



**LAKE  
AID**

CHAQUE ENFANT COMPTE

## 'Finding our way':

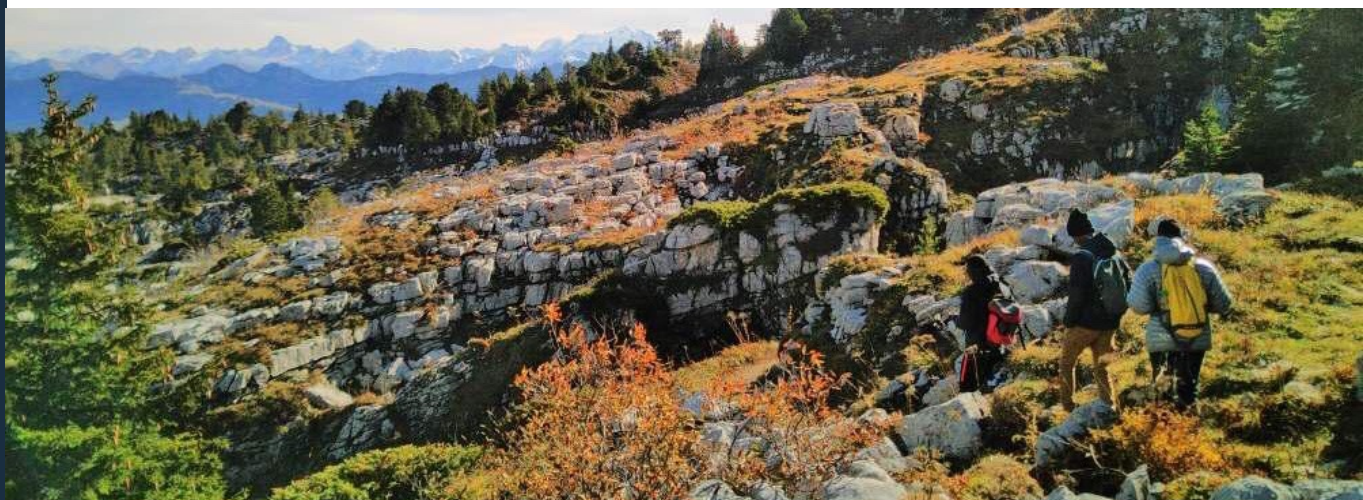
A study of  
unaccompanied  
minors and  
volunteer support  
in Annecy

November 2021

# Background to the study

[Lake Aid](#), a grassroots association established in May 2017 (*Association loi de 1901*) provides support, activities, homework help and essential supplies for unaccompanied minors, asylum-seeking children and homeless families in the Annecy region. Lake Aid traces its origins to the 2015 European migration crisis when Annecy locals, moved by the plight of children arriving at Europe's borders, mobilized tents, clothes and toys for children in urgent need. Soon realizing that asylum-seeking families in the Annecy area also faced significant hardship, Lake Aid volunteers began offering homework support activities for children and organizing social outings at the lake and in the mountains. When a large number of unaccompanied minors began arriving in Annecy in 2018, Lake Aid and other grassroots actors mobilized to provide basic material support to them.<sup>1</sup>

In 2021, Lake Aid commissioned this study to better understand how to best focus its efforts to support unaccompanied minors in Annecy and to maximize the positive impact of its ongoing volunteer activities.<sup>2</sup> Conducted between March and June 2021, the qualitative research included interviews with Lake Aid volunteers to learn more about their individual experiences of volunteering and to seek suggestions and insights on how Lake Aid might better support unaccompanied minors going forward.<sup>3</sup> An online survey was also developed and disseminated among Lake Aid members to understand their experiences supporting unaccompanied minors and the impact of volunteering in their own lives.<sup>4</sup> A mapping of other social services actors and associations included interviews and group meetings with the *Prefecture Service d'Accueil des Mineurs Isolés*, the *Maire d'Annecy*, the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme*, *Solidarité Migrants*, the *Croix Rouge*, the *Réseau Éducateurs Sans Frontières* and *Arve Réfugiés*.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, 10 unaccompanied minors offered their perspectives to inform the research, discussing their experiences on arrival in Annecy as well as their suggestions on how Lake Aid might better support young people. A total of 45 people directly contributed to this study.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The [Rapport annuel d'activité](#) published in May 2020 by the French Ministry of Justice, *Direction de la protection judiciaire de la jeunesse*, details the numbers of registered unaccompanied minors nationally and by department. This official data offers a key starting place for reflection: while in 2016 a total of 8,054 unaccompanied minors were registered across France compared to a more than 16,760 in 2019, the relative numbers are much lower than media, public discourse and political campaign platforms might suggest. In 2019, Haute Savoie registered a total of only 225 unaccompanied minors.

<sup>2</sup> The research was led by [Claudia Seymour](#), an applied social researcher who also volunteers with Lake Aid.

<sup>3</sup> A total of 9 Lake Aid volunteers were interviewed (in person or via Zoom).

<sup>4</sup> A total of 16 online survey responses were received (of which 6 survey respondents were also interviewed). The survey was designed, administered and analyzed by Delphine Pays, also a Lake Aid volunteer.

<sup>5</sup> Among those consulted were 5 staff members from the *Prefecture Service d'Accueil des Mineurs Isolés* (in person); 2 elected officials and 1 one technical staff member from the *Maire d'Annecy* (in person); 3 staff members of the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (in person); 1 volunteer from *Solidarité Migrants* (in person); 1 staff member of the *Croix Rouge* (by telephone); 2 volunteers of the *Réseau Éducateurs Sans Frontières* (in person); and 1 volunteer of *Arve Réfugiés* (by telephone).

<sup>6</sup> The research methodology draws on the [Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice](#) of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth, as well as basic principles of conducting [research with young people](#) and commitment to [Do No Harm standards](#). All interviews, discussions and the online survey were conducted on the basis of confidentiality.

# I. ‘Finding our way’: young people’s experiences on arrival in Annecy

Young people undertaking the migration journey to Europe today embody the universal desire for a life lived in dignity. They may have escaped conflict and political oppression, or they may be ‘merely’ fleeing the entrenched poverty and lack of livelihood alternatives in their home countries; in all cases, their journey has required tremendous fortitude, courage and determination. By the time unaccompanied minors arrive in Annecy, they have survived the most arduous challenges, and have demonstrated a capacity to navigate, at times subvert, and ultimately overcome the greatest of hurdles, often in the face of immense risk and great loss.<sup>7</sup>

These young people have been pushed to the extreme and have survived—testimony to their significant capacities for resilience.<sup>8</sup> The 10 unaccompanied minors who participated in this research project clearly demonstrate such resilience, but they also described the challenges they faced on their arrival in Annecy, the ways they searched for help, and their ongoing struggles to integrate and contribute to life here.<sup>9</sup> In line with ethical research practices—and in consideration of the situation of administrative precarity in which many unaccompanied minors find themselves—this research project did not ask young people about their migration journey, however, some of the key informants spoke of their situation once they had arrived in Europe:

*I managed to cross at Ceuta, and from Spain, I took an overnight bus to Paris. Once in Paris I met other young migrants. For all of us, it was “la galère”, we had to figure things out for ourselves. I heard from some people that there would be more work opportunities in Annecy as it’s close to Switzerland. So I boarded the first train I could find that would bring me here.<sup>10</sup>*



Photo credit: darcy.roehling.photography

<sup>7</sup> Numbers of deaths at sea, due in part to hardline European security measures, have increased significantly in 2021; see France 24 and BBC headlines from 14 July 2021 : [Les décès de migrants rejoignant l'Europe par la mer ont plus que doublé](#) and [The EU countries 'pushing back' asylum seekers at sea](#).

<sup>8</sup> Resilience can be defined as a dynamic process of positive adaptation to significant adversity. The relative sense of well-being and effective coping mechanisms entailed in resilience depend on a range of shifting and interdependent factors including individual agency, social support, and the capacities to fulfill aspirations and to make meaning of experiences (Seymour 2013). Gatt et al. (2020) conducted an international study that examined differences in resilience, wellbeing, and mental health behaviours in migrant and non-migrant adolescents in six countries (Australia, New Zealand, UK, China, South Africa, and Canada); among the 194 respondents between the ages of 10–17 years old, migrants arriving from other countries reported higher resilience scores when compared to non-migrants, yet they expressed reduced prosocial behaviours and higher peer problems than non-migrants.

<sup>9</sup> In line with ethical research practice, this study did not actively interview young people. The narratives included in this report were offered during informal meetings and in social settings with the researcher. The young people were aware of this study and consented to speaking about the generalities of their experience under the conditions of anonymity.

<sup>10</sup> Informal conversation with young person, 15 March 2021.

The unaccompanied minors described how they would navigate the system to formalize their administrative claim. First, on arriving at the Annecy train station, they knew to ask for directions to the [Red Cross](#) where they would be directed to emergency care.<sup>11</sup> Although the Red Cross does not specifically support unaccompanied minors in Annecy, their proximity to the office of the [Ligue des Droits de l'Homme](#) (LDH) allowed the young people to access referral services and support provided by the LDH. They were then accompanied to the responsible governmental interlocutor at the [Prefecture, Service d'Accueil des Mineurs Isolés](#) (S.A.M.I.), *Direction Enfance Famille*. Like most government social services across Europe since 2015, the S.A.M.I. was unprepared for the rapid swell of requests, and described their experience of system overwhelm:

*In 2018 we had a massive arrival of young people. Suddenly we had 400 new unaccompanied minors to deal with in addition to the 800 children already under our care. We simply did not have the capacity to take care of them.*<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, the administrative processes to formalize the young people's requests faced significant delays. Having at last reached the relative safety and comfort of Haute Savoie, these unaccompanied minors faced new and unexpected challenges. In particular, they described how the uncertainty around their administrative status, their delayed access to schooling, and their extended living in temporary accommodation, all weighed heavily on their minds:

*When we had first arrived here, we were so relieved. At last we had found a place to sleep, food to eat. We were met by people who helped us to find our way. But over time it got harder. We didn't understand the administrative processes. There were papers to fill in, appointments to attend. The rules kept changing. We were told different things. Sometimes we were treated like criminals. But the worst part of it all was all of the uncertainty and the waiting.*<sup>14</sup>

While eager to work and to contribute to life here—to express what psychologists and sociologists call 'personal agency'—the unaccompanied minors spent a significant period of time in a state of 'waithood', which was difficult to cope with and which had a negative impact on their mental health.<sup>15</sup>



Although the 10 young people who participated in this research project have all successfully found apprenticeships—and thus represent the 'successful' migration journey—they are now confronted with the mounting pressure from their families at home who have invested in their migration journey and now expect repayment and financial support. As explained by one social worker:

*The main priority for these guys is finding work as soon as possible. Their families at home made a huge financial investment to send them here, and with each passing day the demands on them grow. The pressure they are bearing is enormous.*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Interview, 15 May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, 10 June 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, 3 June 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Group discussion with unaccompanied minors, 15 May 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Basic to maintaining healthy mental functioning is a sense of autonomy, an ability to plan and take life decisions and to have a sense of control over one's environment, which all relate to the concept of personal agency, defined as the human capacity to "act mindfully to make desired things happen rather than simply undergo happenings" (Bandura 2001, p. 5). On the concept of 'waithood' see [Honwana](#) (2013).

<sup>16</sup> Interview, 21 June 2021.

In addition to the uncertainty and worry, young people described their struggles with feelings of exclusion and isolation, as well as animosity from strangers:

*The hardest part now is feeling unwanted by others. Whenever I am on the train, people look at me with what feels like hatred. When there are available seats, people refuse to move their bags so that I can sit down. The other day, a man stared at me for a while then said aggressively: "What are you doing here? Are you just hoping to marry a French woman?" I didn't know what to say, so I just looked down and stayed silent. I don't know what to do in these situations.<sup>17</sup>*

Almost two years after their arrival in Annecy, the 10 young people who participated in this study described their main current challenge as social acceptance. They had not expected that they would face such social exclusion, and the associated isolation leaves them questioning themselves and losing faith that they will achieve their aspirations. At the same time, they wanted Lake Aid volunteers to know how much it means to them to spend time doing activities that allow them to simply be themselves, to feel included and welcome:

*We love the sports outings and doing things with Lake Aid volunteers. We have so much fun in these moments. We love them especially because they help us to forget all our other worries, and all that we've left behind.<sup>18</sup>*



<sup>17</sup> Informal discussion, 15 May 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Informal group discussion, 22 May 2021. The significant positive impact of supportive social relations and access to shared community resources is established in the literature (see, e.g. [Bonanno and Mancini, 2008](#)).

## II. Lake Aid volunteers' experiences with unaccompanied minors

This research has confirmed the goodwill and generosity of Lake Aid volunteers, and the positive contributions that Lake Aid is making in the lives of unaccompanied minors in Annecy. The research also clearly reveals that the benefits of volunteering go both ways, with volunteers describing the great positive impact that active involvement has had in their own lives. Lake Aid volunteers explained how their lives have been enriched by their engagement with young people, which has offered them a real sense of meaning and purpose.<sup>19</sup> As explained by one volunteer:

*I started volunteering with Lake Aid because I wanted to do something meaningful. The more I got involved, the more my heart just started opening. I needed to do something meaningful, I needed a goal, to do something different... I don't know how it happened, but through volunteering, I started feeling more connected. This feeling of connection spread to other dimensions of my life as well.<sup>20</sup>*



Another volunteer described how the support provided to young people reflects back into their own life, with a renewed sense of perspective that is both encouraging and motivating:

*I feel the need to make a social contribution and I have chosen to try to help at a local level. I think these young people deserve all the help we can give them. They have gone through terrible difficulties. They are among us, and they are motivated to build the life they dream of. Their motivation is incredible, and it, in turn, motivates me.<sup>21</sup>*

Lake Aid volunteers demonstrate a strong sense of empathy, a capacity to understand the difficulties of others, and a willingness to deploy their positions of privilege towards a greater common benefit:

<sup>19</sup> Psychological research shows how personal well-being and perceived life meaningfulness are enhanced by supporting others and by building a sense of shared social connection. As one example in the literature, Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959), documents how Holocaust survivors constructed and reconstructed meaning of their experiences in the concentration camps; one of Frankl's main conclusions is that a 'will to meaning' is the primordial drive which motivates the human experience.

<sup>20</sup> Interview, 19 May 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Survey response 16.

*There is a sense of solidarity that many of us feel. All those media stories of harrowing journeys across the Mediterranean a few years ago... now we have these young people in Annecy. Imagine all they have been through. Here it's real, it's right here where we live... I think of my own child in another country, without any support around them. This thought alone motivates me to open my home to a young person.<sup>22</sup>*

Learning about the life of a young person from another place also contributes to an enriched appreciation of cultural diversity, as well as the privileges of one's own life:

*We once had a [young person] from Mali stay the weekend with us. It was Ramadan and he was fasting. It was the first time I had spoken properly with a [person of Muslim faith] about Ramadan, and I felt I understood the spiritual side of this for the first time. Our house overlooks the lake and normally people like the lake, but I sensed he was scared of the water. We got a map out and discussed his journey to France, which involved crossing the Mediterranean by sea. He said he could not swim, and I understood why his reaction to the lake was different. We tried to talk about Mali, as we had seen a film about it, but we sensed he did not want to talk about it. Often, he just sat with us. He seemed to enjoy our company, but we had no idea what he was thinking. It made my husband and I really think about our lives. It was very humbling.<sup>23</sup>*

In their capacity for empathy and their engagement in supporting the dignity of others, Lake Aid volunteers serve as leaders and role models. Such a commitment to human dignity and to a shared understanding of our common humanity are crucial and lie at the foundation of Lake Aid's programmes and approach.

*I give my time and energy, but I receive so much more in return. It is always motivating to see young people smile and progress. I am convinced that a true welcome- worthy of all- benefits the whole of society. When we meet these young people and share a moment with them, what stands out is their desire to be happy and to live with dignity, contrary to what many politicians and individuals would have people believe.<sup>24</sup>*

<sup>22</sup> Interview, 11 March 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Survey response 01.

<sup>24</sup> Survey response 03.



### III. Considerations for increased programming support

Lake Aid's growing base of active volunteers and financial contributions now offer possibilities for increased strategic engagement in supporting unaccompanied minors in Annecy. This study has examined current activities undertaken by Lake Aid and has considered how they fit into the ecosystem of support services in Annecy. Interviews with other associations, government actors and the youth themselves affirm that Lake Aid's interventions are aligned with existing needs, and its contributions are appreciated and beneficial. There are also ways in which Lake Aid might expand and refine its programme offerings in coordination with other social actors and associations. This section of the report reflects on how Lake Aid might upscale and adapt some of its current activities, including in the areas of school support, social activities and material assistance. It also considers ways to support temporary accommodation solutions and how to contribute to public awareness raising around the concerns of unaccompanied minors. Possibilities for offering support to volunteers working with unaccompanied minors are also considered.

#### School Support

According to associations working with unaccompanied minors in Annecy, Lake Aid has especially distinguished itself in the homework support it provides to young people.<sup>25</sup> At the time of this study, there were 11 volunteers providing regular homework support in Annecy. This activity represents a key contribution to students, not only for helping to learn the French language, but also for understanding different educational approaches and expectations that are essential for integrating into the French education system:

*All of the young people have missed school. There are so many challenges for them, such different expectations in the French schooling system... Volunteers help them with this, but their presence means so much more. We offer a supportive adult voice and provide a sense of community and belonging.<sup>26</sup>*

<sup>25</sup> This was emphasized during a meeting with local associations dealing with the closure of temporary shelters 26 March 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, 6 April 2021.





It is evident that Lake Aid’s school support activities offer great benefit, and their expansion would be welcome. It was noted, however, that regularity and commitment are essential; centres which host homework clubs need to know how many volunteers are coming and on which day for their own programming purposes.<sup>27</sup>

Although levels of homework club support depend on multiple factors including the French language and teaching skills of volunteers, and age of students they are helping, it was suggested that volunteers should receive some training and capacity building on supporting the specific learning needs for young people studying French as a foreign language.<sup>28</sup>



Providing guidance and accompanying young people with school administrative procedures and paperwork, including attending meetings with teachers was also suggested as a support that volunteers could offer if they are familiar with the French schooling system.<sup>29</sup> Finally, it was suggested that Lake Aid establish a library with age-appropriate books and French as a foreign language resources adapted to young people which could be shared among volunteers.<sup>30</sup>

## Social Activities

Unaccompanied minors and Lake Aid volunteers spoke of their positive experiences when participating in the wide range of social activities offered to young people, from football and biking to ice-skating and sledding. As noted by the unaccompanied minors who participated in this study, such outings allow them to forget about their troubles and to share experiences with others. Volunteers also noted their pleasure in participating in such activities, including with their own children. It is important to note that the activities most valued by young people do not require significant planning, logistics or budgets. Rather, the approach is about doing what one enjoys anyway, then sharing it with others. As one volunteer noted:

*Our social activities work best when they are about sharing what each of us love. This might include biking, football and other sports, or simply opening up family activities to include unaccompanied minors. In this way it is not only natural, but also easy.<sup>31</sup>*

The benefits to well-being and mental health for young people of such social activities are especially sustainable when they are done on a regular basis, and not just as a one-off experience. One interviewee cautioned against the approach to “renting a young person” for a one-time organized activity, which might actually do more harm than good to a young person in search of meaningful social connection.<sup>32</sup>

Lake Aid volunteers might more systematically consider pairing up with one or two young people to build a relationship in the longer term, as is already done by some volunteers with great positive results.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Interview, 10 June 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Survey response 08.

<sup>29</sup> Survey response 06.

<sup>30</sup> Survey responses 03 and 05.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, 31 May 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Interview, 1 June 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, 3 March 2021.

The *Réseau Éducateurs Sans Frontières* has a ‘*parrainage*’ or sponsorship programme in which volunteers are paired with an unaccompanied minor or adult asylum-seeker—together and over the longer term, they build strong, supportive, and meaningful relationships.<sup>34</sup> More formally, the *Mairie* of Annecy supports the *parrainage civil* programme, which supports the social integration of asylum seekers into France, and includes a ceremony to formalize the relationship.<sup>35</sup> Such sponsorship programmes can be especially helpful for unaccompanied minors as they advance with their administrative processes. This programme also formally recognizes the key role that volunteers have to play in the social integration processes of young people.



## ***Material support to service providers***

Lake Aid’s provision of materials for unaccompanied minors is notably appreciated, including school supplies, clothing, phone credit and bus tickets. Currently, materials are provided on an ad-hoc basis when needs arise, usually through requests via Facebook or in-person at the LDH. Lake Aid may consider ways to systematize these requests and supply of materials. For young people undergoing professional training programmes—which might cost up to €700 per academic year for enrolment, equipment and canteen fees—financial contributions would be very helpful.<sup>36</sup> Providing support for sports uniforms and transport fees for sports club competitions were also mentioned as costs that unaccompanied minors have a difficult time meeting.<sup>37</sup>

There are some ways to improve material support offered by Lake Aid. Some interviewees noted a need for higher quality control standards for some donations. In general, when deciding when to give second-hand materials, volunteers should ask themselves: Would I be happy to receive this? This is especially true for Christmas boxes, but also for school supplies.<sup>38</sup> Several interviewees also suggested that Lake Aid reconsider delivery of the Christmas boxes and Easter chocolates with a perspective of cultural appropriateness, noting that most unaccompanied minors are not Christian.<sup>39</sup> Finally, while food donations are greatly appreciated, Lake Aid volunteers should be aware that in emergency conditions, people in need may not have appliances for cooking or warming up food.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, 15 June 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, 28 May 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, 1 June 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, 1 June 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Informal discussions and observations, March-June 2021.

<sup>39</sup> The annual ‘Christmas’ party might also be reconsidered more agnostically.

## Temporary accommodation

During interviews with associations and government bodies and in conversations with young people, the need for temporary accommodation was repeatedly raised as significant challenge for unaccompanied minors. Accommodation needs differ over time: Initially, while awaiting administrative processing at the Prefecture, shelter may be needed for a couple of days or at most a few weeks until space opens at one of the official residential centres. Currently, these emergency solutions are found on an ad-hoc basis when volunteers from local associations post on Facebook in search of people willing to open up their homes. At a later stage, when the unaccompanied minors reach the age of 18 years, they are no longer able to stay in state-funded centres and thus require accommodation for a few months as they try to establish a more stable base.

*Once they turn 18 years old, these guys are left to fend for themselves. Sometimes a social worker will personally follow up their case and try to provide as much support as possible, but this is rare. The young people are not prepared for this and need a helping hand with the transition to an independent living situation.<sup>40</sup>*

At this stage, unaccompanied minors are usually undergoing their professional apprenticeship and so require close enough access to Annecy to facilitate public transport. Such options are very difficult to find.



While shelter provision is not part of Lake Aid's mandate, some volunteers do provide accommodation; it is clear that, in coordination with other volunteer associations, more host families are urgently needed for young people. Associations which specialize in finding temporary housing solutions for young people—including [Solidarités Migrants Annecy](#), [Arve Réfugiés](#) and [Dingy Solidarité Accueil](#)—have surpassed their threshold capacity for accommodation. Lake Aid volunteers who would like to host could add their names to the rosters of these associations.

In Annecy, the [Réseau Éducateurs Sans Frontières](#), whose objective is to ensure educational continuity for young people, has a shared accommodation arrangement for young people, but this has also reached its maximum capacity.

One option for Lake Aid might be to fundraise to support the costs of a shared-living arrangement for unaccompanied minors who have recently attained majority. This model might entail setting up a year-long lease in which young people can have a stable home until they are able to move on to independent living. In this case, young people would contribute to their living costs; for example, the young people who participated in this study noted they could contribute 325-350€ per month for such an arrangement. For collective living solutions, the foundation [Les Petites Pierres](#) provides matching funding.



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It would be important, however, for volunteers involved in hosting young people to receive some initial training and guidance, as engaging in such a process is not simple:

*Host families need to understand the priorities of the young people who face enormous pressure from home. They need to make money quickly. In many cases they are simply looking for a safe place to stay so that that can work. They are not necessarily looking for a family.<sup>41</sup>*

<sup>40</sup> Interview, 1 June 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, 3 March 2021.

## Awareness around migration

Lake Aid's commitment to humanitarian principles, perceived neutrality and clarity in communicating the support it provides to young people on the basis of human dignity are especially valuable in today's socio-political environment, in which public fear is mobilized around a securitized migration discourse.<sup>42</sup> Given the likelihood of continued inflows of unaccompanied minors in the coming years, such awareness-raising engagement might be considered as a public service.<sup>43</sup> In a context of great material privilege, Lake Aid volunteers have the opportunity to shift narratives around dignified livelihoods and human dignity:

*Often those of us who live in conditions of privilege think we have succeeded based on our merit and our hard work. This is also true, but we can be oblivious to the privilege that has enabled our success. This kind of perspective is helpful for explaining the mass migration flows we see now in the world. It is not an equal thing, but most people don't understand this. How can we contribute to dispelling the myths? <sup>44</sup>*



As Lake Aid volunteers have demonstrated, the process of humanization becomes possible through shared experiences and understanding the very difficult contexts that unaccompanied minors have left behind. Their migration journey is primarily about escaping extreme conditions that any of us would escape from if we could:

*But not everyone understands this. Most people here take their privilege for granted. We need to tell the stories of these young people, bring the situation home to people to break down misperceptions, to support the process of helping to humanize these unaccompanied minors, so that others can understand how hard they are working here and the daily struggles they face. They have no idea about the reasons these guys left home in the first place.<sup>45</sup>*

<sup>42</sup> Interview, 7 June 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Slow-onset environmental degradation, worsening global inequalities and increased economic scarcity contribute to the likelihood of continued migration flows. Rather than a migration 'crisis', what we are currently witnessing is part of a longer-term demographic transformation of people who "migrate to cope with adverse impacts on livelihoods, impacts on health, food security, access to water and other basic services" (Chazalnoël, Ionesco, and Duca, 2021). European policies which conceive of migration as a threat to be managed through securitized responsive are myopic and likely to be overwhelmed in the longer term. Concerted democratic engagement by citizens in Europe is thus needed to propel leaders towards humane responses that maximize the great potential benefits of migration while also diminishing the global structural inequalities that continue to drive migration (Global Compact For Safe, Orderly And Regular Migration, 2018; Seymour, 2020).

Yet care needs to be taken when talking with others about the plight of unaccompanied minors, as ‘well-intentioned’ othering can equally contribute to stereotypes:

*We need to be careful about perpetuating myths about ‘poor black kids’ needing our ‘help’. Such sentiments contribute to not seeing the individual. With such collective labels, racism is possible.<sup>46</sup>*

It is not easy to explain in simple terms the complex conditions of structural inequality within our interconnected global economy. It is difficult for people living in conditions of wealth and privilege to see how the lack of access to resources and opportunities for vast numbers of people in the world are also due to the trade and production policies of their own governments.



While individual volunteers cannot lift the burden of history, there is reason to hope that by engaging in informed discussions based on respect and a desire for understanding other perspectives, positive social change is possible. As demonstrated in the narratives from volunteers and young people who participated in this research, the most impactful way of shifting fear-based perspectives is through shared experiences. When people complain that migrants are benefitting from the French system, they might, for example, be reminded of France’s position as the historic standard bearer for human rights, dignity and equality. France is also committed to international frameworks on the protection of refugees and migrants, as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which pledges to ‘leave no one behind’.<sup>47</sup>

Such awareness raising can happen daily through interpersonal exchanges, or more formally through targeted educational outreach activities. During the research, interlocutors at the *Mairie* suggested that Lake Aid volunteers might propose activities with elementary school students to tell the stories of unaccompanied minors and of experiences of our shared humanity.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Interview, 31 May 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Interview, 31 May 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, 6 April 2021.

<sup>47</sup> France is signatory to the main international human rights frameworks ensuring the dignity and protection of all people, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Labour Organization conventions on promoting decent work and labour migration; as well as on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes a commitment to leave no one behind. France has also committed to the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Migration, both of which are rooted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

<sup>48</sup> Interview, 28 May 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Interview, 3 June 2021.

<sup>50</sup> *Agir auprès du public Exilé : Guide pour les bénévoles* by *Parcours d'exil* is a useful resource developed by mental health professionals. Lake Aid might reach out to Psys Du Coeur to explore possible collaborations.

## Support to volunteers

This research also shows that volunteers might themselves benefit from support and guidance. The difficulties faced by young people are in some cases extreme, and not easy to resolve. In particular, the mental health needs of young people may require sensitive and sustained psychological support that would ideally be provided by professionals.<sup>49</sup> As such services are currently lacking in Annecy, volunteers should thus be briefed on and supported through processing of at times difficult experiences when engaging with young people.<sup>50</sup> Intercultural differences, disillusionment, a sense of helplessness and exhaustion are all normal experiences that could be collectively worked through among Lake Aid volunteers, and with volunteers and staff from other associations.<sup>51</sup>

## IV. Way forward

This study has confirmed that the support provided by Lake Aid makes a real and positive contribution in the lives of unaccompanied minors in Annecy. As a grassroots charity, Lake Aid is appreciated for its contributions, and seen to fill a key social role. There are opportunities for scaling up activities, in particular in terms of school support and extended relationship-based social activities. Possible areas for increased engagement include offering temporary accommodation and contributing to public awareness-raising. There is also a call for Lake Aid to regularly engage with other associations and state services providing support to unaccompanied minors and to coordinate its actions with them. In these tumultuous times, it is clear that collective action is needed to realise the social changes that will allow us all to live in dignity, and with hope.



Photo credit: darcy.roehling.photography

<sup>51</sup> Interview, 31 May 2021.

# Acknowledgements

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