

Bosnians in Apollo

by
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"I love America so much," Senal said softly as he choked back tears. It was Senal's 22nd birthday and he was overwhelmed with the small gifts presented to him during a party in Oakmont, hosted by Dr. McClure, a professor from the University of Pittsburgh. "My friends are so excited for me. They cannot believe that I am here. Its everything they say it is. I just love America so much," he repeated.

He then pointed to a distinguished-looking woman who was sitting across the room from us. "Her husband disappeared one day. They will never find him. Her only son was killed in the war," he said sadly. He then pointed to a gentleman nearby. "It is so awful what happened to the people in his town. There are no words," he said as his voiced drifted off.

It was only a few days earlier that I met Senal when he arrived from Bosnia as the translator for a group of 16 Bosnian educators. I was one of a roomful of guests when this tall, energetic young man who I never met entered the room and walked towards me with an unexpected surprise. "You are Ray," he said ecstatically. "I am Senal. I am so glad to meet you. We know of Apollo and your family," he began.

There was long pause. I thought I was in the twilight zone. As my mind grasped for some explanation of how Senal knew me, I thought that perhaps someone told him about a funny-looking guy with spiked hair. But I was baffled how he knew my family. "How do you know me Senal?" I asked. "You are the banker on the Internet," he said as if I was putting him on. "Oh, I didn't think you had the Internet over there yet. That's cool. But I have no pictures of my family out there," I said. Senal looked puzzled and in perfect English declared, "your dogs, Zeus and Thor. They are yours, no?" Now I was amazed. "Oh wow, that is wild. Yes, of course. I should have known. I have pictures of my dogs on the web," I said enthusiastically.

Senal and I talked about many things in a brief period of time. He seemed to make every breath count. His zest for life was refreshing. The simplest things we had in our country interested him.

Then the Bosnian Secretary of Education, Srebren Dizdar entered the room. All eyes seemed to drift toward this remarkable, gregarious man. Dr. Dizdar's light humor and gentle demeanor veiled a strong determination to bring hope and opportunity to his war-torn country.

I met Dr. Dizdar eight months earlier when he toured Apollo. At the time, I had been adamantly opposed to US troop involvement in Bosnia. I believed that the US had no

business trying to solve a horrendous European problem while there were so many problems right here at home. Meeting Dr. Dizdar changed that.

He could have told us about horrible atrocities. He could have told us about who was right and who was wrong. Instead he simply said he didn't want charity. He didn't want anything except to learn from us. He wanted to make a level playing field for his people.

Dr. Dizdar was a man on a mission. His mission included bringing educators to the little town of Apollo. One would assume there were many more relevant, suitable, convenient places to visit. But Dr. Dizdar would have it no other way. Although none of us could possibly imagine the horrifying impact of their war, the people of our community know what it was like to be underdogs in an economically-challenged environment. He loved that element.

What happened at the Apollo-Ridge public assembly will live as one of the most memorable moments of my life. Dr. Kerr introduced two local men in the audience who had served in Bosnia. After Senal translated, all 16 Bosnian educator on immediately rose to their feet and began clapping. They wouldn't stop clapping. It seemed liked they clapped for an eternity. All they wanted was chance.

It was a great day to be an American. It was a great day to be.



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