
Story of a great adventure

By Gisèle Couvreur – dojo of Halle (Belgium)

A year ago, in the small municipality of Etterbeek (Brussels), a few people started a project called the "Free Go". Originally, the "Free Go" is a creation of young students from the Free University of Brussels. They wanted to help the many students whose budget no longer allow them to feed themselves decently. They had the good idea to collect the "unsold articles" from food stores and sandwich stores from the campus and the neighbourhood. The goods collected were shared among the students. But very soon, the demand exceeded their possibility of storage. They asked then for a room and found second-hand refrigerators, so that they could store the food and make it available to everyone.

And the "Free Go" was born.

Very soon, this initiative was copied by the Brussels municipalities. Our municipality was no exception and also created its "Free Go". To do this, it provided us with two rooms, free of charge. We found refrigerators (three and a large freezer) and a small ad in the local newspaper was enough to recruit the small team of volunteers who run the project.

The objective is of course to avoid food waste ...

We are about 15 volunteers who offer twice a week during an hour the "unsold goods" of two bakeries, three organic stores, a large organic sandwich shop, as well food given by the vendors of our local Sunday market. We have teams that gather the "unsold" and two teams of 5 people who redistribute them.

To find out how it works, I went to two "Free Go" of neighbouring municipalities, but this time as a client.

I was able to observe how humiliating it was to stand in line to receive a small amount of food, and for one person only, whether you live alone or not!

There were also tensions in the queue, with everyone wanting to be first in line ...

And finally, we had to give our name...

When I joined the team of my municipality, we took a training course at A.F.S.C.A.(the Federal Association for Food Chain Safety) to know what we could do or not in terms of hygiene and respect of the cold chain.

Very quickly, we had a lot of people at the door, up to 70 people per evening and very quickly tensions started to arise in the queue.

Naturally, I proposed to manage the people who were waiting outside, because in addition to these tensions arose the problem of the cramped space, with an additional stress for the volunteers.

So I stood in front of the door and started talking to each person. That's how I got to know them, and I lowered the tension by explaining that they were doing good to the planet, that they were reducing waste. We also began exchanging recipes to cook the fruits and vegetables

that we sometimes received in large quantities.

The tensions are gone, and the people who arrive well in advance line up with a smile, they greet us and help us when we arrive with our arms loaded with goods.

At our "Free Go", you don't have to give your name and you take what you need.

So that everyone can have something, I count and re-count the people who wait patiently, sometimes in the rain or like yesterday in the cold.

I inform my colleagues of their number so that they can manage the quantities to be distributed, because nothing must remain in the room!

Because of the small space we have, once all the goods are exposed, I also make sure that there are only five people in the room at a time (but permanently), in addition to the volunteers.

When food remains, we look for and find solutions to prevent it of being thrown into the garbage, either by sending it to other associations or by freezing it.

I spend at least 5 hours a week to do this volunteer work, because I live very close to the local and also because I want to do so. But others do as much, if not more! It's not important!

What is important is to be useful, to be able to reduce inequalities a little bit, but above all to make a small gesture for the planet.

And believe me, there's nothing like a mom's smile when I ask her if I can give her child a banana.

As I explained at the volunteer party I was invited to, volunteering is a nice gift, it's like doing samu.

Samu is a gift for those who do it, those who receive it, the planet and the universe.

It's like stardust touching everything and anyone who can see it and receive it.

Gasshô : Gisèle.