

# Solhagagruppen Opens the Hearts and Minds of American Students

Chelsea Pomfret- Whittier College, CA

On October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Solhagagruppen opened its doors to 32 American students from DIS (Danish Institute for Study Abroad). These students are all studying child development and are interested in learning about children with special needs in an international context. They soon learned that Scandinavian schools for children with disabilities not only go beyond any American school standards, but that there are also top notch after school, holiday, and weekend programs for these children as well. In addition, this population is not forgotten once they have aged out of school and become adults. Solhagagruppen provides resources for people with disabilities in Sweden at all points in life, no matter what age they are.

In order to understand Solhagagruppen's work and Sweden's view on people with disabilities, it is imperative to mention LSS. In simple terms, LSS is a legislation that grants rights to people with functional impairment (Granskad, 2011). It states that that these individuals have the right to govern their own lives (Granskad, 2011). This applies to people with mental disabilities such as autism, people with permanent impairment such as from brain damage, people with severe physical disabilities and anyone with an impairment that affects their ability to function in daily life (Granskad, 2011). The people that qualify under LSS get the services they need for free.

Solhagagruppen is a Swedish corporation that can provide the services that are available to these individuals under LSS. It's



**Solhagagruppen works to create a personalized routine for every individual that they work with. Here, one of the leaders shows the DIS students a boy with autism's schedule for weekends.**

an organization that supports individuals who are functionally impaired in all aspects of life. The Solhaga Group's motto is "Opportunity for everyone to live a good life- all your life!" (Camehagen, 2011). Solhagagruppen provides support in the form of pre-school, school, short term housing, group homes, summer camps, work, and care homes for young people. Their



**Pictures at the doorway of staff and friends who will be staying for the weekend -An individualized solution plan for individuals with autism at Solhagagruppen care home.**

objective is to customize solutions for individuals (Camehagen, 2011). This means that the services provided can be personalized in order to benefit the individual the most. The staff takes a holistic view when it comes to the individuals they are working with and look at the individual in a long-term sense. The organization values

flexibility, devotion, and respect as necessary qualities for staff (Camehagen, 2011). They take pride in the quality of their services as well as their emphasis on open dialogue and communication with the individuals they are serving (Camehagen, 2011).

When the DIS students visited Solhagagruppen, they were able to see for themselves everything that the organization has to offer. Walking through a care home for children ages 1 to 21, they saw the ways in which the solutions for individuals are customized. For example, when walking in the door, there are pictures of the staff and the other children/teens that are there. It also indicates who is there presently, and who will be there for the afternoon/ weekend/ holiday. In addition, each individual gets their own book and schedule that the staff creates for them, and they are scheduled for stays with the same people every time. This especially helps the children or teens with autism who have a difficult time with new people, transitions, and changes in routine. They will enjoy their stay the most if they are able to know what is happening next and if they know who they are staying with. It was apparent to the DIS students that Solhagagruppen puts their time and effort into personalizing their services so that the individuals have a positive experience.

The U.S. provides rights and services for students with special needs under the IDEA legislation (2004). This allows free education in the least restrictive environment possible along with several other support services depending on the child or young adult's condition. However, none of the

services in the U.S. are as extensive or inclusive as Solhagagruppen. There is not an American organization that has all the resources and help that Solhagagruppen provides through municipality funding. There are special education classrooms and school programs that assist the children through grade school. There are various summer camps, afterschool programs, and organizations such as the Special Olympics that help with socialization, self esteem and sometimes give the parents a much needed break. However, not all of these resources are free and therefore accessible to every family. Also, although these organizations exist in different parts of the country, it doesn't mean that every state or city has these resources depending on funding, location, etc. Unlike Sweden, there is not one cohesive organization working all over the country with the goal helping the function impaired population in all aspects of life like Solhagagruppen. The U.S. could definitely learn from Solhagagruppen and the Scandinavian educational system in general. Maybe the DIS students that were fortunate enough to visit Solhagagruppen will be inspired to bring the philosophy and mentality of this corporation back to the states and find a way to improve the quality of life of American people with special needs.

Works Cited:

Camehagen, Lars. *Welcome to Solhagagruppen*. Solhagagruppen, 2011. Web. 16 Oct. 2011.

Granskad, Sidan. *Social Services-LSS –The Swedish Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments*. Söderköpings kommun , Aug. 2011. Web. 16 Oct. 2011.