

My end of week: NATAŠA OLIMPIKI

Athletes are always ready to help

The humanitarian organization "Olimpiki" has been working since 2013. Then, with the help of athletes, artists, journalists and other public figures, they started organizing several events, during which they collected so many funds that today we count them in five-digit numbers. Nataša Olimpiki, the founder and head of the organization, points out that we should not forget actions that cannot be measured with money. "Material things come and go, but experience stays with a person forever and enriches you", she said.

Lucijan Zalokar



Photo: Marko Feist

Soon it will be ten years since the “Olimpiki” organization was founded. How do you look at the decision to start such a project today?

- First of all, I feel happy that I mustered enough courage and decided to take that step. At that time, I divorced my ex-husband, with whom I also ran a joint business, and I was alone with three children. I had to find a new creative challenge. Caring for others has always been at the center of my interests, so I wanted to do something that could help those in need. When I look back and remember how long it took us to put that pyramid together, I'm really proud of how it all came together and I'm happy to be leading the “Olimpiki” forward.

At that time, you organized a lot of different events. The first actions took place within the "Malča Beličeva Youth Centre" in Ljubljana, after that you teamed up with the greats of Slovenian sports several times... Did you think at the beginning that so many memories would be accumulated in ten years?

- It is difficult for to do something, if you do not believe in it. I knew that I was persistent and dedicated, and dedicated, and I hoped that our story would come to life as it did in the end. The children from the "Malča Beličeva Youth Centre" will come to Jahorina these days and I am very much looking forward to spending time with them again (when we talked on the phone, the interlocutor was in a hurry to Bosnia and Herzegovina; writer's note). In a way, my heart is still in that centre. When we started, I spent at least two hours there every evening; we played together, braided, brought famous personalities to visit... Those children are writing to me today; I like to say that memory is living energy. Of course, we also helped them materially, and material things come and go, but the experience remains forever in a person and enriches you. Also, the action "Greats of Slovenian Sport" was an unforgettable experience. I managed to connect a lot of different people and together we created something good and beautiful. I am apolitical, but it was still nice to see that some of the politicians responded, including the president of the republic - Borut Pahor. Various experts, such as psychologist Gabi Čačinovič Vogrinčič, collaborated regularly. There were a lot of people involved and it's hard to single out anyone.

I think you also got in touch with Jože Trobec, the author of the legendary Vučko, who also created a new mascot for the "Olimpiki" organization.

- That's right, Mr. Trobec is a wonderful man and he made such a beautiful and cheerful mascot, which reminds us that it should be like that every day. The mascot bears the name of our organization and spreads love, unity and solidarity throughout the Balkans and beyond. By selling the mascot, we will help children and families around the world. I've been thinking for a long time that the "Olimpiki" should have a mascot. I also talked about this with Minja Subota, the president of the board of directors of "Children's Cultural Centre Belgrade". When we worked closely together for several months in 2020, we thought that it had to be something related to Sarajevo, where he was born (Subota, otherwise a renowned Serbian television presenter and musician, died on September 17, 2021; writer's note) and where the Olympic Games were held in 1984. Then the idea to contact Trobac was born. I wrote to him via Facebook, and he responded quickly. I asked him if he would be willing to make a mascot for the "Olimpiki" organization. When he saw what we were doing, he immediately agreed. Our next huge wish is to organize an event and light a big fire during the presentation of the mascot, which would burn in memory of the victims of COVID and as a symbol of peace in the world. Now we are discussing when and how to carry it out.

It sounds like you are currently fully occupied with plans related to the mascot, but probably you are also dreaming of a new project in the near future.

- I already mentioned the extended weekend in Jahorina, I expect a very pleasant time with a lot of wonderful people. After that, we are preparing an event in Raška in September. Their municipality is twinned with our Hrastnik. We agreed with the mayor of Raška to visit them with several groups of children in the middle of September, when Raška Day is celebrated. Raška is surrounded by marvelous mountains that offer many opportunities for hiking, panoramic driving and other activities. Numerous athletes and musicians will also attend the event. By the way, Aca Lukas strongly supports our organization.

Once you said that the key to the success of charitable actions is that you are guided by your heart in this work. However, we must admit that for a well-organized event, there are other things besides that.

- Communicativeness is certainly useful. As well as sincerity and commitment: people quickly feel what intentions you approach them with.

Did you consciously decide to focus on charity events with a sporting connotation, or was it just a coincidence?

- I have been always doing a lot of sports. I run regularly, I do yoga, I like to go out on the snow in the winter, I water ski in the summer... It seems to me that in primary schools, the first lesson should necessarily be a lesson in physical education. Every day. Yes, sport is very close to me. And I notice that athletes are always ready to help. During all these years, I have not met a single person who asked to be payed a single euro for attending our event, or who would refuse cooperation without a proper reason. Maybe they are like that because they have invested a lot of energy and time in their achievements, at the same time they remember well that their parents supported them and gave up other things in order to support them. That is why it is not difficult for them to understand that they have to help when they can.

Humanitarian workers are faced with inequalities, injustices and abuses of different kinds every day... How much does all this hurt you on a personal level?

- Very much, but especially then I try to help as much as I can. Due to the events of the last two years - the COVID epidemic and the war in Ukraine - it seems that more and more people are becoming less regarding others, and in my opinion we should unite, help and

facilitate dialogue in this difficult time... In the Balkans we can see how deep are the consequences of wars and nationalisms, which led to them.

Not so long ago I visited a Roma settlement in Novi Sad. People were very happy and grateful when they brought them things, which we collected through donations. However, it is difficult to imagine the circumstances in which they live. I spoke with a woman who complained of kidney pain. She was visibly exhausted. Three children were jumping around her; she was holding one in her hands. I asked her if the children were hers, she confirmed. After that it turned out that she is the same age as my older daughter – 24!

You opened the “Olimpiki” representative office in Belgrade two years ago. Why did you decide to take that step?

- I have always wanted our organization to work outside the Slovenian borders. I was born in 1974, still in Yugoslavia, my father is Croatian and that is probably why the Balkans are very close to me.

I guess it's quite difficult to start charity projects abroad, where you don't have as many acquaintances as at home.

- Well, you can see that I like to talk (laughs). I think that, if you are open to new opportunities and contacts, even abroad is not too much of a challenge. It may have been very difficult at the beginning, but for other reasons – the epidemic and all the restrictions it brought. With one foot I am still in Ljubljana, where my children are; two are often around the world, but Slovenia is still our base.