

Giving children a chance



Jakub Reus and Radek Laci, who have both been assisted by the group's "Help me start in life program," and Ditta Pospíchalová, who coordinates the program.

Group assists youngsters facing a difficult start to life

BY DANIEL BARDSLEY
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Radek Laci speaks four languages (Czech, English, German and Russian), has just completed a bachelor's degree and has now embarked on a two-year course to secure a master's degree.

He is keen to learn another language, Spanish, and hopes to develop a career in marketing and would ultimately like to live overseas.

For someone who was left by his mother at a children's home when aged 6, the 22-year-old's achievements so far, and his ambitions to build on them, are nothing if not impressive. That he is able to carry on with his education and aim for a postgraduate degree is at least partly thanks to the help of a Prague-based organization called *Dejme Dětem Šanci* (DDS, Let's give children a chance).

This group's "Help me start in life" program, one of four initiatives it runs, has provided Radek with financial support to cover some of the costs of his course at Prague's University of Finance and Administration. With the bill for his accommodation alone totaling 43,000 Kč a year, without assistance he is unsure if he would have

been able to continue his studies in marketing communications and public relations.

"The foundation helped me to carry on with my education, with the master's degree," he said.

Radek, originally from Hradec Králové, is one of 29 young people currently being helped by the program, now in its second year. Assistance can sometimes be especially important for young people in homes a long way from Prague or other large cities "If, for example, they want to study something in Prague or another big city, but they're in a village in Bohemia, it's difficult [for them] to cover the costs of traveling and accommodation," said Ditta Pospíchalová, coordinator of the project.

"The idea of this project is that it helps the children to study what they want, and that really helps with keeping the children motivated." Across all its programs, the organization, founded in 2011, offers assistance to children in 27 homes around the country.

The Czech Republic is known for having a large number of children in institutions, with DDS estimating that nationwide the total is around 7,000 in 120 homes.

A paper by Helena Šašková and Johana Mertová published last year in the *European Journal of Social Work* said there was an "adversely high number of children living without a family" in the Czech Republic and described the care for vulnerable youngsters as "a problematic issue." The researchers said attempts to place children back with their biological families

were frequently difficult because the domestic situation often did not improve.

Given the difficulties many children in care face, it is perhaps unsurprising their educational attainment is often below average. Indeed Radek said it was difficult for many young people in children's homes to appreciate the importance of education. "Our children's home is very closed and there is very little information about another life outside. When the children are about 18 years old, they just want to move back to their family. But I don't think this is ideal, because the families are not really the best," he said.

In addition to providing funds distributed by the children's homes, DDS offers financial rewards for the individuals themselves to help encourage them to complete their education. For example, they might receive 1,000 Kč if they achieve a particular grade on their course, or 5,000 Kč if they finish an important stage in their education. "We want them to continue to study. If they finish studying and receive a degree, they have a better start to life," Pospíchalová said.

Another of the programs run by DDS is called "I wish." Through this plan, members of the public can donate funds to fulfill a specific wish of a young person, such as receiving a computer. In Radek's case, he is hoping a kind-hearted individual might fund the purchase of a drum, to complete the drum kit he uses in the band he plays with.

So far, around 300 wishes valued at more than 1.25 million Kč have been fulfilled. This year alone over 100 children have been helped and in excess of 500,000 Kč has been distributed through the scheme. For many of the schemes DDS operates, funds donated by members of the public or companies are allocated to a specific child.

Jakub Reus, 17, is another youngster assisted by the organization. His mother died two years ago and since then he has spent time living with his father and younger sister, although he moved into a children's home in Prague as the atmosphere with his family could be difficult. As he continues with his studies, he is now receiving financial support from the "Help me start in life" program. Jakub would like to go on to university, possibly to study journalism. "I value the support very much. It means a lot to me. At the beginning, I couldn't believe that someone would support me. It's a big thing for me," he said.

The organization is keen to secure additional funding, both from companies and individuals.

More information is available at www.dejmedetemsanci.cz.

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