

## **RESEARCH REPORT**

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**From August 12-22, 2002 I traveled to Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia with a grant from IREX. There were three purposes to the trip:**

**(1) to oversee the second summer of implementation of a reconciliation program I helped to establish for teenagers of differing ethnic and religious backgrounds in Mostar, Bosnia; (2) to visit Belgrade as the guest of the Special Advisor to the Minister for Yugoslavia to the European Union in order to discuss that country's admission to the Union and to see many of the NATO bombing sites; and (3) to establish initial contacts in Bosnia to follow up my earlier research on the reconstruction of civil society for women and the growing problem of sexual trafficking in women and children. I was able to achieve all three purposes in the course of my trip.**

**The summer of 2002 marked the second year that The Council for America's First Freedom (CAFF), an NGO located in Richmond Virginia, successfully implemented an outreach program in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Bosnian Rebuilding Initiative, Dialogue and Group Empowerment (B.R.I.D.G.E) Project was designed and implemented to foster religious tolerance among Mostar youths. Mostar is geographically divided by the Neretva river; a river formerly spanned by a world-famous, historic Ottoman bridge (the Stari Most), that was completed in 1566. During the war, the bridge fell under intense shelling - despite the citizens' efforts to protect it by hanging old tires along its structure. Many feared that the former religiously-integrated and tolerant community of Mostar would forever be destroyed along with the bridge. Since the war, increasing separation of Mostar has taken place, with few ethnic minorities choosing to return to their 'original' side of the river. West Mostar is now primarily inhabited by Bosnian-Muslims, while East Mostar is populated by Bosnian-Croats. Religious tensions have created increased religious fervor, and an increased number of Mosques and Churches are sprouting up around the city. Mostar youths, particularly the males, feel uncomfortable crossing to the 'other side' of the river, and fear physical retribution if they were 'caught over there.' While plans to rebuild the bridge are officially underway, Mostar youths are more concerned with 'real' reconciliation among the two communities than the 'symbolic' reconciliation that they feel the new bridge will represent.**

**Project B.R.I.D.G.E. was a modest effort to reduce the religious hostility currently plaguing Mostar. The goals of the project were six-fold. They were to: (1) contribute to leadership development of the post-war generations of Bosnia-Herzegovina with a focus on maintenance of peace and tolerance; (2) empower a community of learners devoted to making positive changes towards reconciliation in Mostar; (3) promote the ideals of religious and cultural tolerance, coexistence, self-**

reliance, non-violence, and conflict resolution; (4) begin repairing and rebuilding relationships between the different ethnic communities of Mostar; (5) aid in the establishment of a new non-governmental organization in Mostar dedicated to promoting reconciliation between young people; and (6) develop links between Project B.R.I.D.G.E. and other local NGOs working towards reconciliation in Mostar.

Fifteen participants, ten female and five male, ranging in ages from 15-20, and consisting of 7 Bosnian-Muslims, 7 Bosnian-Croats, and one Bosnian-Serb, were brought together from East and West Mostar (a town divided geographically by the Neretva river) and challenged to accomplish the following six goals: (1) develop leadership skills, including: decision-making, consensus-building, an understanding of different perspectives, communication skills, and conflict resolutions; (2) learn how to effectively work with people from different religious/national backgrounds; (3) better understand their own identity and its relationship to “the others;” (4) humanize “the enemy,” as a component of rebuilding the community; (5) address wartime trauma; and (6) encourage proactive behavior for positive change.

Over three weeks, which was broken down into a one-week stay in East Mostar, a one-week stay in West Mostar, and a one-week stay at the coastal city of Neum, the youths participated in three diverse components of the program: (1) daily “facilitation” meetings (where experienced facilitators led the students in thematically-based sessions exploring such issues as stereotypes, identity, and fears); (2) cultural exchanges (which included trips to a Mosque and Catholic Church); and (3) regular “fun” activities (where the youths were initially encouraged to mingle with others of diverse backgrounds, and eventually undertook this of their own initiative).

The overall success of the program was impressive. Organizational issues had been smoothed out since the 2001 project, allowing more energy to be devoted towards the goals of the program and attention upon the youths development arc. Beginning the first week, students actively engaged in complex conversations on issues such as identity, culture, and religion. The group formed bonds very quickly, and soon developed feelings of security which enabled them to open up to one and other. In week two, the discussions moved to stereotypes, decision-making, control over choices, and ideal visions for the future. The goal of the activities in week two was to move the students beyond their feelings of powerlessness to those of self-empowerment. The groups began focusing on ways they could make a difference in Mostar. Week three saw increasing self-empowerment being transformed into ideas for future change. The group began to develop a missions statement and a declaration of principals.

The success of the program cannot be overstated. By the end of their three week journey, the students were listening to differing viewpoints, and contributing to group discussions. The students were willing to reflect on their own past experiences (including some war-time experiences) and look reflectively at their own

identity, and how this had been altered by the war. One student commented “I never knew I was Catholic before the war.” Most students left the program eager to take proactive actions to improve their communities in Mostar. The group developed an organizational structure and a preliminary schedule for year-round events.

But the task lying before these youths is not easily overcome. Some students who had originally agreed to participate in Project B.R.I.D.G.E. were forced to drop out as a result of parental-pressure. The recruitment of students in Mostar is complicated by high school officials who have played a deficient role in recruiting new students, and have demonstrated other negative sentiments towards the goals of the project. The students have begun to apply for NGO status (allowing the group to apply for grants from European institutions not accessible to American organizations), but the bureaucracy and misinformation surrounding the process has proved difficult. The age of the students provides for a great deal of energy and enthusiasm, but a lack of expertise and networking abilities. To insure the continued success of Project B.R.I.D.G.E., and to insure that the healing-process which has begun among these youths continues to survive and spread throughout the Mostar community, expertise and guidance, which requires both funding and manpower, will be vital. Project B.R.I.D.G.E. provided an excellent forum for observing “war-torn” youths who came to a program with feelings of hostility towards the “other side” and left with a new-found understanding that people aren’t defined by their religion, and friends can live on both sides of the river.

From Bosnia I traveled to Belgrade where I was the guest of Misha Crnobrnja, Special Advisor to the Minister to the European Union. I had worked many times in the past with Dr. Crnobrnja on conferences on the Balkans conflicts, as well as the B.R.I.D.G.E. project. As a historian specializing in international economic relations, he gave me an extraordinary tour of the bombing sites in the Belgrade area while explaining the most current developments in that country’s relations with the United States. I have already utilized photographs and information from that part of my trip in a class I am currently teaching on law, ethics and war with a Lieutenant-Colonel from the Air Force, and in a presentation on campus on the legal issues raised by the Kosovo campaign. I also obtained extensive information on the projected issues in relation to Yugoslavia’s admission to the EU. I will continue to utilize this information in my upcoming research and publications on the laws of war and civil reconstruction. In my opinion there is a need for researchers and policy-makers to focus on the importance of economic reform rather than reconstruction of infrastructure in the immediate aftermath of armed conflict. For example, the inordinate delays in reconstruction of the symbolic bridge in Mostar has become a source of resentment because it is seen as an impediment to the much needed economic development which appears to be on hold until the bridge is completed.

My final goal was to establish some contact in Bosnia with women’s organizations dedicated to prevention of violence against women which might also

**have some experience or insight into the growing problem of sexual trafficking in Eastern Europe. I am planning to publish another article on sexual trafficking, and to that purpose have established a very valuable connection with the executive director of the Women of Bosnia-Herzegovina.**