

Down's Syndrome: "The real handicap is not believing in them"

Pubblicato: Lunedì 23 Novembre 2009

The case of Alberto, is an example of what a Down's person can achieve and exceed. This young man, from Cavaria, who attends the University of Insubria, achieving excellent results, was also spoken about at the conference "The Down's person: planning an adult future", which, today, has brought experts from all over Italy, to Varese, and at which the Minister of Interior Roberto Maroni is also present. This international initiative, which continues tomorrow, was organised by the University of Insubria, in collaboration with the "Azienda Ospedaliero Universitaria Ospedale in Circolo e Fondazione Macchi" in Varese, the Local Health Authority in Varese, the Welfare Department of the Local Health Authority, the Province and the Varese Town Council, and is sponsored by the Italian Senate, the Region of Lombardy and the Medical Association of Varese.

The proceedings, in the crowded Aula Magna in via Ravasi, were chaired by Giovanna Brebbia, who for a year has worked to organise this important event to discuss Down's Syndrome. "We included the topic of the **future** in this conference because it is necessary to consider what research has done to give people with Down's Syndrome the chance of a better life, and how much still has to be done. We think this that meeting may give families hope, but that it is also a stimulus for action." This direct message went out to all levels of government in the area, which were well represented in the audience, including the Minister Maroni, the regional councillor for health, Luciano Bresciani, the prefect of police, Simonetta Vaccari, the Head Public Prosecutor, Maurizio Grigo, the Mayor of Varese, Attilio Fontana, the President of the Province, Dario Galli, the councillors for social services Gregorio Navarro, for Varese, and Christian Campiotti, for the provincial administration, and the head of police, Marcello Cardona.

Renzo Dionigi, the chancellor of Insubria University explained, "Down's syndrome is an important subject that we shall be dealing with from a scientific point of view, with the help of various contributions. It is a topical subject that few universities have dealt with in such a complete way." From the social care institutes, which are coordinated by the Local Health Authorities, to the schools, from the help of a fundamental resource, like voluntary associations, to the problems of adulthood. The speakers explained the organisations involved in the growth and education of a person with Down syndrome, and how these organisations collaborate with each other.

"We started by analysing the needs of the families involved," explained the psychologist **Silvia Mocchetti**, who presented the network of services run by the local health authority, in Varese. "Every day we try to satisfy the requests for information, the need not to feel alone, trying to give relief to parents and to respond to the demand

for accessible and connected services.”

“In the schools of the province of Varese there are **2500 handicapped students, 70 of whom have Down’s syndrome**” said **Claudio Merletti**, director of the provincial school department. “There are 1011 support teachers who follow them, and, throughout the region, there are seven local centres which are a point of reference for teachers and parents on matters of disability. At the moment, I think we have to work on two different fronts: on the one hand, by educating managers about the various diseases, and on the other, by insisting on coordinated activities by organisations and authorities. A critical step in coordinating functions, is the first two years of high school.”

Concentrating on potential, and overcoming prejudices are two messages that have been repeated many times during the conference. A shining example is **Alberto Sanna**, a young man with Down’s Syndrome from Cavaria, who, with perseverance and constancy, is taking exams in Communication Sciences at Insubria University. His experience was described by **Francesca Zappa**, the head of services for the disabled in the University: “With Alberto, we set up a course of study that took into account his strengths and weaknesses. It is a course in which he is the protagonist, and he knows this. The work with Alberto is progressing with the collaboration of the lecturers and those in charge of the courses, and it has allowed Alberto to achieve great results.” The day ended with a reading by the actress **Silvia Sartorio**, a native of Varese, from “Your name is Olga” by Joseph Espinas, and with a concert.

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