

## Project for Peace in Bosnia

*"Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures" - John F. Kennedy*

### The Background

If peace is a slow process, war is its opposite in this respect too. Fifteen years ago, Kolibe Gornje, a small village in northern Bosnia, represented the kind of thriving, multi-ethnic community that Yugoslavia was proud to call its own. Over 300 years, this village had grown to include over 400 households, composed of each of Bosnia's main ethnic groups, Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Serbs. Beginning in April 16, 1992, as if overnight, war ripped apart the foundations of a peace they had worked so hard to maintain. As invading forces attacked the village, plundering and destroying anything in their path, the village transformed from a vibrant cultural center into a ghost town. All the villagers, including my family, were forced to flee their homes, and their homeland.



Today, the villagers are slowly returning to Kolibe Gornje from all corners of the globe. But the process of rebuilding their lives has not been an easy one. Ethnic tensions continue to divide post-war Bosnia. During the initial resettlement phase of Kolibe Gornje, Bosnian Serb and Croat minorities who once made up this multiethnic community were hesitant to return, fearing the kind of discrimination and intolerance that marked the Bosnian conflict. In the late 1990's, the initial resettlement came largely from the Bosniak population, who worked

together to rebuild their homes and their village infrastructure. Fortunately, the villagers of Kolibe Gornje did not follow the path to segregation. Once the Bosniak majority resettled, they welcomed the return of members belonging to other ethnicities. In recent years, the majority of resettlement has come from Bosnian Serb and Croat diaspora returning to their homes in Kolibe Gornje.

Together, they must let go of the past and work toward a better future. Yet throughout the village, the skeletons of old structures remain, bringing back painful memories. Perhaps the most haunting of these ruins is the ancient sports center, called SC Duganja. Before the war, it served as an area for bonding and friendship. Villagers used this center to gather and welcome their friends from neighboring villages when hosting athletic events. SC Duganja was the lively cultural center of the town. Today, it only serves to remind the villagers of their tragic past.



*The remains of SC Duganja*

### The Proposal

I propose to use the grant of \$10,000 to rebuild the destroyed sports center SC Duganja. The building would be modeled after the design of the former center, measuring 775 ft<sup>2</sup>, including a locker room, a shower rooms, coaches' quarters, and a common room for teams to interact and villagers to gather. The grant would be used to cover the costs of the construction materials, with the villagers themselves adding immeasurable value to the project by contributing their volunteer labor.

## The Parties Involved

As a former resident of Kolibe Gornje, I am intimately familiar with its present-day struggles. Because I have been fortunate enough to escape the horrors of the war and start a new life, I feel a sense of responsibility to help those who are still suffering. Since the end of the war, I have been to Bosnia numerous times. In high school, I organized fundraisers for the SOS Children's village for orphaned children in Sarajevo, Bosnia. My senior year, I interned at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, helping them interpret documents related to Direct Foreign Investment into the country. For the last two summers, I have served as a volunteer for Global Children's Organization's "Friendship without Borders" camp, serving children who have been traumatized by the war. The work I have done in Bosnia has largely helped residents of the large-urban centers of the country, such as Sarajevo. I have found that too often, rural villages struggling to make ends meet are overlooked. This project is a small, but important step in helping the residents of Kolibe Gornje rebuild their lives. As one of Kolibe's own former residents, I can attest to their determination to overcome adversity.



In the past, the people of Kolibe Gornje have shown themselves incredibly willing and eager to participate in projects to rebuild their community, as evidenced by their own efforts to reconstruct their homes. In recent years, their efforts have been aided by a group of young Italian scouts from Turin, who have pledged their support for this project as well. When informed about this project, many prominent members of the community, including Senad Zepcan, the chief liaison

for this project, expressed great enthusiasm and support. These residents had absolutely no doubt that with the funding, the project could be completed this summer. Within days, they supplied a blueprint for the building, as well as an estimate of the costs (see page 3).

## The Prospect

The reconstruction of the former sports center would promote peace and ethnic tolerance in the village as well as the surrounding area. At the local level, it would help reintegrate the Bosnian Serb and Croat minorities into the community of Kolibe Gornje by including them in efforts to better their village. By rebuilding their destroyed sports center with their own hands, the villagers become agents of change, helping heal the wounds of war. At the regional level, it would enable contact with the surrounding villages, which are largely ethnically Bosnian Serb and Croat. In the area, a major form of interaction occurs through regional sports tournaments, especially soccer events. Because Kolibe Gornje has not had a proper venue to host athletic teams, it has not benefited from this significant interaction with neighboring villages. The sports center will allow them to join the sports league, both at the junior and senior level, and reestablish ties with their neighbors. The outpouring of enthusiasm and energy into this project will promote tolerance and understanding not only in the village, but throughout the region. For many generations to come, this center will stand as a symbol of friendship and peace.

