

Lebanon Daily Record, The (MO)

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August 30, 2009

LHS graduate leads effort to help educate autistic Bosnian children

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Section: News

Page: 1A, 11A

Estimated printed pages: 6

Article Text:

As a new school year begins, it is good to remember that as local students graduate from high school, their families, friends, and teachers encourage them to go out and change the world. Many do so, by going on to college or getting a job, embarking on a career, settling down, and raising a family.

Some, like Anna (Tiesing) Taggart, a 1994 graduate of Lebanon High School, do so by going far from home and making changes that will impact countless students and their families for years to come.

While attending SMS in 2001, Anna went on a summer United Methodist mission trip to Bosnia to assist hearing impaired children. She arrived in Sarajevo, once the shining jewel of the 1984 Winter Olympics, however, she caught only glimpses of the ruins of that era. Instead she saw walls pock-marked by bullets, left from the horrendous 1990's Bosnian war that damaged 60 percent of all homes in the country and cost 200,000 Bosnians their lives. The conflict had ended a few years before her arrival, but the war weary families struggled on.

Educational opportunities for all special needs children were still practically non-existent in Bosnia, and Anna found herself immersed in areas unknown to mainstream American teachers.

Anna, the teacher and speech pathologist in training, was captivated.

"It was exciting, exhausting and vastly different from what I was learning in college," Anna stated.

"I was going to graduate school in southwest Missouri and working part time at the county jail. I suddenly found myself halfway 'round the world, trying to convince classroom teachers, who had just come through a devastating ethnic war, that admitting deaf students to their regular classrooms would in no way adversely affect the rest of the student body." She came back to the U.S. at the end of the mission trip, talking of the new friends she'd met, the deaf children she'd worked with, the training of Bosnian speech pathologists, and her plans to return the next year. For the next few years, that is exactly what she did, spending a few weeks each summer in Bosnia. In the meantime, she completed her Master's degree, took a position at Speech Pathology Group in Walnut Creek, California, and in 2008, along with several other speech-language pathologists (SLPs) formed a non-profit umbrella organization.

Speech Pathology Group: Children's Services International (SPG: CSI) works to provide volunteer services to children abroad, and Anna is president of the organization.

In her work at SPG, autism has become Anna's specialty, and she has spent years training special education teachers and speech pathologists in northern California about evidencebased treatment strategies for children with autism spectrum disorders.

Later that same year, Anna toured Bosnia speaking with other SLPs, members of parent associations, local schools, and staff and students at the University of Tuzla, the country's only

training institute for such professionals.

"The goal," Anna recalled, "was to determine the primary need of children with communication impairments in Bosnia. The resounding message from every person I interviewed was that the country as a whole was desperately in need of training for autism treatment. Children were either hidden in homes or institutionalized. More than one family told me that when their child finally received a diagnosis of autism, the doctors told them, there is nothing you can do for this child. The best thing to do is put him in an institution, forget about him and have another child." Anna continued, "I was appalled to hear how terrible the situation was for children with autism and their families in Bosnia. I knew that in the U.S., with early diagnosis and treatment, many children attain typical levels of communication and often become mainstreamed with their peers and perform academically at a level as well or better than their typically developing peers." In the summer of 2008, over a cup of ! Bosnian coffee, Anna and Bosnians hungry for education for their children, developed a plan that would include a training seminar for 150 professionals, plus the opening of the first autism classroom for children ages 3-5 in the country.

In addition, an initial training would be included for 16 Bosnian professionals who would then return to their hometowns and begin implementing the new strategies at their places of employment.

Meanwhile, the model classroom would continue to serve Bosnia as a training ground for other educators from all parts of the country.

Anna also realized they were going to need resources from the Bosnian federal government, and she felt very fortunate to receive the full support of Spomenka Mièiæ, the vice president of Bosnia.

It was the vice president who determined that this training should be mandatory for professionals currently serving children on the autism spectrum.

By October 2008, Anna was back in California interviewing professionals with experience with autism from all over the U.S. who were interested in volunteering in Bosnia. She spent the next nine months, preparing and planning with co-workers, new team members and Bosnian educators, as she pulled together a major cross-cultural educational endeavor, the first ever in Bosnia.

"It got pretty crazy at times," the diminutive energetic speech pathologist continued. "I was sitting in line at the drive-through at Starbuck's one morning when my cell phone rang. I answered a call I assumed to be from one of my colleagues and instead found myself talking to the vice president of Bosnia, Spomenka Mièiæ. I managed to stammer, 'Madam Vice President, I am honored that you called,' just as it was my turn.

I could hardly think what to do, but you don't ask the vice president of a country to hold while you order coffee, so I just waved off the clerk and pulled out of line!" Anna returned to Bosnia in June 2009, several days ahead of her team of 14. Her team members included a pediatrician, speech pathologists, behavioral psychologists, early intervention specialists, a California State University student and a logistics specialist.

Logistics in this case, included everything from negotiating visas and customs and arranging meals and lodging for her team members to purchasing appropriate classroom furniture, supplies, and educational toys.

Anna speaks easily now of the constant emotional highs and lows of the days before, after, and during the entire endeavor.

The Sunday before the opening day of the seminar, it was discovered that more than twice the number of people expected had been allowed to register.

How could she and her team possibly decide who would and would not be allowed to attend, when the need was so great? Anna was informed the cost for the additional persons would amount to approximately \$1,700, or less than \$30 per person, and for that amount, she said, she could not turn anyone away from Bosnia's first ever educational experience for children with autism. Instead, she called her boss in California, hoping against hope to get an answer even though it was 8 am on Sunday morning in the U.S.

"Susan is my angel," Anna stated later, "as she called me right back and said, I don't know if we have the money but we'll figure it out later.

These people have to come.

We will pay for it." Anna said she fell asleep that night with the most peaceful feeling in her heart. And that describes how the rest of the experience continued. On the opening day of the classroom experience, Anna was asked to speak for 30 minutes in front of the Bosnian legislature about special education laws. She also found herself on Bosnian national television.

She later recalled, "it was a profound experience to stand in front of their legislature and say, 'Today at 9 a.m., eight children with autism went to school for the very first time in your country.'" All of this was done with the constant assistance of a Bosnian interpreter as Anna does not speak the language.

She characterized the seminar and the five days spent in the classroom with the eight students and 16 Bosnian educators, as the "hardest and best job I have ever done in my life. Our SPG: CSI team made me so proud on so many occasions.

"At different points, every person on the team stepped up when it was needed, sharing their authentic self. They made themselves vulnerable and gave every bit of who they are to the people of Bosnia. At the end of every seminar session, the speakers were inundated with questions and comments about kids from every city in Bosnia. There were also tense moments.

"On one occasion, when emotions and debate between the educators threatened to unravel the whole project, one of our SLP's asked for the microphone and began to speak about how debate was healthy and necessary for change.

Emotion overcame her as she began to cry, and suddenly everyone was mesmerized and the room was silent. She gained the respect of everyone there and I will be forever grateful.

"In the classroom for the first time ever children with autism spectrum disorder in Bosnia had come to school.

The U.S. team had anticipated screaming tantrums and sheer chaos, and although there was some crying and difficulties, by the first day, the kids were already learning. By Wednesday, most of the students had learned to take hold of a picture of the item they wanted and walk it over and give it to a teacher, in order to get their desired item. The kids had met all the goals we had set for the entire week by Wednesday!

"On a scale of 1-10, this whole experience was a constant 20, on the amazing factor," Anna concluded. "I know what happened in Bosnia this summer will outlast my lifetime, and the ripple effect will continue far beyond what I can imagine now. That feeling cannot be squared with anything else, and so I will continue to go to Bosnia, back to the schools that we are building, one by one." At this time of year, it is especially gratifying to know that Lebanon High School graduates can be found, changing the world, one educational system, one school, one child at a time, in the U.S. and all the way around the world.

For more information on this project, go to www.spgcsi.org.

Caption:

Anna (Tiesing) Taggart Photo courtesy of Laura L. Valenti Bosnian Vice President Spomenka

Micic and Anna Taggart sit side by side during a seminar on teaching autistic children.
Photo courtesy of Laura L. Valenti A Bosnian boy, Benjamin, requests a ball from Special Education teacher Barbara Sherman.

Memo:

'When their child finally received a diagnosis of autism, the doctors told them, there is nothing you can do for this child. The best thing to do is put him in an institution, forget about him and have another child.'

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Record Number: 1024525892