go back home. I needed to fight for myself and learn to make decisions. And this is how I began to think outside of the box in terms of making decisions.

Having walked the path I have, my motivation in life now has become simpler. I can't rely on things like Erasmus to be my 'career' and therefore I need to tailor my expectations, for example, moving to a tiny house in a rural area.

I want to be free, I don't want a big mortgage, and much prefer travelling. I have been to South Africa. There, I see a totally different culture. I went there 3-4 times per year. There, I experienced a different way of thinking. There, I learned so much about who I am. Up until I was 35, I thought that everybody thought the same as me.

My lived experience brought me to that conclusion, but life has transformed during this time. Since 2008, I've been with the same therapist. She's 74 years old. She is my rescue, my anchor, and my role model. She illustrates the power of the individual—any individual—to enter your life at a particular moment and become that supportive adult that everyone needs. Everyone needs someone to back them. Just as the teacher who saw me in Central Station did.

One of my plans in life is to write a book. Perhaps putting pen to paper for this is the start of that moment. My lived experience has made me who I am—someone who has had to think out of the box to survive adversity and navigate through challenging circumstances. It's my specialty, and I embrace it.

I may have been a young person in care; I might have worked in the care system, but the care system does not define me. But it has helped me to think outside the box!

“We went to France, although neither of my parents were considered French. We started life in a hotel in Paris; we spent one year in the hotel. Due to constant moving, my mother lost everything three times and my father twice. I speak French, but my mother tongue is German. At home, we had a 'melting pot' of languages.”

**Bernard Abrignani**



## Bernard Abrignani

Son, Father, Husband, Grandparent,  
French-German-Italian born in Tunisia,  
World War II “out-come”, Teacher, Youth  
Worker, Diversity Promoter, Believer in  
Humanity, Politician, Skier – PROUD  
IMMIGRANT!

I was a child without roots but surrounded by love. I was born in the South but migrated north. I became a child of EuroMed before EuroMed was a ‘thing.’ I was travelling from one side of the region to the other and trying to build bridges between both sides of the “White Sea,” as it is said in Arabic.

My destiny? I was trying to give others the chance that I had throughout my many lives as a Teacher, a Youth leader, a Youth Worker, Members and Creators of NGOs and today, Civil Servant, and local Politician.

And not forgetting, parent, grandfather, and husband. I try to connect things. In my youth workdays, it was joining theory to practice, making sure it was not only ‘saying’ but also ‘doing’.

I try to do this always in a philanthropic, philosophical, and progressive spirit, practicing solidarity, mutual tolerance, and respect for others and oneself in total absolute freedom of conscience. This is how I try to live. Being part of the EuroMed movement provided me with the chance to put and continue to put my values into action!

But those values were not some policy or strategy documents but rather my upbringing, which nurtured and curated this instinct that I carry with me.

At my age, I have had many lives, if you take my meaning. I’m the firstborn French, but not from France; I was born in Tunisia. I’m the fourth but last immigrant coming from Sicily. My mother was born German. My father is Italian.

At 19, my father went into the French army. Tunisia was delivered from the German troops by the Americans. Tunisia was a protectorate. To become French, my father had to become a soldier. My father was part of the D-Day landing in Provence. He was fighting in the war for France, but he never saw France and had never even seen snow.

He was in Vosges, and it had a terrible winter while he was based there, and he got frostbite. When you have a war, it seems you have the worst weather. This is how it felt for him.

My father entered Germany and met my mother at Lake Constance. She was a refugee fleeing from Soviet troops in Silesia. French soldiers were not allowed to have relationships with German women. He came back to France, but secretly returned to Germany to marry my mother at the French Consulate. They got married in the French-occupied territory (the Black Forest).

They then went to Tunisia by train and boat. This was not a short journey by any means. They lived close to Tunis. Tunis was a cultural shock for my mother—no toilets in the house, and she was not accepted by her new Sicilian mother-in-law.

My mother was living in Silesia but had studied medicine in Vienna. She wanted to study history, but her work was judged ‘not German enough’ by the Nazi authorities, so she had to study medicine. Once the Soviets invaded, she had to escape Vienna.

When in Tunisia, she worked as a nurse, which helped her integrate, making life easier. As you can appreciate, being German after the Second World War was not the most popular and well-received community. I have made a family video about my family called ‘How the Ice and the Sun Met.’ It was important to document the story so it would not be lost through time.

I have always liked history, and this is why I always wanted to know about countries. I have an interest in and respect for each country. It’s a natural thing for me, partly because of the very mixed upbringing and background I have and how I have moved around. For the first four years of my life, I grew up in Tunisia. Interestingly, the next time I went there was on my honeymoon.

When Tunisia became independent, we had to leave. Rebels from Algeria crossed into Tunisia, and my father was on what was called the 'Red List.'

I started my professional life as a teacher and then moved to the post of Director of a special school with pupils with intellectual disabilities. Then I was called by the Ministry of Youth and Sport and offered a position by them leading the development of EuroMed.

**We went to France, although neither of my parents were considered French. We started life in a hotel in Paris; we spent one year in the hotel. Due to constant moving, my mother lost everything three times and my father twice. I speak French, but my mother tongue is German. At home, we had a 'melting pot' of languages.**

My father was 80 before he went back to Tunisia; he left when he was 34. He would say, 'They expelled me, and I don't want to cry.' I used the opportunity of a prep meeting to encourage him to come back. He was walking in Tunis and recognised everything, and after 2 days, he was able to speak Arabic again. And then we went back to the South. When working in Tunisia, my father was one of the guys searching for water, not oil.

I don't remember bad stories, even though I used to visit my grandparents in Germany. I was surrounded by buildings that had been destroyed. I was the only one who had a grandfather in WWI (on my mother's side) fighting for the Germans, but in WWII, my father was fighting for the French against the Germans.

It is never so straight-forward. These situations and our experiences tend to be quite nuanced. My experience as an immigrant, living in various countries and with quite a mixed background, was entirely beneficial for my work, of course, but what it instilled in me was a love affair with diversity and accepting of others, and it made me who I am today.

In an era where being an immigrant often comes laced with negativity and derogatory headlines and where (in lots of European countries), immigrants are made to feel not welcome, being a proud immigrant is the very thing that ironically has instilled in me the values that are needed in society if we are to succeed collectively.

Having been an immigrant in the context of contemporary challenges faced by immigrants in various parts of the world is very relevant for my own construction. My pride in my immigrant identity and my belief in the positive impact of diversity on society are uplifting and serve as a reminder of the importance of embracing inclusivity.

**"Summer 1977: a couple of days before departure, things are get-ting prepared, and the car is be-ing packed for our return to Germany. Family members are visiting. And then, while I was already 'tasting' a new long trip on the road, I'm told the news is about to have a major impact on my life! 'Aunt Cesaria, you are staying with her; you're not going back to Germany.'"**

**Salvi Greco**

A portrait of Salvi Greco, a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a dark jacket. The image is overlaid with a blue semi-transparent shape that contains text. The background of the entire page is white with several yellow stars of varying sizes scattered across it.

## Salvi Greco

European, Comfort Zone Enhancer,  
Allergic to boxes, Misplaced, Bulky  
Shoes Lover - CHILI BELIEVER!

**Many people know I travel with my chilli, but very few know its origin.**

Growing my own chilli was a challenge and a legacy from my father, who passed away two years ago. I started hoeing and putting my hands into the soil of my father's garden as a reaction when he became sick, with a timely and definitive diagnosis. I took over growing tomatoes and salads, but the challenge was about chillies because my father was also a great chilli lover.

My love for chilli started when I was 7. It was a 'special event'—chilli and dealing with your 'childhood shit' as it were. Not many will know that I was also a baby immigrant. My parents were living in Germany. A big part of my childhood was fully in German; I was deeply Italian and a fully German-speaking child.

First class after kindergarten in Germany—back in 1977—my parents wanted to come back to Italy. They still needed some time to plan. My parents thought it would not be good that I go to second and third class in Germany, so my parents decided that I should start second class in Italy.

I loved returning to Italy every summer for holidays because of the long trips by car to and from Italy. Across the Alps, up through Italy to Lecce, and after a couple of weeks back to Wuppertal in Germany,

**Summer 1977: a couple of days before departure, things are getting prepared, and the car is being packed for our return to Germany. Family members are visiting. And then, while I was already 'tasting' a new long trip on the road, I'm told the news is about to have a major impact on my life! 'Aunt Cesaria, you are staying with her; you're not going back to Germany.'**

I remember like a big blackout in my mind. I remember at some point it was like waking up after a long, deep sleep. I was in my aunt's house, and I was crying like hell. I remember they were trying to play with me along with a little bird, but I was just desperate.

In the first days at the house of my aunt, I was hiding and crying in her garden, and suddenly I saw a little plant. There were a couple of red things on the plant. I bit them, and then I started crying even more.

I felt the strong hotness of the chilli, and while still crying, I started also enjoying that bittersweet taste and... feelings. In that moment, I decided not to cry anymore in my life. I have cried, of course, since then, but never again in the same way.

In those days, many Italians left their children with their grandparents and relatives. Those were quite common stories of emigration. So, the wider family took responsibility for raising children. The wider family in Italy is an extension of the immediate family. I stayed with my aunt for two years. My mother was the first to come back, and then two years later, my father.

A double trauma. Discovering my "abandonment syndrome" trauma was indeed traumatic. When I was 20, I was in a group of volunteers working with children with a difficult background. One day, we were in the studio of a psychologist for supervision. I was there to better support children; I ended up spending two years with the psychologist.

The "abandonment syndrome" trauma came out when I was talking with her about my relationships and how I was always "quitting." The exact moment I realised how beautiful that relationship was.

It became clear that I prevent things from happening so as not to get hurt. This was how I discovered my childhood trauma. I was

young, and when you are younger, you grow accustomed to things like this and push them a little to the back or completely to the back. It's only in certain situations that it reappears, and then you have to deal with it.

And this trauma from childhood started a never-ending relationship with chilli. It was a trigger, but something I ended up embracing.

My parents were not farmers. In Germany, they were working with metals in a factory. When my parents returned, they bought some land and started farming. We were producing tobacco, olives, and olive oil. We started growing vegetables—and chilli, of course—for our own use. I quit farming quite early, but when I took over my father's garden, I couldn't help but start with chilli.

The chilli world is a wonderful one. There are thousands of species of chillies, and there are different levels and shades of spiciness. The Scoville Heat Unit (SHU) measures the level of spiciness on a particular scale. In Italy, many think that the Calabrian chilli is the strongest, but on the SHU scale, it scores only 300,000 units, "only" because the Carolina Reaper, the actual world's hottest chilli, scores 2,200, 000. Yes, you read that right. Measured in hundreds of thousands, a chilli can also be scored in the millions.

Chilies also have wonderful names. Ever heard of the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion, for example? It's also in the SHU top-five ranking. It was the first "serious" chili I tried, before the Carolina Reaper and others. It was during a dinner with a lady in New York, when I proudly shared my Italian chili thinking how, if she could stand it, but then she gave me that little Trinidad Moruga Scorpion and I was in heaven and hell.

While eating chilli and learning to cook with it, I grew up. I went to vocational school to learn to cook. I didn't go to university, and my main learning came from my interests and passions. I worked in a theatre company, on a radio, did street work and social work, and this led to my connection with European programmes.

I encountered "Youth", then "Youth in Action" and so on, and as I did, I was also becoming more aware of myself, and after many years since my path with the psychologist, I also gained a new, different awareness of my childhood trauma.

I'm aware I grew up with a compressed rage, a feeling that I was misplaced. My childhood was in Germany, but I was not German, and some Germans always looked upon me as the 'Spaghettiesser' (spaghetti eater), and in Italy I was seen as the "German child".

Chilli and the European dimension work probably saved me, so sharing my chilli with friends and colleagues when I'm travelling and working across Europe is just a little giving back.

There is something therapeutic about growing your own chilli, or just your own food, for that matter. I get immense pleasure from giving those tomatoes, salads, and chillies to my friends wherever I go, and I can say it's only from the sun, water, and care of my own hands.

"Life, my young Padawans, is like a Jedi's journey' Carlos began the workshop, using the Force to capture their attention. "Just as Luke Skywalker faced challenges and overcame them, you too can conquer the obstacles in your path."

**Carlos Sousa Santos**

## Carlos Sousa Santos

Social Innovator, Friend, Dreamer,  
Cinematic, Facilitator, Visual Thinker,  
Design Thinker, Coach – RESILIENCE  
MANAGER WITH THE FORCE!

### What If... Carlos Sousa Santos was a kind of Jedi?

Once upon a time, in the vibrant city of Braga, Portugal, there lived a 49-year-old Portuguese man named Carlos Sousa Santos.

Carlos was not your typical middle-aged man; he was a dedicated youth worker who found joy and purpose in connecting with young people and guiding them towards a brighter future.

Carlos's passion for his work was evident in the way he approached every aspect of his job. He was known for his friendly demeanour, contagious enthusiasm, and an uncanny ability to relate to the youth in ways that left a lasting impact. Little did everyone know, Carlos's secret weapons in building connections with the youngsters were his deep love for Star Wars, Marvel movies, and the legendary 007 franchise.

Carlos' small office was a testament to his pop culture fandom. The walls were adorned with posters of iconic Star Wars characters, Marvel superheroes, and James Bond in his various dapper disguises. His desk was cluttered with action figures, comic books, and memorabilia from his favourite films.

One day, as Carlos prepared for a youth workshop on career development, he couldn't help but draw parallels between his beloved movies and his work with young minds.

**'Life, my young Padawans, is like a Jedi's journey,' Carlos began the workshop, using the Force to capture their attention. 'Just as Luke Skywalker faced challenges and overcame them, you too can conquer the obstacles in your path.'**

Carlos seamlessly weaved the wisdom of Yoda into his motivational speeches, teaching the importance of resilience, friendship, and embracing the Force within themselves. The youth, initially sceptical, soon found themselves captivated by Carlos's unique approach.



When it came to teamwork, Carlos referenced The Avengers, highlighting the strength that comes from diversity and collaboration. 'Remember, like the Avengers, each one of you brings a unique superpower to the table. Together, you can achieve greatness!'

His workshops weren't just about career guidance; they were infused with life lessons inspired by his favourite movies.

As Carlos discussed the importance of adaptability, he delved into the world of James Bond: '007 always finds a way out of tight spots. You too can navigate the challenges of life with style and resourcefulness.'

Carlos's unconventional methods garnered attention, and soon, other youth workers sought his advice on how to engage with their charges. The synergy between his passion for movies and his dedication to empowering young people became a powerful force.

As the years passed, Carlos continued to use the magic of Star Wars, Marvel, and 007 to bridge the generation gap, leaving an indelible mark on the lives of countless young individuals.

The force of his impact spread far beyond the streets of Braga, proving that sometimes all it takes to connect with youth is a little bit of movie magic and a whole lot of heart.

And so, Carlos Sousa Santos's story became a legend in the world of youth work, reminding everyone that inspiration can come from the most unexpected sources.

Dream: it might come true...

“Stories constitute the single most powerful weapon in a leader’s arsenal.”

Dr Howard Gardner,  
Professor,  
Harvard University.

**Volume 3 will  
appear soon.**

**Thank you  
for reading.**

