

Join our efforts

Helping war-traumatized children of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Once recognized for its culture and beauty, the country of Bosnia-Herzegovina has become synonymous with death and devastation over the past four years.

The war and ethnic cleansing in that region have claimed more than 200,000 lives, 50,000 of which were children. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, more than 2.3 million people in the country have been displaced, 150,000 children have been wounded, countless children have been separated from their families, and more than half the children in the region have been shot at, lost their homes or been forced to watch their parents being slaughtered.

Most surviving children have suffered psychological trauma resulting from these war atrocities. At the same time, the number of mental health professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina dwindled. Many, understandably, fled for their lives.

In January 1994, Sayed Gomah, then director of TAIBAH International and now secretary general of the Coordinating Council for Humanitarian Agencies (CCHA), called me from Zagreb, Croatia, to describe the plight of the Bosnian children. I suggested training Bosnian teachers to become "lay therapists" to help these children and offered to spearhead the program.

I consulted with top professionals in the field of trauma psychiatry, all of whom offered valuable advice. In particular, I called on the wisdom of Robert Ursano, MD, then chairman of the American Psychiatric Association Committee on Disaster and Robert Pynoos, MD, of the University of California-Los Angeles. I also recruited William Holcomb, PhD, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry and neurology at the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Medicine, for the project.

From the beginning, we made a long-term commitment to helping children throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. We planned a series of trips to the region, during which we would train teachers as therapists to recognize and treat children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychiatric conditions resulting from war atrocities.

Between February 1994 and December 1995, faculty members from the University of Missouri-Columbia (MU) have made eight trips to Bosnia-Herzegovina, training more than 1,000 teachers and mental health professionals who, in turn, have helped an estimated 10,000 children. Our team focused on Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zenica, and we also gave one seminar in Mostar.

During our travels, we quickly realized that thousands more children needed our help. In response, Lester Bryant, MD, Dean of the MU School of Medicine and a strong supporter

of the Teachers As Therapists Program, suggested that we embark on a second phase: Training the Trainers.

We decided to maximize our efforts by training four teams-one from each of our focus cities-consisting of teachers and mental health professionals, who would then train others as therapists. This phase involved creating the MU International Center for Psychosocial Trauma . In June 1995, a month-long training session was held at the Center for teachers and mental health professionals from Bosnia-Herzegovina and from Oklahoma City, the site of a deadly terrorist bombing in March 1995.

With the help of MU, CCHA established the Child and Family Research, Training and Counseling Center in Sarajevo for war-traumatized Bosnians. The centers in Missouri and in Sarajevo work together to build services for the children of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Finally, MU is conducting a study in Bosnia to assess PTSD among children. Our goal is to assess the occurrence of PTSD and depression, as well as the intervention methods that are most effective in treating their conditions. None of this would have been possible without the generous and consistent support of CCHA. Individuals-and there are many-are acknowledged throughout this report. In particular, we must recognize the incredible perseverance and dedication of our Bosnian friends, who have determinedly helped their children even as they themselves suffer. The teachers and professionals of Bosnia-Herzegovina are true heroes.

This report is an attempt to document our experiences in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I have attempted to describe not just our programs, but also the people and places we visited. The result, I hope, is a colorful glimpse of a brave people. I have also included valuable assessments and recommendations regarding our efforts. Finally, an appendix lists some of the many people who contributed time, sweat and tears to our goals.

It is hard to comprehend the needs of a child who has no parents, no belongings, no home. Over the past four years, thousands of children in Bosnia have fit that description. It is hoped that, through continued dedicated effort, we can someday provide these innocent victims with two essential things: peace of mind and hope for the future.