

Three Social Workers And An NGO

The use of art as an assessment tool in psycho-social evaluation of refugee children are among the activities of this team of professionals who journeyed to Albania.

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Give me money or I'll kill you right now!" The 15-year-old girl grimaced as she recalled the Serbian soldier's shouting on her last night in her home in Kosovo. "The soldiers lined us up and demanded money," Sylvia continued. "We didn't have any, so we gave them jewelry. We were scared. We said, 'Don't kill us, please, we don't have any more money.'" Then the soldiers put me in a room with my uncle and his son. They told me, 'We're going to kill you now.' They gave me the gun and said, 'Kill them!' I was crying and said, 'You'll have to kill me and kill us all because I won't kill them!' For almost two hours the soldiers kept badgering me to kill my uncle and cousin, but I couldn't. I was crying uncontrollably. Finally, the soldiers left and I did not have to kill my loved ones. My family fled to the mountains and I saw my village being burned as we left. I remember watching our neighbors running away and one of them was killed."

Sylvia's eyes were full of sadness as she recounted the atrocities surrounding her flight from Kosovo in the Spring of 1999. As we sat with her on a cement stair of a refugee camp in Albania, Sylvia volunteered to talk about the emotional needs of the refugees

there. The late afternoon sun was just starting to wane as she shared her skepticism that anything could help her or her people. There were just too many memories, too many horrors invading her sleep. She was sure that these memories would last forever.

This interview came at the end of a long day spent in refugee camps in South Albania. Two weeks earlier, our research team from Andrews University Social Work Department had been commissioned by a non-governmental organization (NGO), Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), to work with the Kosovar refugees. Our program was selected because the chair of the social work department served on the ADRA board. The Danish government (DANITA) had given ADRA a grant to help meet its psycho-social needs. The research team consisting of the program chair, field director, and interpersonal practice coordinator and had experience in needs assessments, qualitative research methodology, and crisis intervention.

Getting Ready

The phone call came, giving us one week to prepare for the assignment. True to the traditions of the academy, our

first thought was, "When in doubt, do a literature review!" With that resolve, our graduate assistants busied themselves investigating every topic closely related to refugee work. We checked out library books, copied numerous articles, and purchased books, rationalizing that there would be a lot of time to read on the plane. We kept abreast of the political and military situation by Internet which offered the information that the refugees, consisting of many elderly persons and traumatized children, were in worse condition than expected. In addition, U.S. citizens were cautioned against traveling to the area. "What do you think? And from the trio of voices: "I'm going." "Me too!" "I'm in." In less than a week, we were on our way, still not quite sure just what the mission would be.

Travel Challenges

The typical route to our destination was to fly to Greece, take a taxi to the Albanian border, and take another taxi from the border to Tirana, Albania's capital city. Because of the language barrier, arranging for a taxi from the airport in Greece proved to be challenging. But about four hours and a hundred dollars later, our driver dropped us off and we pulled our bags, boxes, and books to the border patrol, happy that the first part of our journey had gone uneventfully. Only moments later did we discover that we had arrived at the wrong border. We were at the border of Macedonia, not Alba-

nia. With a smirk, the border patrol officer informed us, "You are just one country away." He continued, "Why would you leave Greece and go to Albania? Albania is not as nice as Greece." When we explained that we had come to work with the refugees, he wondered aloud, "How much help can three women give to thousands of refugees? It's better if you go home." We hoped that was not a premonition of things to come and finally convinced him to just arrange a taxi to Albania.

Several hours later, at the Albanian border, we were again dropped off, as the drivers are not allowed to cross the borders without the proper paperwork. As we pulled our belongings through to the Albanian border zone, the sun was beginning to set and the taxi drivers were not eager to make the four- or five-hour trip to Tirana. Spending the night at the Macedonian/Albanian border was not appealing and after about an hour of asking for help and in general being a nuisance, we located a taxi driver and were off again.

Albania is a mountainous country with poor road conditions. The rain that began gently falling that evening made traveling more difficult. Our driver dodged potholes and maneuvered over mountain roads with no guard rails at frightening speeds. Trying to communicate with a non-English-speaking driver presented an additional challenge. We finally reached our destination of Tirana at 9:00 p.m., nearly 12 hours after our departure that

morning and three days after leaving the United States.

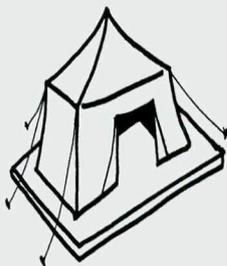
We were thrilled to learn we had finally reached Tirana but had no way of telling our driver where the ADRA office was located. The directions e-mailed to us earlier stated, "Go to the statue in the center of the city, follow the street opposite the horse's tail to the peach-colored hotel and turn left down that side street. Turn right at the next corner and you will find ADRA's banner hanging over the side of the building." Since the directions were in English, they were of no use to our driver. He was obviously not impressed with our lack of knowledge of how to find our destination; however we knew by the landmarks that we could see from the taxi windows that we were close. Miraculously, we looked up and there was the ADRA sign hanging from the building. We were sure the taxi driver was pleased to get us out of his vehicle and we unloaded our belongings quickly onto the dark, wet cement as he drove off. It was only later that we realized that one of our boxes was still in the back seat window. We never saw him or our books, articles, or granola bars again.

We spent the next two days developing our specific mission. Although we had prepared as much as we could, given our short travel notice, ADRA's Albanian office held key information that we needed to proceed. We realized the plan was for us to conduct an assessment focusing on the

emotional needs of the refugees. We coordinated our efforts with other NGOs and contacted the Albanian University Department of Social Work. During a field seminar we attended, we were pleased to discover the students working in many refugee-related field placements. We were also able to gain important insights from a social work perspective. For example, students and professors shared with each other their views on NGO relationships, the psychosocial issues of the refugees, and the environmental differences among the camps.

Learning from the Refugees

Saturday morning arrived and we were ready for the task that brought us to this part of the world. At the last minute, we had decided to take



along some crayons and paper to give to the children in the camps. We found our supplies in a store front at a cost of approximately four times higher than in the States, and made a mental note to equip ourselves before leaving next time, if we were ever asked to assist in a similar effort. As we set out for

the refugee camps we were anxious, wondering if there would be enough time to accomplish our goal of completing a thorough needs assessment.

Arriving at the first camp at the top of a hill, we saw what could be described as a typical refugee camp or tent city. The curious children gathered around us, anxious to discover why we were visiting. Although we hadn't developed a complete research plan, we realized that our crayons and paper presented an opportunity to gather valuable information.



"Would you children like to draw with some crayons?" our Kosovar interpreter asked the children. "Anyone who would like to color, come up to the cement area," she added. About forty children followed two team members and interpreters up to the church that housed supplies for the refugees. We hoped the children's drawings would offer a glimpse of their emotional state in lieu of the lack of appropriate time and re-

sources to do a full assessment of them.

The children waited patiently in line for paper and crayons. We could hear their playful conversations as they began drawing. As the children finished, we asked if they would like to tell us about what they had drawn. One by one the children came and explained their pictures. Nearly every child wanted to tell us about his or her drawing and asked that we keep the picture. "What did you draw here?" we asked.

"These are the soldiers. They shot a small child and another small child was watching and crying. They burned my house, but I didn't cry."

Another child said, "I saw a small baby being taken from his mother and killed. They burned everything in our house. It's all gone."

A third child recalled, "The soldiers came and made us march down the road across corpses of neighbors. We were told to kick the dead bodies." The horrifying themes depicted on their drawings were clear and consistent.

The adult refugees also shared their stories. They stated that conditions at this camp were not good. The tents had plastic over the tops of them, making them hot inside. One woman expressed worry over physical illness as she wondered whether her husband and two brothers were dead or alive. A school teacher refugee said that boredom was their current worst enemy. She suggested that simple things such

as books, magazines, and puzzles would help take the children's minds off the suffering. The refugees were wonderful in their giving attitudes, offering to share what little they had with us.

After saying good-bye to the refugees we drove the



twenty minutes back down the hillside to a second refugee camp. This site had six large warehouses which housed 2,000 refugees. We noted a Catholic presence in this camp: nuns leading a group of children in singing. The warehouses were cooler and the refugees described the conditions, in general, as good. One said, "It is better than being in the mountains and not having food." We were shocked to see about six outhouses for the 2,000 refugees, three of which were padlocked.

A young adult female commented on the sound of airplanes in the distance; we had hardly noticed it. She said, "When I hear airplanes I am afraid; it's the same noises I heard as when they were bombing our homes in Kosovo." An elderly couple described their despair: "Very sad, we need you to throw us in the sea, there is nothing left for us." We learned their grandsons were in Kosovo

and everything they owned had been destroyed. This camp echoed similar themes of loss and uncertainty.

We then drove thirty minutes into town to visit our third camp which was at an old school. Smells of urine and stale water greeted us as we made our way into the gymnasium housing many refugees. We were surprised to see the children gathered around a television. This single set at the camp also gave the refugees a connection to the outside world.

The sad stories of the long, difficult journey through the mountains, the bombing and/or burning of the houses, and the deaths of family and friends continued as we spoke to the people of this camp. One woman, when asked about rape, recalled that one girl was told, "Put off your clothes. We will kill you with our penis, but won't waste a bullet on you." As we left this camp, we were aware of the fatigue we were feeling from the impact of the collective emotional traumas related by the refugees.

The weariness lifted as our Kosovar interpreter encouraged us with her knowledge of some special qualities of the camp that we were about to visit. This camp had been an Albanian summer retreat; the setting was beautiful, up on the side of a mountain, overlooking the sea. The scene before us contrasted greatly with the tragic experiences of the refugees and with the camps visited previously. The refugees here assumed camp leadership

through organized group activities. When we arrived we noticed a game, resembling soccer, going on. It was at this camp the fifteen-year-old related her ordeal with the soldiers commanding her to kill her uncle and cousin. While the stories were as graphic and horrifying as previous camps, we noticed a relaxed atmosphere with more interactive activities taking place. After finishing the assessment interviews, the refugee children, coached by camp leaders, put on a patriotic program for us which included singing and poems.

The Journey of Leaving

As we left the last camp of the day, we noticed that the penetrating sadness and pervasive losses of the hundreds of interviewees had now become ours. One member of the team began to cry and yet, even with two skilled social workers to provide solace, we were at a loss to help each other. Soon, "debriefing" took on a whole new dimension; we no longer saw it as a one time event, but as an ongoing enterprise.

We began talking, first to each other, then with ADRA officials, about what we had seen and heard, our clinical and administrative observations, and short-and long-term goals. Some of our grief and heaviness were replaced with hope as we formulated interventions from the individual to societal levels. Within three weeks of our departure from Albania, ADRA hired two of our

program's recent graduates. These graduates accepted the challenge of leading in the programs initiated by the research team's needs assessment. The baton was passed.

Reflections

As we have presented information from our experience to others, we often wonder about the people who shared their stories and needs with us. We wonder if they have been reunited with their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. With the refugee descriptions of the destruction of their homes and neighborhoods, we wonder about what kind of housing and communities they returned to. We have a heightened sense of awareness of the overwhelming challenges facing the restoration of the country. We wonder how such a legacy of historical and cultural differences can be overcome when the issues are so complex and elusive.

Over the months following our visit, the lines became increasingly blurred between victims and persecutors. As the refugees returned home, media reports were filled with stories of retribution by the Kosovars. We began to realize with greater clarity that the real issue was achieving peace. How can diverse peoples live together harmoniously? There were religious, ethnic, and social class differences among the warring factions in Kosovo. We came back home with a greater resolve towards continuing our involvement in research and in

international social work. Our social work research agenda must include not only treatment but prevention of trauma, of not only intervening after war but strategies of mediation to prevent conflict.

We've often reflected on how much we take for granted, how we live in abundance and yet are so willing to complain about what we don't have. On our trip to Albania, we complained of being able to take only one small suitcase, while the refugees would be grateful for even that amount of clothing to call their own. We were anxious to get home to our families, while the refugees had no home to return to, and many of their family members were missing or dead. We were tired from our journey and work after the eight-day adventure and looked forward to peaceful rest that we were sure would come. And while most of the refugees have now returned to their homeland, we still wonder how much peaceful rest they will experience until we can all learn the lesson of celebrating difference. □

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