



10 questions for Michael Speckenbach of Bowspirit Kids On the way to the "kids' fun ship"

In November 2018, Michael Speckenbach (49) launched the "Bowspirit Kids" project in Lübeck, Germany - the vision of a passenger ship which, as a "nautical recreation camp", should help sick and traumatised children to forget their pain and worries after surviving surgery or treatment. "Turning children's tears into tears of joy" is the project's slogan. Almost half a year later, Kai Ortel spoke with Michael Speckenbach about the progress and challenges on the way of creating a "kids' fun ship".

assessments. If the opportunity for direct exchange arose, however, it usually turned out that these negative voices were due to the fact that our project had not been dealt with in detail, but without detailed knowledge a quick pre-judgment was made that this project could not succeed at all. Such reactions are regrettable. Not so much because they are negative, but because they are purely due to lack of knowledge and ultimately our target group - the sick and traumatised children - have to suffer from the fact that people do not take the trouble to understand an idea.



The founder of Bowspirit Kids: Michael Speckenbach.

(Photo: Oliver Gloß | Foto Krause)

1. At the beginning of November 2018, after more than three years of intensive preparation, you went public with the project "Bowspirit Kids" and since then have been present with the idea on all traditional and modern communication channels. What were the reactions to your idea of a nautical recreation camp for sick and traumatised children?

The reactions were both surprised and surprising. We deliberately only had a very small circle of "confidants" before we went public, because we wanted to avoid that our vision was already being talked about before it was fully formulated. In this respect, the starting signal was relatively unprepared for many of those around us - from families to friends and acquaintances to business partners. The feedback was usually a double "Wow": Wow - what a great idea. Wow - what a big idea.

But of course there were also negative

Surprising - for us - was the reluctance of the media to take up and disseminate the topic. Both in the so-called social media and in the editorial offices up and down the countries, it seems that a sense for stories worth telling has been lost. And what was surprising was what a small lobby seriously sick children on our rich continent have. Here our worst fears have actually been surpassed.

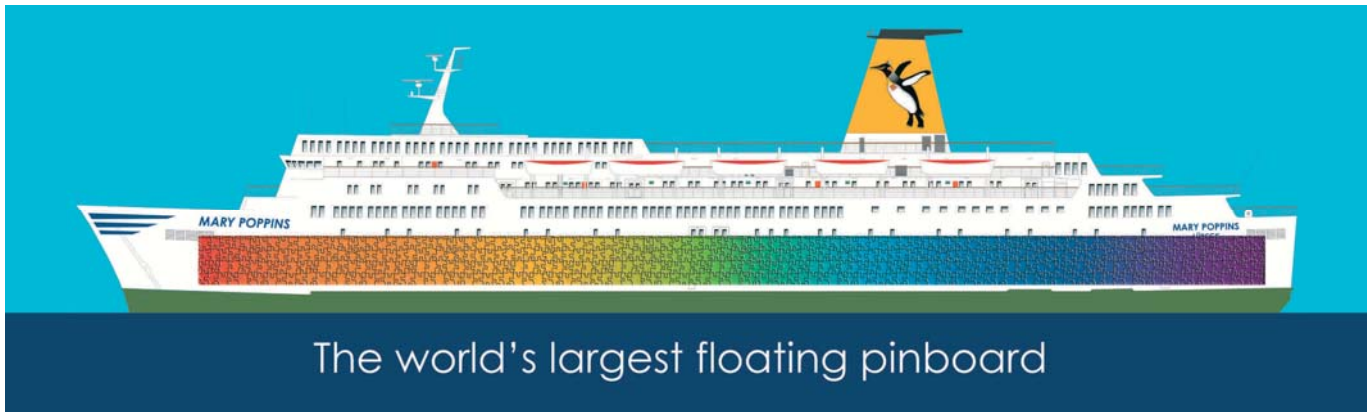
2. Are these children not better cared for in a hospital or in an in-patient therapy facility on shore than on a ship? How will you convince parents to put their children in the care of Bowspirit Kids for a limited time?

We don't want to compete with hospitals or existing therapy facilities. We are not a hospital ship. Whoever wants to come to us on board must have completed the in-patient therapy or at least a definable therapy phase.

There are hardly any in-patient therapy facilities on shore for what we want to achieve. That is precisely the problem and the gap in care in our social systems throughout Europe that we want to close with our project.

With us on board, it is a matter of coming to terms with what has happened and integrating it into one's own life. The whole thing, however, not as psychotherapy on the therapist's couch, but playfully and rebuilding self-confidence. If you like, we want to give back the childhood lost through illness and/or trauma.

We do not need to convince the parents at all. After weeks and months with their seriously ill child, they know exactly what has been lost to it and to its siblings. There is no doubt that there is a desire for an appropriate offer, but there is simply no strength



to demand it out loud.

Like any holiday camp for healthy children all over the country, the Bowspirit Kids' floating recreation camp will be designed and supervised by experts. We just want to take care of a special clientele who needs "recreation from illness" in order to start self-confidently into a hopefully healthy future.

3. There are many charity projects, charitable campaigns and calls for crowdfunding in Germany. Why should you especially support "Bowspirit Kids"?

Nice try (smiles), but I'm not going to cross that bridge. Every social and/or voluntary commitment is important for our societies. The projects are as colourful as our societies in Europe. And all of them contribute to improving people's life situations. That's great.

I can't answer the question why you should especially support Bowspirit Kids, because of course I'm not objective.

But I can try to explain in a few words why Bowspirit Kids exists at all:

When a person - grown up or small - falls seriously ill with body or soul, we start to run a "machine" in the form of acute care. Based on our life experience, we adults can better understand what is happening to us. Children cannot do that. For children life is simply lifted from the hinges, even if you don't notice it right away.

Following acute care, there is usually a follow-up treatment or rehabilitation for adults, at least in Germany. In other European countries it looks more limited. In the context of such therapeutic stays, psychotherapeutic accompaniment is usually also offered.

And now we have the key problem: follow-up treatment or rehabilitation measures are available for children and youths in Germany only at very limited conditions, because these are usually measures of vocational rehabilitation of

the pension insurance institutions, but the children do not exercise any profession at all. On the other hand, if there are, they are linked to a clinical picture that can be treated during the rehabilitation period.

But when it comes to integrating something that has happened into one's own life and learning how to deal with it, our social systems fail at this point. And if we look abroad in Europe, then there are no corresponding measures for adults and certainly no measures for the sick children or their siblings.

That is the supply gap that we as a society have to close ... and for which Bowspirit Kids offers a solution.

If we all do not do this together then the following will happen: If the child comes back to the family after the acute medical care and is released as "cured", the family, which was in a state of emergency for months, will try to return to everyday life quickly. I don't say this as a reproach, but as a description. And I have an extraordinary understanding for this from my own experience. There is simply a lack of strength in everyone involved!

The experiences remain with the sick child or its siblings, however, still "unsorted" in the vita. And they will break out at some point - as sure as the Amen in church - and mostly exactly when one cannot need it at all. For example, only after decades as an adult with own family and standing in the professional life. And then it gets really expensive for the society.

Studies have shown that the direct accompaniment of mental stress with children and young people has an efficiency of 1:2.5 to 1:3.0. This means that the earlier we help with the integration, the stronger the child goes into the future and can later even be a helper itself.

But so far we permit ourselves the "luxury" to look away. The affected families have no strength to ask for help loudly. And the children, as non-voters, have no lobby in social policy. As is well known, new social services are only introduced if one can directly generate

votes in the next election.

Instead of spending one euro today, we will spend two and a half to three euros in the future. In my view, that is foolish.

I myself have a hands-on mentality when it comes to recognised "organisational errors". I cannot wait until a political decision-making process has worked its way through party congresses and commissions, because I see the suffering children. So I looked for partners who think the same way. And we are now offering societies throughout Europe a solution that can be implemented quickly and effectively. The people just have to want it and support the project financially with a micro contribution.

4. The actual crowdfunding phase started in mid-November with the idea of the "world's largest floating pinboard", in which the sides of a real ship are "filled" with the entries (photos, sayings, greetings, etc.) submitted against donations. How far has this part of the project progressed?

Careful, please. The participation in this campaign is not a donation in the sense of the German tax law, because you receive a return service. So you won't get a donation receipt for it. The support of our world record attempt "The world's largest floating pinboard" is comparable to the purchase of merchandising articles, as you know it from other social organisations.

The pinboard still has a lot of space for entries from supporters. This is among other things due to the fact that for the German supporters we have reached so far, a donation receipt was apparently more important than having fun with such a campaign. So they chose the way of the classical donation. For supporters from abroad as well as entrepreneurs this looks differently. Thus we offer an optimal way for everyone to support us.

5. At the end of the way there will be an own ship, you speak of an "older passenger ferry", which is called MARY POPPINS in your press releases. How do you imagine everyday life on the MARY POPPINS?

After the middle watch the ship's bell will be struck. Then first the bunk and then the ship is cleared ... once that's done, there's a tin cup with brackish water as well as ship's biscuits for all. (smiles)

Okay, no kidding - before anyone else thinks we wanted to revive the time of slave ships ...

Just imagine a passenger ship, please. On board the MARY POPPINS, however, everything will be equipped so that kids and youths will feel at home - with colours, furniture, games and leisure activities for their generation. A "floating playroom", so to speak.

We forgot the everyday life you asked for in port. We are on holidays - and we have them together. We all want to have fun together, play, be a kid, experience something ... live again. There will also be group activities, shore excursions, but also free times on board.

Perhaps today you will help our cook prepare lunch. And he will show you how you can prepare something especially tasty - adapted to your illness.

Or you help our female captain to find the course to the next harbour ...

After a long time in the hospital, you are really in the mood for sports again? Great, in the former car deck some others are just starting to play basketball and are already waiting for you ...

You never catch the ball? Well, how about the climbing parcours right next to the field. Secure yourself and be secured by the others as you climb from starboard to port through the deck ...

Tomorrow we come to the capital ... then we all visit a musical performance ... and the karaoke choir is practicing hard so that the ears of the bus drivers will be blown away ...

We're out at sea. But do you have any idea what it looks like below surface? Or how important clean seas are for us humans? We'll show you ...

You like working with wood? Cool - the senior boatman has a workshop for the kids next to his own and shows you some tricks ...

Even though it's totally awesome here on board, you're happy to see your family again and want to make yourself dressed up for your arrival? Then ask the sailmaker, who has nothing to do anyway, because we don't have sails, if she will make a chic jacket or a cool cap together with you ...

Have we forgotten something you're in the mood for right now? Then have a word with us - we will make (almost) everything possible ...

Now perhaps one or the other will think "but what about the psychotherapy?". - We do it - with all the aforementioned. Well, you have to know that children deal with mental distress differently than we adults. We deal with it rather "in one piece". Children, on the other hand, do it piece by piece - while playing. In the middle of the cheerful game the question can arise what happened to the body of the late dad. And after the answer is given that is understood and it goes on in the game. Therefore all of us on board - from the deck hand to the female captain and of course even more the socio-pedagogical and medical staff - will be prepared for their special guests so that they can react if there is more to a question or remark than just what is obviously said and we can assist the child.

6. What can a ship offer that a hospital or therapy facility on shore cannot offer?

A ship can overcome borders - borders between countries, borders in the mind, but also the border between land and sea.

We would like to offer our little potential guests a very special journey to start into a hopefully healthy future - a new stage in their life's journey, so to speak.

If, on the other hand, this journey would "only" go to a coast, there would be a border - the sea. However our young guests have experienced barriers and border experiences more than enough. Just as we symbolise it with our name, we also want to show that despite what has been experienced, (almost) everything is still possible if the kids and youths learn to trust themselves again with our help and integrate the foul that fate has played to them into their future life.

We want to leave port A and leave what

has been experienced behind us - unfortunately we cannot undo it. And we arrive at port B again. And even if they return home afterwards, our guests will be able to view their return to everyday life from a different perspective and return "upright" to their future lives.

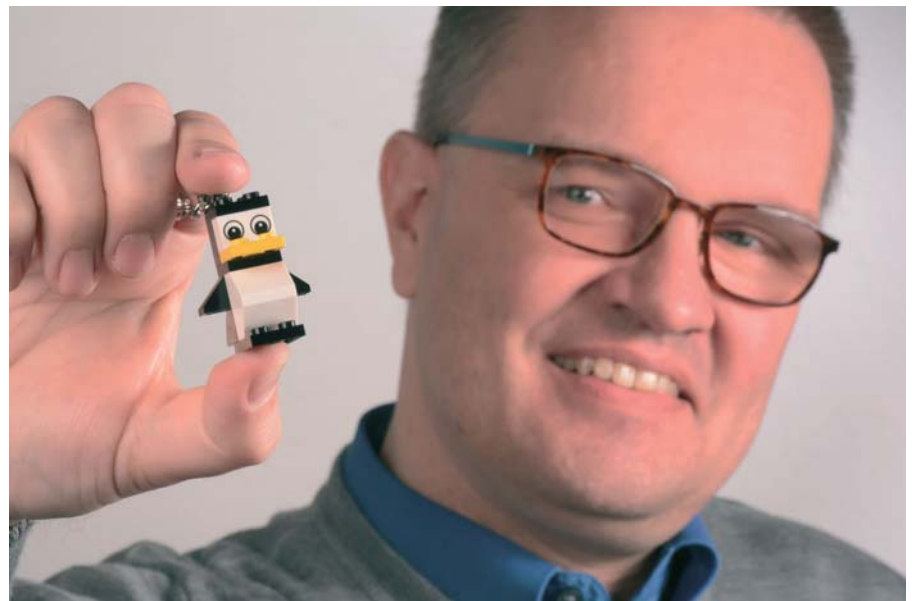
This is the therapeutic advantage of a floating recreation camp. In addition, there is also a practical-organisational one. The ship is not an immovable property, which means that I can adapt its location as required and, for example, shorten the journey times for the children and sail towards them.

7. Even if many people donate small amounts or sponsors support with "hardware" - couldn't such a passenger ship develop into a "black hole" that still eats more and more money? What gives you hope that one day "Bowsprit Kids" will pay for itself, and how do you plan to achieve that goal?

A passenger ship is never a "black hole", but at best the sum of many expense items. And of course we took a close look at these cost items. In my career to date, I have become very familiar with and evaluated the cost calculations of shipping companies, including individual ship operation, as well as the cost structures of acute and rehabilitation hospitals.

A few years ago, there was an interesting study that came to the conclusion that it would be cheaper for the pension insurance institutions to send the insured people on a cruise instead of taking a spa treatment. This will not be the case for us, because we do not operate a ship with thousands of guests, but want to guarantee individual care.

As a result, however, the per capita costs per day will not be higher than for



(Photo: Oliver Gloß | Foto Krause)

rehabilitation measures on shore in Germany.

The assumption that our vision is too big or too expensive is simply wrong. The purchase of the ship, but also the operation are completely comparable with a corresponding in-patient facility.

Only that we do not want to be stationary for therapeutic reasons, but mobile and can supply at the same time a far larger catchment area.

As with any social enterprise, our own viability can only be achieved if the corresponding services we provide are actually paid for by the social insurances at some point, because we believe that the stay on board has to be free of charge for the children and their families.

This means that with the start of the actual activity, based on our track record, political decision-making begins, which would currently take too much time and whose outcome is completely open. But until this is really implemented throughout Europe, Bowspirit Kids will remain what it has been from the very beginning: civic engagement for young individuals who have been fouled by life. As an organisation, however, we will always try to make our own contributions. For example, if we are not travelling with children, we can use the ship and its "hotel operation" for training. Thus we can mediate to educators and teachers as well as interested parents, which way we set with the children on board, so that they can continue this after going off board together. Such training can contribute to the financing of the ongoing work with the children. And this is just one example. We have various topics that we have to "work on" for Bowspirit Kids anyway and in which we can offer our expertise to third parties for a corresponding fee.

8. Were there any moments in the last six months when you wanted to return to your old lawyer's office or to the press office of the shipping company you used to work for?

No - not a minute.

Of course, there are moments when I ask myself "What have you done?". I am not a saint, but a man. And if something really goes wrong - and of course it does with such a project every now and then and of course always completely unexpectedly - then there are also dark thoughts with me.

And I also meet - even with this per se fundamentally good project - time and again people who deeply shake me in my philosophy of man because of their fears, their unreliability or even ignorance.

But then I see Anna, Peter, Shirin, Thomas and Johanna in front of me,

looking at me with big eyes and asking "Are you giving up now?". When I see the Five in front of me, the dimensions are adjusted. The fears of the Five and all the children they stand for show the correctness and necessity of the course taken.

9. Do you have a business plan, a time horizon in which you want "Bowspirit Kids" to become reality? And a plan B if donations and demand fall short of expectations?

Best yesterday! The need is so big and so urgent. At this point we must perhaps bear in mind that, considering our expected annual capacity, we would actually need four ships if we "only" wanted to care for all children and youths newly diagnosed with cancer in Europe every year.

And cancer is by no means the only serious illness or the only trauma trigger that exists for children.

But the time horizon for the implementation is no longer in my hands. I am only the mastermind who was able and allowed to lay the keel for this project. Whether the vision behind the name Bowspirit Kids can become reality now lies with the people, whom I ask to step out of their comfort zone and make something big possible for the little ones with small contributions.

If only every twentieth German citizen gives three euros - as much as a coffee-to-go - then the ship is financed and we can help. And the same applies to the financing of ongoing operations in subsequent years. That means everyone is involved every twenty years with three euros - that should be possible, right?!

If, however, we only would talk wisely or even ignore the need, then the window of opportunity would close, because the clear six-digit start-up financing that my partners and I have provided is naturally finite. If we do not recognise that there is a positive dynamic in the volume of financial support but also in private and public discussions with and about us, we will not be able to implement the project positively and will react accordingly.

But that would be fatal in two senses: on the one hand for the children and young people already affected today, but on the other hand also with regard to the supply gap described above, which would then persist for decades after such a signal from the people.

The musician David Garrett once said very aptly: "Plan B is the biggest enemy of plan A."

That's exactly how we see it. We have no plan B.

Nevertheless, we have described fallback options on our website. And of course, as required by the tax code for any charitable organisation, the statutes regulate what happens to raised funds if none of the options described could be implemented and the companies would be dissolved.

But that won't happen, because tomorrow your readers will dispense with their coffee-to-go in favour of the Bowspirit Kids and will motivate at least three people in their private and professional environment to do the same the day after tomorrow ...

10. Please complete the following sentences:

Lübeck is ... a city with a glorious past as "Queen of the Hanseatic League" and with a great future as the base port of Bowspirit Kids.

In five years ... we will celebrate our third annual meeting at midsummer with over 10,000 children and youths who will have been on board with us, their parents and siblings.

Those who have visions ... need courage to implement them step by step, and should resist the temptation to try to please everyone.

This translated reprint from the German-language maritime online magazine schiffsjournal.de is courtesy of the author Kai Ortel and the publisher Tobias Bruns. Thank you very much!



(Illustration: Bowspirit Kids Group)