

Helping, not looking the other way

Interview with Marianne Waas-Frey



Marianne Waas-Frey was the founder and chairperson of Primavera, and is today its honorary chairperson. She was born in Stuttgart on October 27, 1931. After studying law, history, and politics, she worked as a freelance journalist. From 1961 to 1974 she was an editor at the “Stuttgarter Nachrichten” newspaper, before moving on to Bosch in 1974. Here, as “ws,” she was a leading contributor to the “Bosch-Zünder” until 1991.

Nothing is as old as yesterday’s newspaper. But as a journalist, Marianne Waas-Frey succeeded all the same in creating something lasting. Moved by what she saw on a trip to Brazil, she founded the organization “Primavera – helping children in need” in 1990. In 2008, this achievement brought her the badge of honor of the state of Baden-Württemberg “in honor of many years of voluntary service.” In the course of 20 years, this organization, whose membership is open solely to Bosch associates, has collected nearly four million euros in donations. This money is now helping 20,000 children living in slums close to Bosch locations in Latin America and in Asia. Marianne Waas-Frey has worked tirelessly and with immense dedication to give these children a chance of a brighter future. But it all began in Brazil.

Ms. Waas-Frey, what made you take the decision to found Primavera?

I went to Brazil in 1989 to report on a Bosch anniversary. After my work was finished, I spent an additional three weeks there on vacation. Sylvia Leeven, the wife of a Bosch manager, traveled through the country with me and showed me all our locations. She also took me to see the favelas, the slums near our locations. Going there was an incredibly moving experience, through not exactly risk-free. But Sylvia, who was socially very committed, knew no fear. We went right into the middle of the slums, and spoke with the people there. Then an old lady came up to me, took my hand, and begged me: “Help us, we need water for our children, otherwise they will die.” At that moment I knew I simply had to do something.

But it can’t have been easy to turn an idea like that into reality. Did you receive help from Bosch in setting things up?

Yes, you’re right. I knew right from the outset how things should be structured. We in Germany wanted to be responsible purely for collecting funds for children in need, while all the work done locally should involve Bosch associates and be overseen by them – that was a fundamental requirement, and still is today. But how were we to get the money together? At first I had the idea that each associate should donate one euro each year. But how do you go about that? It can’t be done without a lot of paperwork. So I went to talk to my supervisor, Wolfgang Knellesen. He heard me out and passed the matter on to the right people. Thanks to his intervention, we received permission from the board of management to use the Bosch organization for our purposes. To get the money together, we published appeals for donations in “Bosch Zünder.” This involved endless amounts of painstaking work. First I got in touch with the legal department, and they explained to me that



we had to found a registered non-profit association in order to be legally entitled to process donations. In no time at all we had the ten volunteers we needed to be able to found the “Primavera - helping children in need” organization in 1990. The association’s first committee published its first charity appeal in the “Bosch-Zünder” that same year. But even so, Primavera had a difficult birth and modest beginnings. Two years after its founding, we had the idea of putting on summer festivals on the grounds of the Robert Bosch House in Stuttgart to collect more money. It was from that point on that people took notice of us, and the board of management also continues to support Primavera to this day.

How did Primavera’s projects in other countries come about?

When initial reports of our work in Brazil reached India, they hit a chord, since the wives of Bosch managers there were also already doing admirable work helping out in the slums

of Bangalore. They asked Primavera for help, and we were happy to oblige. In fact, we discovered that there were people at all levels who were open to what we were doing and ready to do whatever they could to support our cause. We had unbelievable amounts of work. Many things involve a lot more work than you might think: things like making requests. And I also did all the association’s public relations work myself.

So ideas for new projects always came from Bosch associates?

Yes, right from the start it was Bosch associates who initiated projects. They got in touch with us from many different countries to tell us about the work they were already involved in. As soon as we had been presented with proof that Bosch associates were playing a leading role in a project, we were able to provide it with financial support. And then Sylvia Leeven even started up a project of her own. It’s still our biggest: the Centro Promocional Tia Ileide in Campinas. It takes

children from the poorest families off the streets and offers them not only food and medical care but also a comprehensive educational program in addition to their school lessons. This work has even received international awards.

How is it that a woman like you is willing to devote so much time and effort to the cause of helping children in need?

It may be in my genes. My whole family is the same; my mother was always helping other people and lending a hand in emergencies. But it’s also got something to do with my personal values: I had a Christian upbringing and have managed to hold on to my childhood faith, which has always been a great help to me. So you need values to live by, but the most important thing is never to look the other way!

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