

A PATH FROM DARKNESS COMMUNITY EMBRACES WAR-SCARRED MUSLIM CHILDREN

As a child in Bosnia, Melisa Huric watched an exploding grenade cover her sister with the blood, bones and brains of one of their neighbors.

“I often wake up at night after 3 a.m. and see that,” says Melisa, 15. “When I was in Bosnia during the war, I was always afraid.”

A new life in Hartford was supposed to end that fear.

But last year, when three men dragged her from the street into a car and tried to rape her, she learned that her new home was filled with new perils.

The tale of that event sparked an epiphany in Salwa Elgebaly of Bloomfield, an active member of the area's Muslim community. Elgebaly decided the one thing that could most help Hartford's growing population of Bosnian refugee children overcome the nightmares of their past could also help them survive the dangers of the city.

It was Islam.

“I founded this for Melisa,” Elgebaly says of Ansar for Kids, a nonprofit organization that, since July, has provided guidance and support for five hours each Sunday to Muslim refugee children from Bosnia.

There are about 2,000 Bosnian and 130 Kosovar Muslims in the area, according to Catholic Family Services. Ansar, which means support, is now open to Kosovar children as well.

Most Sundays, Elgebaly arrives at Jubilee House in Hartford's South End to find many of the 65 Bosnian children in the program, ranging in age from 6 to 18, waiting for her to open the door. Inside, they gather to study the Koran, learn Arabic and receive

counseling for their problems.

The Sunday before Ramadan began, teacher Hussein Elazezy was attempting to explain to 30 students the importance of the monthlong holiday's daily fasts, but was frustrated by chattering teenagers.

“Shoot them, shoot them!” shouted a student angered by the disrespect.

Hussein silenced the class and continued his lesson on the fast, which began Dec. 4.

“Every day thousands, maybe millions, of children are dying for lack of food and drink,” he told them.

Mumir Dervisevic, 12, raised his hand.

“Brother, you said they went without food and water,” Mumir said. “So did we.”

The talk of starvation brought memories of the war. One student told how, after days without water, she pressed her face into a trail and drank from the hoof-print of a cow. Another tried to chew on rocks to have something -- anything -- in his mouth to fight off hunger.

The class broke for lunch and the boys mobbed Yomna Maharem, a volunteer teacher carrying a Domino's pizza box.

“Everyone will get a piece!” Maharem shouted. “Go sit down!”

The students ducked their heads and backed away from the food.

To Elgebaly, the students' fight for food is an ugly vestige of life in war zones and refugee camps.

“They compete for everything,” she said. “They have no trust that there is tomorrow. They have no trust that something is going to come to them.”

“These children are very disturbed. Every little sound, they jump. They run.”

On the first day of the program at Jubilee House, young students hid behind Elgebaly as they peered into the chapel, then tugged at her skirt.

“There is a cross here,” they whispered, pointing to the crucifix that, in Bosnia, had been the mark of their Serbian oppressors.

They refused to go inside the chapel built for the Sisters of St. Joseph, who live upstairs. Instead, they said their prayers kneeling on paper napkins spread on the dirty classroom floor. Only after one of their fathers stepped into the chapel to show them it was safe would they pray there.

“Christians killed us,” one student told Elgebaly, who was first schooled by Franciscan nuns in Egypt.

“My dear, don't say Christians killed us,” Elgebaly replied. “Say evil human beings killed us.”

Today, the Christian chapel is a haven where the Muslim children can, if just for a few minutes, be kids.

Meliha Korkutovic, a playful, bubbly child, colored pictures of mosques in Medina, Mecca and London.

“Meliha, do you want to come and live with me in my house?” joked Elgebaly.

“I don't know,” said the 7-year-old. “I've never seen your house!”

Meliha has reason to celebrate during Ramadan.

During the war, her mother was struck by lightning while gathering food in a cornfield. After her mother died, Meliha gave her father permission to remarry, as long as her new mother had the same name -- Ferida.

In the South End, Nedzib Korkutovic met Ferida Becirovic, whose husband was also killed in the war. The couple celebrated the one-year anniversary of their marriage just days before the start of Ramadan.

Ermina Becirovic, 13, now Meliha's stepsister, remembers seeing people -- even elderly people -- tied naked to trees and beaten with belts by Serbians.

``I remember my mother telling me that my father wanted to see me and my brother before he died," she said. ``He didn't." She recites a fatiha -- prayer for the dead -- each night.

Mihreta Hreljic, 14, her head wrapped in a red scarf, said her father was shot to death, too.

``My mother said we looked alike and liked the same things always, like food," said Mihreta.

But not all their problems came with them from Bosnia.

Once-polite kids learned to swear in Hartford. They began hitting each other. Girls showed up for prayer in heavy makeup and tight shirts that exposed their stomachs. Some refused to cover their heads.

For the Ansar volunteers, those behaviors are as troubling as the recollections of war. They fear the students could lose their Islamic identity amid the open sexuality, violence and vulgarity that can be found in America.

``At Bulkeley [High School] they have a room where you can pray, no?" asked Nurun Ahmed, a volunteer making sure students have a place to pray at school during Ramadan. ``Just two at a time can go," she said, ``because if you make noise and disturb everyone, they can't do it."

John B. Walsh, vice president of Ansar for Kids and director of faith and works for St. Patrick and St. Anthony Roman Catholic Church in Hartford, said he sees no conflict in working with the

Muslim children.

“They are the invisible community that should be helped,” he said.

Elgebaly has a \$10,000 budget to run the program during this school year. Expenses include \$250 a month for rent. She relies on volunteer teachers. Most supplies are donated.

The program began with several dozen students studying in the basement of Hassan-Ali Sugulleh's Hartford home. When more refugees arrived, it moved to the Islamic Center of Connecticut in Windsor. But many of the students could not get there.

Jubilee House is just a short walk from many of their homes -- so convenient, many families hold nightly Ramadan prayers there.

Elgebaly, who is a clinical-trials consultant in Wethersfield, sees the entire mission of Ansar in the face of Melisa Huric.

“I knew her since July when we started this program. I knew something about her -- that she was lost and needed help,” Elgebaly said. “I was not rough on her. I wanted to help her.”

Melisa fidgets with her headscarf, is often rebellious in class and sometimes is rude to her classmates. She dresses in the latest American fashions, not the humble coverings encouraged by the Koran. But she still comes. And she still prays.

Elgebaly is patient. She wraps her arm around Melisa's shoulder. Whether it's nightmares or dark thoughts or just being a teenager that troubles the girl, she tries to help.

After six months in the program, Melisa, a freshman at Bulkeley, is learning how to pray the way Islam instructs. She quietly kneels in the chapel and carefully raises her hands before her face.

“It is helping me,” she says. “I am getting better.”