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Bridging the gap to Bosnia

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Story by Denise Morrison Yearian, special to the News Journal. Photographs courtesy of Mark Manno.

Four Delaware teens recently crossed the once-restricted borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina to become the first U.S. youth delegates to travel to there since the civil war and help train the next generation of Bosnian leaders. The trip was part of the Bosnia Youth Leadership Program, which the U.S. State Department created in 1999. Every year since then, Bosnian youth have traveled to the United States to learn about democracy, citizenship, leadership and tolerance.

In 2006 Mark Manno, a 4-H state extension educator who lives in Newark, was awarded a three-year grant, making Delaware 4-H responsible for the program.

"This year marks two of Delaware's three-year participation," he said. "But what made this trip significant was this is the first year the State Department has lifted travel restrictions and allowed youth under age 18 to go."

On Sept. 23, four teens and three adults left on a 14-day journey to Sarajevo, Mostar, Banja Luka, Zenica, Tuzla and Livno.

There they met civic leaders and elected officials, made presentations at schools and community centers, attended a youth conference and followed up with projects initiated by Bosnian teens who visited Delaware earlier this year.

Student participants were chosen based on their application, essay, interview, recommendation and academic standing. They were Stephanie Bailey, 16, a junior at Smyrna High School, daughter of Wendy and Robert Bailey of Smyrna; Margot Miller, 17, senior at Padua Academy, daughter of Mark and Jane Miller of Wilmington; Jordan Reardon, 16, junior at St. Mark's High School, daughter of Jacqui and Jeff Reardon of Newark; and Johnny Vann, 16, junior at Newark High School, son of Earline Vann of Newark. Adult participants were Kathy DiSabatino, 4-H leader and special education teacher at East Millsboro Elementary School; Katie Daly, 4-H extension educator; and Manno.

Prior to leaving, team members were required to attend meetings, read some books, write reports, subscribe to Radio Free Europe's electronic newsletter, take language lessons, host a Bosnian exchange student and visit various dignitaries associated with that region, such as Judge Richard Gebelein, who was one of the war crimes judges for Bosnia after the war.

"We also went to Washington, D.C., where we were briefed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, visited the Bosnian Embassy and then met with the new U.S. ambassador to Bosnia, Chuck English," said DiSabatino. For Bailey, meeting English was the turning point. "When he told us we were going to be U.S. ambassadors it hit me, 'This isn't just a vacation. I'm really going to be somebody for these people.'"

Welcomed with open arms

"The people were extremely welcoming of us," said Miller. "The first town we arrived in all of the students took us out and showed us the town. The adults were welcoming, too. Even if they didn't speak English, they made sure we knew they wanted us there. Two nights I got to stay with Ana, a Bosnian girl I had hosted in my home. It was good to reconnect with her."

"As a teacher, it was interesting to see the differences in education. Their teachers stand up and lecture, the students take notes, and that's it," said DiSabatino. "What I found really surprising, though, was when we gave

our presentations and asked if the students had questions, most didn't know how to pose a question. One teacher told me that's because asking questions is discouraged."

Bailey also found the education system different.

"The students there take like 13 to 16 subjects and go to school in shifts," she said. "But what was really evident was the teens are much more motivated about getting an education than American students are. There everyone wanted to learn and make life better for themselves."

Another thing that was evident was the cost of war.

"Wherever you went, you saw bombed-out buildings. ... It was very sobering," said Manno. "Throughout Sarajevo on the sidewalks and in the streets there are these pinkish-red splats, called Sarajevo roses, marking the place where an explosion or bomb killed at least five people."

Even the natural environment evoked images of the war. "One day as we were driving I was commenting on the beauty of the mountains and rock formations, and a Bosnian youth who was with us said, 'Those carvings and indentations you see in the rocks are where the Serbians were firing down upon the village,'" said DiSabatino.

"Suddenly what was so awe-inspiring was a gripping reminder of the war."

The most memorable was a monument in Tuzla where 71 people, mostly teens, were killed by an artillery shell in 1995. "Seeing the monument was a wake-up call for me," said Miller. "Tuzla is where my friend Ana is from. She remembered being in the town square 10 minutes before it happened. Just knowing that made me value our friendship even more."

Before leaving, the team met with English one last time. "This time we did most of the talking about what we saw, how things could change and what we thought might happen," said Bailey. "We also shared conversations we had had with families. This was important because chances are Ambassador English will never get to the grass-roots level and hear what the common people's thoughts and ideas are. He said he was proud we were there and glad the program was going to continue next year."

Manno is glad it's continuing, too. Not just for the Bosnian teens, but also for 4-H youth fortunate enough to have made this trip. "The four kids I took over aren't the same ones I brought back," he said. "They have a much broader view of the world. Some even came away with a new vision for their future."

Miller did.

"I have a better sense of the world and my place in it. Right now I'm considering taking international studies in college with a concentration in the Balkans. One day I'd like to work with the foreign service or maybe a nonprofit."

BOSNIA AND HERZOGOVINA

Bosnia and Herzegovina has about 4 million people living in 19,741 square miles (about 10 times the size of Delaware) on the Balkan Peninsula in southern Europe. The ethnically diverse population speaks various dialects of Serbo-Croatian. The country's Bosniaks (about 48 percent, mainly Muslim), Serbs (about 37 percent of the population, largely Eastern Orthodox), and Croats (about 14 percent, mostly Roman Catholics) formerly formed a complex patchwork, but civil war and the flight of refugees forcibly segregated much of the population. Some inhabitants have gradually returned to their pre-conflict places of residence since the fighting's end. Never particularly robust, Bosnia and Herzegovina's economy was shattered by the civil war that broke out after independence.

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