

# 8

## Hidden, Silent, Confused

*A survivor negotiates Boise and adolescence.*

*By Belma Sadikovic with Todd Shallat*

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On January 7, 1993, a cold Thursday evening, Belma Sadikovic escaped the Bosnian war. She was 9 years old at the time. Her elementary school had been shelled. Her father had been drafted. Fleeing north with her mother via Croatia and Slovenia, she reached Stuttgart, Germany, taking refuge in the home of her aunt. Two years later, the family was reunited. In December 2000, with help from relief agencies and American sponsors, they crossed the Atlantic, reaching Boise by way of New York.

Ethnically, Sadikovic is Bosniak. More fundamentally, in her memory and mind, she is a survivor and a refugee. Sadikovic now teaches education to college students in Boise and Nampa. An emerging scholar, she is a passionate advocate for refugees on a local and global scale. A naturalized citizen, she recently finished her doctoral dissertation in the College of Education at Boise State.

### *Where are you from? What do you recall of your childhood flight from the war?*

I was born in Zenica [now a regional capital city of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is about 40 miles north of Sarajevo].

For the first six years of my life, my parents and I lived in an apartment overlooking the city. We lived with my grandparents, which is common in our culture. My grandmother raised me since both my parents were busy working full-time jobs. My father worked as a master electrician at Željezara Zenica, the biggest steel factory in Bosnia. My mom was the assistant director of Utok, a Slovenian upscale boutique, which served the affluent population in Bosnia prior to war. We lived a very good life prior to the war in Bosnia. We owned an apartment, had a nice car, and spent our summer vacations on the Adriatic Sea. I had a very happy childhood. Then in 1992 the war took everything we had.

The war in Bosnia started on April 6, 1992. After almost a year, my mother and I were fortunate to escape its horrors. On January 7, 1993, when I was 9, my father

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paid a stranger his life savings to send my mother and me to live with an aunt in Stuttgart, Germany. The man drove a white Volkswagen hatchback. My father couldn't come with us as he was drafted into the army. We finally reunited in Germany in the summer of 1995. On December 16, 2000, after a year of waiting in Split, Croatia, we flew to Amsterdam and took a connecting flight to New York. We traveled with other refugees –



B. SADIKOVIC

Sadikovic, age 3, poses below her family's apartment in Bosnia's Zenica, 1988.

Previous page: Belma Sadikovic, 2013.

all easy to identify. We all carried large white bags labeled IOM (International Organization for Migration). I still have our bag.

I also carried a blue backpack filled with goodbye letters and memorabilia given to me by my friends. There were memories and good-luck tokens. I still have everything tucked in my closet, including the backpack and a diary-like notebook, which I only recently started reading. It took much time and effort to compile enough emotional strength to be able to dive back into the raw realities of my experiences as a child refugee.

Our trip to the United States was very intense for my parents and me. The fact that we were crossing the Atlantic Ocean and heading to live on a different continent made us anxious. Furthermore, we had never been on an airplane. I was

terrified. But in New York, as we boarded a flight for Denver, I remember the smile of a young TSA officer. “Welcome,” he said. My heart grew three sizes.

In Boise we were met by my uncle and his family, who had come to the U.S. two years before. They were our sponsors. Our resettlement caseworker from the Agency for New Americans also greeted us.



LEFT: ZEDOTURIZAM, RIGHT: R. SADIKOVIC

### *What was it like to start over in Boise?*

In Boise I did not start school again for several months. In a different situation, I would have been thrilled to not be held accountable for going to school. But not this time. At age 16 I had already missed too much school, which created a gap in my education. Instead I accompanied my parents because, although my English was broken, I spoke better than they did. I was responsible for translating.

Our caseworker with the Agency for New Americans spent over a month trying to find an affordable apartment. Meantime we stayed with our sponsors. Affordable housing was hard to find. Not many property owners wanted much to

Left: Zenica, an industrial hub on the Bosna River.

Right: Southbound highway to Sarajevo.

do with refugees. We found an apartment complex on 29th Street that housed other Bosnians and refugees.

I remember our first shopping trip to Winco. The streets seemed so wide; the buildings appeared so big. Winco was filled with different varieties of chips. There was an aisle completely dedicated to soda! And another filled with candy and chocolate! I was in heaven.

We survived on food stamps until my parents found jobs. Two months into our resettlement in Boise, my parents took the first jobs that the caseworker found for them. We did not own a car. My parents walked to work. At times, my mother would get a ride home from one of her co-workers because their shifts would end close to midnight. None of us spoke much English.

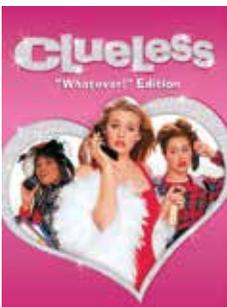
Like all refugees during the initial months of resettlement, my family and I underwent medical examinations. We had to complete legal paperwork before I could be enrolled in school. At first I was placed directly in a language academy for newly arrived refugee students. The English Language Academy was housed in Riverglen Junior High, but the refugee kids did not interact with the regular students. We had our own small part of the building downstairs. It felt strange to not be able to go on lunch breaks with the American kids at the same time. It felt humiliating. We felt like outcasts. Isolated, we called our school “the ghetto.”

I spent an academic year with my peers in that ghetto until my English was said to be “good enough.”

### *Describe Boise High School. What were your expectations?*

My first day in a real American high school was in February 2002, a week before I turned 18. Boise High seemed like a set from a movie. Like the movies I had watched in Germany – films like *Stand and Deliver*, *Clueless*, and *Dangerous Minds* – American students seemed bold and violent, their schools dramatic and cruel.

My first day at Boise High was in the middle of the spring semester. I stared at the floor of my classroom. In my dreams



TV GUIDE

High school movies like *Clueless* (1995) distort a young refugee’s expectations.



ANGIE SMITH

I still relive that day. Shoved into the room by a counselor. Avoiding the stares of my classmates. The teacher's high-pitched voice. Introducing myself to the class. My accent was British, having learned choppy English in Germany.

My survival method was to dissociate from who I was and what had happened to me. I would not talk about it. Constant and unexpected traumas and changes prevented me from making genuine human connections. I remained skeptical and reserved. My refugee survival skills helped and hindered: they helped me cope with being an outsider, but they hindered my self-awareness of who I really was.

### *Did the refugee experience color your education? Your capacity to learn?*

I didn't want to stand out. I wanted to fit in. I just wanted to belong. A few months passed. I tried to stay under the radar as much as possible, pretending to be a thinker just so I didn't have to speak English.

Zahraa Naser, 18, sitting center in a red hijab, struggles to connect with American classmates at Boise High School, 2016. Naser and her sister, standing left, reached Boise from Syria after her father was killed in Iraq.

As you can imagine, flying under the radar didn't fly with my English teacher. I was placed in a study skills class where I met Mr. Bradberry. Not wanting to mispronounce his name with my British accent, I called him Mr. B. He saw my strengths and became my mentor. He was someone I could talk to and trust. He helped me gain confidence in speaking and writing English. Academically he helped me excel. I became "student of the quarter," although cultural anxieties still held me back.



LAURA SEITZ/DESERET NEWS

Students learn compassion for the foreign born in a multicultural classroom, 2017.

One Friday Mr. B. sat down next to me and said, "What do you think you and I go to the Career Center and fill out a college application?" I stared back, then I looked at my homework. Could I get accepted to a university? Could I pay for tuition?

"I am not good enough," I replied.

"I want you to apply to Boise State University," said Mr. B.

“It is here in Boise, so you don’t have to travel far from your family. Think about this. You have the whole weekend to think about it.”

I nodded. My heart jumped. The bell rang, shaking me out of my negative thoughts. Soon I was taking the SAT and ACT college entrance exams and filling out applications. With help from the TRIO program [federal financial aid and encouragement for first generation college applicants] I entered Boise State as a freshman in the fall of 2003.

### *You are now well-settled in Boise. Where does the story go from here?*

I am Bosnian-American. By sharing my story I am reclaiming my identity. I am healing. But not everything can be told in writing. Some experiences can only be felt. “Refugee,” for me and many others, is more than a word. It is memory and experience. Often that experience makes refugees, if given the chance, eager to contribute. Education for me was the key to integration. I was silent. Education gave me voice.

In May I completed my doctoral degree in education. My calling is to teach others how to work with minority students, how to help them find their voice. I want to pay that forward. I’ve come this far because of people who cared and pushed me to reach ever-higher. People believed in me when I struggled to believe in myself.



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