

Delaware teens the first to experience peace in Bosnia

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Posted: 10/16/07

For most high school students September represents pencils, notebooks, finicky lockers and the return to long school days. For four chosen Delaware high school students, the month meant traveling to Bosnia-Herzegovina, meeting with U.S. Embassy officials and touring Roman ruins and historic castles.

As members of Delaware 4-H, a service and leadership program, the highschoolers were selected to travel to Bosnia, a country in shambles due to ethnic cleansing merely a decade ago, for two weeks starting Sept. 23 as part of an exchange program.

The U.S. State Department initiated the Bosnia Youth Leadership Program in 1999, which gave Bosnian teens the opportunity to travel to the United States. This is the first time, however, that the State Department has permitted U.S. teens to travel to Bosnia.

Margot Miller, a 4-H student ambassador from Wilmington who traveled to Bosnia, says after hosting a Bosnian student for two years she was eager to visit the country and interact in the society.

"Hosting was an absolutely wonderful experience for me," Miller says. "We had a great connection and got along very well. It really made me want to go see what their country was like because I had heard so much about it."

Johnny Vann, a 4-H ambassador student from Newark who went on the trip, says the entire experience was incredible.

"Bosnia is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen, and I've been a lot of places in America," Vann says. "Also, my host family treated me like a king. At some points it was just really unnecessary because they were treating me way too well."

The students' days were busy and eventful. Activities ranged from meeting with officials from the U.S. Embassy and Ministry of Education, touring the mountainous landscape of Eastern Europe, dining at outdoor cafés and eating cevapi, a minced-meat meal, a national dish of Bosnia.

Vann says the 4-H ambassadors also visited high schools and gave presentations about life in the United States.

"We told them about Delaware and the three counties," he says. "We explained what the life of an average American is like and how a lot of the kids here play sports."

An average school day in Bosnia runs on a different time schedule compared to American schools, Vann says.

"Over here, we go to school for the whole day, but the school that we went to in Bosnia had three or four

breaks that were maybe a half hour to an hour each," Vann says. "That was really surprising to me but it also explained why they didn't get out of school until like 4:30."

Bosnia has come a long way since April 1992, the date which marks the beginning of the Bosnian War. Three years of bloodshed left 100,000 people dead and 2 million displaced, according to the German Press Agency.

Mark Manno, a state extension educator who went on the trip, states in an e-mail message Bosnia is no longer a state corrupt with combat but is a peaceful place and Bosnians are generally welcoming.

"The people are remarkably friendly and virtually all young people and most people in hotels and restaurants speak English," Manno says. "The place is absolutely safe also. You can walk anywhere, anytime of day or night with no fear, even in parks and streets with poor or no lighting."

The 4-H student ambassadors drove from city to city and experienced not only the geography of each country but the culture and nature of the people as well.

Katie Daly, an extension educator on the trip, states in an e-mail message her favorite part of the trip was the knowledge she gained from meeting new people.

"My favorite part of the trip and what I will take the most from are the personal connections that I made with people," Daly says. "You really learn the most about life and the world we live in from talking with other people. It helps you to see that we're not all so different and at the same time opens your mind to what exists in the world. It was so great to talk with people and hear their story."

The students were required to write an essay and submit to an intense interview process before being elected as participants to travel to Bosnia. The four students each came from a different high school in Delaware but were able to get to know one another better on the trip. Miller says each student brought his or her own American style to Europe and the diversity of the group was a hit.

"I really got to know the others well," she says. "We all have different ways of life and different schedules. There was a wide range of people going on this trip, so it really gave a good view of American life."

The group traveled from Serbia to Croatia and all over Bosnia. Each member of the trip says the civilization and landscape were more than inspiring.

"It is a fascinating place, steeped in history, culture, religion and more," Manno says. "As Winston Churchill says, 'The Balkans creates more history than they can consume locally.'"