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Interview with Zijada Talic

“The war was a disaster. Everyday they attacked us with grenades and weapons. Many people didn’t have anything to eat. Many people died from hunger. It was a very hard time, a very hard time,” said Drake University employee Zijada Talic. From 1992 – 1995 the Bosnian war raged. The fighting, which began after Bosnia –Herzegovina split from Yugoslavia, was between the Serbs, Croats and Bosnians. All sides agreed that they wanted the country to be a federal nation but couldn’t agree on proposed borders of the regions or the religions that would make up these regions. Talic spent much of the war hiding from the Serbs in basements and searching for food in nearby cities and villages, “basically we were hiding from them [Serbs]. We were hiding from the grenades. Sitting in the basements was scary, very scary. You never knew when they are going to start attacking. It was a struggle every day,” Talic said.

In 1993, Talic’s father was hit with a grenade and died. She also lost her grandfather, uncles and some cousins in the war. Although men were not forced to go to war, the alternative was a country in upheaval. “You have to go and fight if you want to live. You have to fight for your life.” In 1995, just months before the war ended, Talic, her mother and her sisters were transported to a different village. After the Serbs had transported all the women and children of the city, the 8,000 men that were left were captured and killed over three days. Among them was her brother, Suad. “We were waiting and hoping they were going to let him go, he was only 16

years old, you know, and then he never came. It was so hard, when you lose the loved ones, it's so hard."

President Clinton and his administration demanded that the war end and to enforce the peace, he sent NATO troops to Bosnia. Shortly after that, Talic, her mom, and sisters were transferred to free territory where there was no fighting or violence, "I kind of didn't remember everything how the war stops. We went to the free territory. My army was there. There were no grenades but I don't know. After a couple months they decide to stop the war. It was better. It was a big relief. You don't hear any more grenades, explosion. You know, it was better food. Many organizations have clothing for us, food for us. I think it was the Pakistani army, everyday they fed us."

Since they were not allowed to attend high school during the war, Talic spent the four years after the war attending an economics high school in Sarajevo, "it was a good time. Go to school and have friends again and feel like before war. Everybody was together and having fun." After high school, Talic's mom and sisters moved to Boise, Idaho, "since we couldn't go back to my city, then we were still struggling, my mom only had a little bit of money, retirement from my father. People still struggle over there now. There are no jobs, they struggle with hunger, and the economy is not good. There is no war, that's the good thing. We heard many people went to America, then one day we decide, let's try and see."

In Boise, the government offered a welfare package for refugees that the family was able to live off of. Her sister, mom and Talic went to school for three months to learn English and then she started working, "you come here and you

understand pretty much nothing and you have to start from the bottom. Cities are kind of different here. Like the houses, we build from bricks. The culture is different, but we like it, I like it. After school, we started a normal life.” While in Boise she began working on obtaining U.S. citizenship. She had to apply, pass a test and attend a ceremony, “I did everything and now I have citizenship.”

After a couple of years in Boise, Talic met her current husband over the Internet. A native Bosnian, he was living in Des Moines at the time. They met a couple times, dated for a year, got married in 2003 and Talic moved to Des Moines, “we have a very good life. We don’t have kids yet but we are planning to in the future.” Although Des Moines has a growing Bosnian population, the community isn’t the same, “in Bosnia, people always get together, in your city you know all your neighbors and they come to your home all the time. You know, kind of here, its kind of different. In my neighborhood I don’t know that many people. I miss people. I miss everything.” In order to get her fill of Bosnian food, Talic cooks most of her meals at home. There are a couple of Bosnian stores around town that she is able to find key ingredients at.

Talic has been working at Drake University for seven years. She started working in Hubble Dining Hall, was transferred to Terrace Dining Court and then got her job at Cowles Cafe, “I like it here, everyday you can meet new people, you can talk to new people everyday, it’s exciting. You know, I’m trying my best to be happy, to smile to people, to be nice to customers, that’s my main goal.” Talic also hopes to go to college one day and work for a bank. She sees the struggles that students go through but believes she has a unique perspective on it because of her

own experiences, “when you go through, it’s kind of easier to understand how people struggle. People actually don’t know until that hits you and you will understand better after you go through some stuff.”

My interview with Zijada Talic was eye opening. Her zest for life and spirit was everything that I knew it to be before the interview; however, the experiences that she’s had prior to her life in Des Moines overwhelmed me. More than that, it put my life into perspective. If someone who has been through so much can keep what’s perceived as a “low-income level” job for over seven years and be grateful for that, then what do I have to complain about? My interview also taught me that looks can be deceiving. Sure, from the accent that she greets students with you can tell English isn’t her first language, but what does that mean? Her interview with me also taught me that I can learn a lot about a person, all I have to do is ask.