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Your essays

RON KLUTHO "When I meet a Bosnian...I see myself."

I recently returned from a month in Bosnia. I stayed with eight families throughout Bosnia and visited dozens more. These were the families of Bosnian friends of mine here in St. Louis.

After assisting, teaching, and befriending Bosnians for five years here, I realized a dream to visit this beautiful and unlucky land. When I made known my plans to go, Bosnians here went into action, planning my itinerary, insisting that I visit their relatives, even collecting the money to pay for my plane ticket. From the time I arrived in Bosnia to the time I left, I was treated like a king by people whose average monthly salary is about \$250.

I teach English as a second language at Forest Park Community College, and I am the co-director of the Immigrant and Refugee Support Program at St. Pius V Church. At this point, about 95 percent of the people I work with at St. Pius are Bosnian, although there have been previous waves of Vietnamese, Eritreans, Somalis, Haitians and other groups. All of these people experienced losses, tragedies and worse. Some of them literally have no home to go back to.

People who are admitted as refugees to this country are given assistance — food stamps and a small stipend — for a very limited amount of time. The goal is to have them become self-sufficient workers as soon as possible. The sponsoring agencies place them in jobs, and the overwhelming majority want to start working immediately. It is believed that work is actually therapeutic for survivors of war and other traumas — it represents normalcy and takes their minds off the bad memories.

Because many refugees do not speak English when they come, they usually work at low-paying jobs, although they may have been professional workers in their countries. In order to support their families — both here and back home — large numbers of refugees work two or more jobs. Employers are usually very pleased with the performance of these workers and look to hire more once they have one.

Immigrants are revitalizing some of our urban neighborhoods and actually creating more jobs with the businesses they are opening. The restaurants, bakeries and groceries in the immigrant "business districts" give us a literal taste of another world. As we meet our new neighbors from far-away countries, we learn about other ways of life, other customs and, in so doing, we see ourselves in a different way. At the same time, we see that these new people are not so different



Ron Klutho (right) in Sarajevo with Muharem Hegdic, at a cemetery for victims of war.

from us, underneath the cultural and linguistic trappings.

What is sometimes perceived as stand-offishness, clannishness or arrogance in immigrants is, more often than not, nothing more than fear or shyness. A new country, a new language, financial difficulties, a very fast-paced lifestyle, sometimes hostile environments, all on top of traumatic memories — this is a lot to handle at once. It is natural to seek some security and comfort, something familiar.

We Americans can help in the acculturation process. Many Bosnians tell me that what they want most of all is an American friend.

With a sense of humor and an open heart, language differences do not have to be a problem. Sponsoring agencies like the International Institute, Catholic Charities Refugee Services and the Jewish Federation welcome volunteers to help in many ways; for example, "adopting" a family and taking them to the Zoo, the Arch, etc. Sister Elisa Sylvestri has a women's tutoring program for language instruction through St. Pius Church and always needs volunteers. At St. Pius, we have an "adopt-a-family" program at Christmas through

which school, church or office groups buy gifts for a family and then continue the relationship after the holidays. There are many ways to get involved. The telephone number is (314) 772-4514.

When I came back from Bosnia, many Bosnians asked me to tell Americans about what I saw and experienced there. It bothers and hurts them to hear questions like, "Do you have televisions in Bosnia?" They want me to tell Americans that Bosnia is not, and was not, a "primitive" country but actually was quite similar to the United States. Indeed, that was my feeling. As I strolled through Basarvija, the old section of Sarajevo, and saw the fashionably dressed people chatting with their friends, I realized that the idea of war there had been as unthinkable for Bosnians as such a war here would be for us. At the same time, I thought of my own ancestors fleeing famine and persecution to come here. When I meet a Bosnian, a Haitian, a Sudanese, a Cambodian, I see myself.

Ron Klutho teaches English at St. Louis Community College at Forest Park to members of the growing Bosnian-American population.

Let me tell you about my Bosnians.

My Bosnians are survivors. After a genocide that killed what would be the equivalent of 15,000,000 Americans as the world watched—no, facilitated, they picked themselves up and put their lives back together. After a genocide in the late 20th century that featured barbarity rivaling the worst excesses of World War II—concentration camps where men were forced to castrate each other, men forced to rape their granddaughters, babies cut from women's wombs and smashed against trees, entire villages burned to ashes—there was no Katie Couric or Oprah Winfrey to listen to survivors' stories, no commission to see what went wrong, no funds set aside to reimburse people for losses. My Bosnians picked themselves up and put their lives back together.

My Bosnians are not defined as victims. They understand that dwelling in the past hurts themselves. Even now, 20 years on, as mass graves continue to be discovered in Bosnia, and bodies—or body parts—are identified through DNA testing, dashing hopes that loved ones may have survived, my Bosnians bury their relatives in dignity and don't speak of hatred toward the perpetrators of genocide.

My Bosnians are hard-working. The vast majority of Bosnians in St. Louis go to work every day, sometimes working two or more jobs, more often than not very physically demanding. Many have worked and saved to open their own small businesses. Contrary to popular belief, refugees—Bosnians as well as other nationalities—pay taxes, and do not receive special benefits. They must start repaying our government the cost of their one-way ticket to the US government six months after arrival, just like a student loan.

My Bosnians are hospitable. A visitor to a Bosnian home will be welcomed as royalty, no matter what the economic means. Guests are considered special blessings. Shortly after the genocide, Bosnians in St. Louis collected money and bought me a round-trip ticket to Bosnia so I could see their country, as I had been expressing such a desire. I was there for a month, visiting dozens of families—relatives of refugees here. While visiting one family in a refugee camp, I was given the one can of soda the family had, and was offered the one chair, while the family drank water and sat on the floor.

My Bosnians are generous. Funds are collected within the local Bosnian community constantly, for orphaned children and ill people in Bosnia, to rebuild churches and mosques that were destroyed there, as well as local needs such as funeral costs. The generosity isn't limited to Bosnian causes. The local community has done fundraisers to benefit Backstoppers, as well as victims of Katrina and the Joplin tornado. A contingent of Bosnian volunteers went to Joplin from St Louis to help after the tornado.

My Bosnians are funny, often with a dark humor. They will say, seeing a friend after a long absence, "You're as rare as coffee," referring to the unavailability of Bosnians' beloved coffee during the genocide.

My Bosnians are strong, physically and emotionally. They can make quick work of tearing up and laying a new driveway as easily as they can take tragic news with dignified sorrow.

My Bosnians are multicultural in the true sense of the word, having come from a very ethnically and religiously diverse country, where the motto was “Brotherhood and Unity,” before the *genocidaires* took over. However, they understand the danger of “balkanization,” (an ironic neologism if there ever was one.) When people divide themselves into groups instead of focusing on their similarities, misfortune is bound to follow.

The Bosnian community lost one of its members this week in a horrific murder of unspeakable brutality. My Bosnians wonder where the outrage is after this. I participated in a peaceful march on December 1 to honor the memory of Zemir Begic for one mile along Gravois in a light freezing rain with meager media coverage. Some chanted “Peace for everybody!” and “Bosnian lives matter!” After pathetic attempts at “peacekeeping” by the international community during the Bosnian genocide and peace agreements that seem to reward the perpetrators, and senseless violence here, some wonder if Bosnian lives do matter.

St. Louis is home to the largest community of Bosnians in the world outside Bosnia. They are grateful to have been given a chance of a new life here and have enriched St Louis in countless ways.

July 11, 2015 marks the 20th anniversary of Bosnia’s equivalent of 9/11—the Srebrenica massacre, in which some 8,000 men and boys were systematically killed. This next year will be a stressful and emotional time for my Bosnians, as they will be reminded of the terrible time. It is my hope that we can help them—and all refugees—to feel that they are safe and welcome here, and belong in the fabric of our city. We are all one community, and we are all the richer if we can embrace this idea.

Ron Klutho has worked with the Bosnian community for over 20 years, formerly as co-director of St. Pius V Church’s Refugee Support Program, and currently as coordinator of the Refugee and Immigrant Program at Places for People.

I have the painful honor of meeting torture survivors every day. Painful because hearing their stories is gut-wrenching; an honor because I am always in admiration and awe of their courage, strength and spirit.

My agency, Bilingual International Assistant Services, assists torture survivors in St. Louis, in the areas of case management, mental health therapy and psychiatry, and legal service. Many St. Louisans may not know that we have thousands of refugees living here, all of whom lost at the very least their home and belongings, and many of whom lost family members. Up to 30% of refugees are believed to be survivors of state-sanctioned torture in the countries they fled from. Take a drive down South Grand Boulevard on a weekday morning, and you will see newcomers from around the world walking to English classes at the International Institute. If there was a conflict somewhere in the world, you may eventually see it reflected on South Grand. The large wave of Bosnian refugees has become an integral part of the community, but there are more recent groups—Liberians, Iraqis, Afghanis, Somalis, Syrians, Congolese, and so many more. The suffering that they endured defies belief, but they somehow find the strength to continue, grateful for a new life in the United States.

Exactly twenty-five years ago, Rwanda was experiencing its own genocide. An estimated 800,000 members of the Tutsi minority were murdered in the most brutal of ways—often hacked to death with machetes—at the behest of extremist leaders, over 100 days. This was carried out by members of the Hutu majority, average citizens who were coerced, or forced on pain of death, to kill their neighbors.

June 26 is the UN Day in Support of Victims of Torture. Each year, my agency organizes an event in recognition of this day, and this year, it will focus on the Rwanda genocide, with a presentation at the Missouri History Museum, culminating in a survivor testimonial by Marie-Christine Williams, who was 14 when she (barely) survived the genocide in Rwanda. How can events like this occur in this day and age? Sadly, they are nothing new, and likely to continue. One common thread is the dehumanization of the enemy, the “other,” which can not only make it acceptable, but essential, to ethnically (or politically, or religiously) “cleanse” a country. In Rwanda, the Belgian colonizers had used a “divide and conquer” policy to set Hutus and Tutsis against each other, favoring the Tutsis, which caused resentment among Hutus. When the Hutus gained power after independence, extremist Hutus who wanted revenge used hate speech and propaganda to stoke fear and hatred in Hutus against Tutsis, referring to them as “cockroaches”, “scum” and “vermin” who needed to be eradicated. During the genocide, there was constant hate propaganda on the radio, encouraging Hutus to “purify the country.”

Countless other examples can be cited. The Nazis referred to Jews as rats, vermin and subhuman, and blamed them for economic problems. The Khmer Rouge called enemies of the state “tapeworms” and “bladders of urine” during its bloody reign in Cambodia. In Bosnia, extremist Serbs painted Muslims as bloodthirsty *mujaheddin* and Catholics as murderous Nazis, as a justification to kill or expel them. In Somalia, some ethnic Somalis scapegoated Bantus, who had been forcibly brought to Somali from present-day Malawi and Mozambique as slaves,

during the 1990s chaos in Somalia. Today Cameroon, in a conflict virtually unknown in the West, is falling apart along French- and English-speaking faultlines, with calls justifying shooting “crazy dogs” and “terrorists” coming from some leaders and exploding on social media.

“Hate speech” and propaganda are very dangerous and can be deadly. In the above examples, people lived together in harmony for long periods until economic problems or political opportunists led to conflict. People seem to be malleable when there is a perfect storm of economic problems, political unrest and fear-mongering, and it is not unique to any part of the world. We would be remiss in not including the “peculiar institution” of slavery in our own country. Slave owners justified what they were doing by considering African Americans as less than human. Children were removed from their mothers and sold or raised by other women; people were sold like cattle, not to mention the daily indignities and violence.

In recent years, we have seen more name-calling and balkanization in this country, more tension, more “us vs. them”. With a presidential campaign gearing up, we are sure to see this ratcheted up. Having heard countless stories from people from around the world who were on the receiving end of such hatred, I have seen how fragile the human fabric is. Citizenship in the United States is not based on race, ethnicity or religion, like some other countries. It is based on shared ideals of liberty and equality, which we have not always upheld for everyone, but which we can all strive for. Millions of immigrants and refugees have come here because they see what our country stands for, perhaps more clearly than we do, and we are stronger because of them. Let’s celebrate our differences but remember our shared humanity. Let’s not ascribe ill will or evil to people with a different opinion, but listen to each other, or simply agree to disagree. I invite you to the Missouri History Museum on June 26 at 7 pm to hear what happened in one small country when a group of people were seen as less than human.

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