

The unique story of Siel Bleu

by

■ **Jean-Michel Ricard** ■

Co-founder, Groupe Associatif Siel Bleu

Overview

In contrast to the current trend in society which considers old-age sad and boring, Jean-Michel Ricard and Jean-Daniel Muller, two recent graduates from the University of Strasbourg's Sport Sciences department, decided to create the Siel Bleu association in 1997 to help elderly people in their region to recover and to maintain their physical capabilities. Their association provides an innovative form of support based on health and adapted physical activity, and is based on a common good, non-profit model. The bonds of trust created with their beneficiaries have enabled the association to overcome a number of obstacles. Today Siel Bleu exists throughout France and has a very broad public foundation. The association has now become an associative group with various branches, employing four hundred and fifty people. Will Siel Bleu's activities, whose therapeutic benefits are now the subject of research programmes, be reimbursed one day by the French social security system?

Report by Élisabeth Révah • Translation by Rachel Marlin

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The Siel Bleu association has just celebrated its 18th birthday. It would therefore appear that it has now reached adulthood! The people we have met and talked to have shaped our association. The first meeting which started the entire project took place between myself and Jean-Daniel Muller in 1997 when we were both Sport Sciences students at the University of Strasbourg.

The beginnings of Siel Bleu

At that time, both of us wanted to become school sports teachers, but our final work placement with the *Association bas-rhinoise d'aide aux personnes âgées* (Abrapa: association to help elderly people in the Bas-Rhin *département*) made us change our minds.

The work placement which changed everything

The work placement took place in several old people's homes in the Bas-Rhin *département*. It was only initially intended to be for three weeks, but in the end it lasted a year. It consisted of giving elderly people, who were very dependent, the opportunity to take part in programmes of adapted physical activity (APA), regardless of their age, in order to help them recover and maintain their physical capabilities. We also wanted to restore their self-confidence and allow them to keep some degree of autonomy. Very often, close family and friends of elderly people are worried about their frailty and advise them not to venture outside. We, on the other hand, encourage them to take risks and feel free.

We quickly realised that adapted physical activity was a very good way to create social ties. Far from being side-tracked by negative discussion about the financial burden of the elderly on society, we, who were barely twenty years old at the time, developed incredibly strong and meaningful relationships with the elderly during our work placement. In June 1997, when we were coming to the end of our placement, they told us how they hoped to see us again the following year. At that moment, Jean-Daniel and I knew that this was where we had found our calling.

An article about our work placement appeared in the *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace* newspaper. Because of various forms of financial support, we created the Siel Bleu association. Why 'Siel Bleu' (cf. Ciel Bleu = blue sky) you ask? Well, it is not because we are sports teachers that we are bad at spelling! Siel Bleu simply stands for *Sport Initiative Et Loisirs* (Sport, Initiative And Leisure) Bleu.

Challenging early stages

We started working for the association without being paid. For six months, we worked during the night attempting to organise as many meetings as possible during the day in order to get our adapted physical activity known. Our aim was to provide geographical and financial accessibility to as many people as possible. With Siel Bleu, we offered activities which change people's daily lives. We are convinced that staying healthy is a right, not a luxury.

Initially it was very difficult for us. We could almost hear people say 'why are these young people interested in the elderly?' It must have seemed a bit bizarre to them. Additionally, the directors of old people's homes did not see the advantages of investing in a new form of support centred on health for octogenarians who, on average, only had between eighteen and twenty-four months left to live.

We had two meetings which allowed us to prove ourselves to the professionals in the field. The first was with the former assistant director of the Bas-Rhin's work, labour and professional training department. The second was with the former president of the Bas-Rhin's General Council and mayor of a small town, who agreed to co-fund our activities in twelve old people's homes in the *département* from March 1998 for a six month period.

The remaining expenses were covered by the establishments themselves. This was symbolically very important for us if we were to be taken seriously.

Of course, the people in charge and the nursing staff in these establishments were reticent when we began, but, at the end of six months, eleven out of the twelve old people's homes signed an agreement with our association without the slightest hesitation. As for the twelfth, our story with this establishment played a fundamental role in Siel Bleu's future orientation. The director of the home told us that he did not want to continue working with us, but one morning he telephoned us in a panic. Not only had he been contacted by a journalist from the *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace* asking why he had decided not to sign a contract with us, but the residents, their families and the nursing staff had circulated a petition protesting against his decision. Furthermore, the residents were laying siege to his office, demanding that Siel Bleu be reinstated. The agreement was signed the same afternoon!

That day, because we had taken care of them and because we were very young, these elderly people gave us the greatest proof of their trust in us and how useful we were to them. They have far fewer prejudices than we think. The direct and indirect beneficiaries of our activity are our best ambassadors.

Siel Bleu spreads across the Bas-Rhin

After this first step, support from the medical profession was decisive. On request from doctors in the Bas-Rhin *département*, we even launched programmes specifically for Alzheimer patients based on non-verbal communication, touch and sight. The surprising reactions from some of the patients convinced several establishments.

Apart from working with old people's homes, we also wanted to reach out to people who were living alone at home, who were frail, especially those in rural areas. Consequently, with help from the Bas-Rhin social security organisation, we set up a programme dealing with how to prevent falls, and targeted a specific population (people whose partners were not longer alive, people who had recently been admitted to hospital, and so on). Sessions for these people took place in rooms which were lent to us or which we rented near their homes. After fifteen sessions, they generally wanted to leave their homes to take up regular physical activity.

This programme enabled us to measure the economic impact of our activities. Our main indicator of success was the number of people who became members of Siel Bleu after they had completed the fifteen sessions of the programme. More than 95% of the people who followed the programme dealing with how to prevent falls became members of our association.

We devised our methodology throughout the course of numerous group meetings with help from people in the medical profession, Siel Bleu employees and our beneficiaries. As a result of this interactive process which encouraged group participation, we were able to launch a large variety of gymnastics programmes (for health purposes), aquatic gymnastics ('aquagym') and open-air activities which increased our reputation progressively throughout the Bas-Rhin *département*.

Conquering France

After several articles about Siel Bleu in the national press including in 'Le Figaro' and 'L'Obs', we received proposals from all over France. Obviously we were not yet ready to carry out all these requests, but in 2001 we decided to tour France for eighteen months in order to meet everyone who was interested in our project (including private individuals, physiotherapists, doctors, pension funds, and health insurance companies), and to create new branches of Siel Bleu in other *départements*. Often our project did not appeal to our audiences. People thought that our success in the Bas-Rhin *département* could not be reproduced in the rest of the country.

A new profession is born

In the end, a doctor who managed several old people's homes in an area near Thionville (in the Moselle *département*) called us. If Siel Bleu was to offer activities in his establishments then we had no choice but to recruit staff. Jean-Daniel and I were graduates of a very popular university course, but whose success rate