

DEPARTEMENT CULTUUR, JEUGD & MEDIA

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Flemish Culture Prizes
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ULTIMA 2016 INTANGIBLE HERITAGE GEEL FAMILY NURSING CARE

For over 700 years, Geel has been a welcoming refuge for people with psychological difficulties. 'Geelse Gezinsverpleging' - Geel family nursing care - continues to build on this strong tradition. Currently over 250 psychologically vulnerable people live here day in, day out, in a normal family. Over the centuries, thousands went before them: people searching for answers who found a home in this compassionate town. The importance of this care is hard to overestimate. Finding peace and acceptance, a place at the table, their own room, the warmth of a family, being included in social life... For countless people searching for answers, coming to Geel meant the start of a rewarding and happy life.

This tradition of family nursing care dates back to the early middle ages and the legend of Saint Dimpna. The story goes that Dimpna, the daughter of an Irish king, fled from her father's incestuous intentions. It is said that she went into hiding in Zammel, a hamlet of Geel. But her father came after her and beheaded her in a fit of madness. When the tradition of pilgrimages developed in Flanders, many 'insane' individuals came to beg for a cure at the grave of Saint Dimpna. While they were chased away from other villages and towns due to their bizarre and sometimes frightening behaviour, in Geel they were accepted, because due to the legend, the inhabitants of Geel were predestined to care for them. This is how Geel became a haven for many vulnerable people. They were taken into the homes of Geel residents during or after their nine-day atonement, and carried on living there. Only 167 years ago, this care was institutionalised with the construction of wards and support services and the arrival of psychiatrists and nursing staff.

The essence of Geel family nursing care lies in the unique way in which citizens and the community have already cared for 'the other' for centuries. The fact that professional caretakers and volunteers combine their strengths and together voluntarily serve people with long-term and multiple psychiatric needs is certainly still unique worldwide. At the start of the 21st century, it is precisely this care in the community with solid and permanent support from specialist teams and hospital facilities (from the town, the Public Psychiatric Care Centre and all other professionals) that is being recognised by the World Health Organisation as an ideal form of care in modern psychiatry.

www.opzgeel.be