

WETLANDS YOUTH CONFERENCE

European Bahá'í Youth Conference

We were given a foretaste of the magical atmosphere of Wetlands 3 as soon as we stepped into the clean and friendly Nymagen train station. A cluster of young Bahá'í women was waiting for us, holding high a flimsy sign. This was to be our ride to the conference and our first encounter with radiant Dutch Bahá'ís. The conference took place in a special centre, miles away from urban life, somewhere in a wooded area; that was to become the setting for our spiritual union.

Wetlands 3, running at the same time as a Mediterranean Bahá'í conference, was intended for people from Ireland, Northern Ireland, Belgium, Holland, Scotland, Wales, England; the youth committees of these countries together with the European Bahá'í Youth Council (EBYC) were responsible for organising the conference. The Irish came at least forty strong in a bus; they were outnumbered only by the stronger Dutch presence. While England may have played its bright and boisterous part, it had a humbler representation, for its size. Altogether some 240 youth and junior youth gathered.

Workshops aside, other main day activities included the tranquillity zone in the chapel and football and volleyball, neither of which I took part in. There were pockets of youth hanging out in every place in and around the grounds. As evening came sweetly and imperceptibly over day; one memory that remains is of youth sprawled out on the first floor merrily singing songs over a guitar.

The second night witnessed a spectacular party; certainly one of the best I personally have had grooving with Bahá'ís. An Irish youth took control of the turntables provided by the competent Dutch organisers and the dance floor saw a free flowing unraveling as people styled in the circles that formed and vanished into the ecstatic energy of the hall.

Among the daily workshops one had to choose from were: the existence of God, Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í weddings, meditation, dance and drama. One was free to move in and out of the self-repeating workshops over the three days, with the exception of moral leadership which had a three-day long continuous programme. The workshops gave people the initiative to question for themselves and often could be appreciated by the Bahá'í and the non-Bahá'í participant alike.

A poignant and edifying episode of the conference came when Petra Zingel, a Dutch Bahá'í who is bound to a wheelchair, showed a film about her life; physically disadvantaged at birth and mistakenly treated as mentally disabled by her care providers, Petra said that after what she has learned from her life, she would not change it for anything. The lesson learned here was the importance of being able to respond positively, whatever may happen, and truly celebrating life.

One of the joyous occurrences of the conference happened the afternoon that two bus loads of between fifty and one hundred people went to the town center of Nymagen with "Awake" the Dutch dance workshop. There they sang the Global Hymn, a Bahá'í composed song which called for the world leaders to unite in consultation over the plight of the world. Pamphlets and invitations to the conference were passed around to people.

The most memorable speech came from the Bahá'í Youth Council for England member Dion Azordegan who addressed all, it seemed at first cautiously, but with increasing fervour, so that the power and truthfulness of his discourse would have been recognisable to even an indifferent heart, if only by its attention-grabbing tone and volume. He began by giving the youth an appraisal of the reference points and values prevalent in society today; the point to be taken here was obvious for any young people associated with the Faith. Dion stressed the beauty and joy of living in the spiritual world and gave an account of one particular Hand of the Cause of God who spoke with such zeal and ardour, gesticulating wildly, knowing what this illusion of a material world was worth.

Expanding the vision of what we youth were doing together, we connected with the simultaneously occurring

Mediterranean conference covering Italy, Sicily, Greece and other islands; sharing a similar programme and purpose. We were drawn together with them in spirit as we sang "Many Weathers Apart" to them over the receiver of a held up phone and listened in turn to their raucous cheers.

The creative spirit came forth vividly and perhaps more abundantly than in previous Wetlands. The performances of the two talent shows left one with a fluttery impression of colour and richness. Among some of the gems was one performed by Petra Zingel who filled the hall with a piercing reverence as she sung a poignant ballad accompanied by guitar. Another melody, sung by a small group of junior youth girls, was moving in its purity and in the beauty of its message of love. Rap performances were given by the Reading/London massives and by the Dutch posse. The performances flowed, with people queueing up for the stage until closing time.

An account of the workshops and events which took place does not truly describe the conference, which was more like a series of chaotic spiritual rushes which left one floating a few inches above the linear, and time-constrained world. As we were having our group photo taken, in the loose mass of people I saw two hundred and forty people having two hundred and forty different experiences. Focusing on the practical purpose of the conference of galvanizing youth into cohesive action, on the last day, everyone grouped into their corresponding regions to review and discuss their local situations. The conference finished with two gospel Bahá'í songs - a summation of holy exhilaration, a good-bye firecracker and a bursting invocation and celebration of the new day.

Due respect must be paid to Sheena Wortley of Ireland and Charlie Law of Holland, our radiant and energetic hosts, and to the ushers who stuck firmly by their task.

Sebastian Lopez