

Hej Främling!

- A Unique and Colorful Integration Initiative

Hej främling! is a Swedish non-governmental organization that has received international attention and, among other things, qualified for the final in the UNHCR's award Nansen Refugee Award.

Business leader Emma Arnesson has won the European Parliament's award for outstanding Europeans, and is currently working in an expansive organization, that has spread to seven of Sweden's counties.

"We try to re-define what integration is," Emma says.

We meet with Emma at Café Tingshuset in Östersund on a cold winter day. She offers us coffee, and starts to talk about her journey, from being a toddler with a strong sense for justice into becoming the manager of the non-profit association Hej Främling.

"I have never lived anywhere else in Sweden than here, and I feel incredibly at home in Östersund," she says.

You started your first non-profit association already when you went to high school. How come you engaged in difficult issues at such a young age?

"Already when I went to kindergarten, there was a concept called 'the children of Biafra'. I was very concerned about that back then. It was quite a shock; what! Why aren't these children as privileged as I am? I started to reflect on the fact that the world was so unfair for children, and I have a memory, from when I was about five, I sat by the dinner table at home and my mother and father talked about the children of Biafra and how terrible their situation was. I remember that I, who never liked green peas, changed after listening to their conversation. I felt guilty that I had such a good time when so many other children had nothing. So one can say that it was that disaster that first sowed a seed within me. I have also always been an empathic person, and in a combination with curiosity and knowledge, it kind of turned me into who I am today.

Dreamed about Founding a Town for Exposed Children

Already at an early age, Emma dreamed that, when she was old enough, she would raise money and found a "children's Town" after she was inspired by SOS Children's Villages' work, watching a fundraising gala on TV.

“I chose the socioeconomic program at high school where, in the final year, I made a project work, where I collected as much money as possible as a donation to the construction of Astrid Lindgren's Children's village. The project ended with arranging a charity gala. The house was full of people, and I got maybe a quarter of a million Swedish Crowns, totally, during my final year of high school. I then felt that 'now I can die happily, having made some difference'. But when I opened the morning paper the next day, there was a picture of me all over the front, with the headline stating the success of the gala. That actually made me feel that 'now I have to do more. This is just the beginning.’”

Travels in Southeast Asia and Internship with UNICEF in Africa

After high school, Emma and a friend went for a six-month journey to exposed areas in Southeast Asia, in order to get an idea of the World, and the needs of exposed people. A few years later, her research in the way of the World continued, as she received a scholarship as a 'World enhancer' - through the *Peace and Love Foundation* - a scholarship that for Emma became a way into the UNICEF.

“I was in Zambia as an intern at UNICEF when I was 22 years old. And I was completely floored by how terrible the world can be. There were children who were extremely malnourished that I had to feed and take care of. The worst thing was when I was in an emergency hospital for children who had been subjected to sexual violence. There were children from three years and up there and the doctor, Mr Zampa, did everything he could to take care of as many people as possible. One day, a two-year-old child, who was completely torn apart by sexual violence, was found in a container outside a hospital. Being there and seeing all this was the hardest thing I've done in my entire life. Leaving there, knowing that this is the way it will continue, every day of the year, was horrible. When I got home from this trip I got depressed. It was overwhelming, like a pitch black darkness. I did everything I could to help from home, raise money and make sure that more volunteers could go to Mr. Zampa.

Depressed after Impressions in Zambia

The depression didn't go away easily. Finally, Emma decided to move to Canada for a year, to try to beat it by doing what she loves most - skiing. In Canada, she also met her love, who would also accompany her back home to Östersund later. When they returned to Sweden, in 2013, the asylum residence in Grytan, just outside the city, had just opened. And the success story, Hej Främling!, first saw the light of day.

"I read a lot and heard the talk on the town about the asylum accommodation in Grytan and it was, like... various complaints. I had such a hard time understanding how people could be so condescending towards asylum seekers, when it felt like no one had actually even met any of them face to face. These were people who came from completely different environments and cultures. Who would help them? Who would make sure that they would have a chance of getting integrated in our society? What were their needs? To get the answers, we decided to go there, to them. And just as we had thought before, there were a lot of people on a very small area who neither knew where they were nor what was about to happen to them. At the same time, I experienced that there was no structure in their everyday lives. So we had a dialogue with them and asked them about their situation and what they told us was quite discouraging. How they had lost family members along the way. How they had lost everything they owned. How they were totally terrified about their future.

"Two Pairs of Cross-country Skis was the Best Thing that Had Happen to Them"

"We then tried another approach, by asking what they thought was the best thing that had happened since they came to Sweden, in order to find something to reinforce. They told us that, in the winter before, a woman had donated two pairs of cross-country skis to them. That was, by far, the best thing that had happened to them since they came to Sweden. That made us realize that we can improve other people's everyday life by just being ourselves. And that is, like, the whole philosophy of Hej Främling still. We are not an aid organization - it is not about just giving, but we should do what we need and want for ourselves - to increase or preserve our mental and physical health. But we should do it together with others - and in doing this we strengthen each other.

So, that's how it all started. Can you tell me about how you work at Hej Främling today?

"Today we are a non-profit association, offering health-promoting activities for everyone, in order to increase health and togetherness. We stand on three legs - sports, culture and outdoor life. This is based on what the people themselves think is fun and like to do. We have a super-successful concept called 'Inlöparna', which started here in Östersund but which today is available in 15 locations around Sweden. You simply meet and run together. We also engage in yoga for both adults and children, as well as in winter sports. We dance, read and discuss books, family activities and excursions, and we trail the mountains.

Who joins? Mainly asylum seekers?

“No, and that is extremely important to remember, in order to be a Hej Främling initiative, the activity must be open to everyone. We do nothing just for asylum seekers or new arrivals. That is a common misunderstanding, that we do things for asylum seekers only, but fifty percent of our participants are what you may call ‘conventional Swedes’. This means that we have an extreme diversity. We have children and seniors on the same activities. And if you look at the integrating effect that Hej Främling yields, is actually the result of friendship and relationship. That makes it very much easier for new arrivals to become established in society. Finding a first job, an internship, a home, understanding social codes and being able to extend their personal network. And we know that there is widespread exclusion for Swedes too. Our activities are warm and inclusive. Even those who are to shy to go to an established yoga studio, just might find the courage to join our activities, and may later on be able to leap out of the nest and fly.”

12,000 Participants in 2017/2018

Hej Främling started in Östersund in the autumn of 2013, and is today represented in seven counties in Sweden. In total, the association organizes 33 activities a week on a regular basis in Sweden - and during the fiscal year of 2017/2018 Hej Främling had 12,000 participants at their activities.

“It is truly amazing what has happened, when looking back on that first ski school in our Northern inland forests in 2013. That we at Hej Främling have found a concept that engages so many people all over Sweden today, it's just incredible and so exciting. And we continue to work and grow all the time.”

What is it like to run such a non-profit association in Östersund?

“To me, Östersund is the World's best place to live and to work, especially because there is so much freedom here, both in the outdoors but also among people. I find that in Östersund, you are encouraged to actually become who you really are and that means you can also reach your full potential. There is a lot of warmth here, and I'm not talking about the weather, but about the people. The commitment of the citizens, in contributing clothes and equipment, has been absolutely overwhelming. There is no end to the generosity and the attention. But the very best thing about living and working in Östersund is the feeling that defines this city - the will to make a good society, together.”

[Hej Främling literary means ‘Hello Stranger’]

Hej främling! stands strong on its fundamental values;

- To follow and spread knowledge about the UDHR (Universal declaration of human rights)
- Always make decisions that will be in favour to sustainability –economic, social and environmental
- Always choose to see strengths and possibilities in others
- Always encourage diversity, transparency, participation, solidarity and kindness

Hej främling! received The European citizen's prize 2017 and was a finalist in Nansen refugee award by UNHCR.