

"I am going to say hello to that gentleman and to meet him. I can't just give him a dollar and not know why he plays in the streets. Do you want to come?"

Mirjana came without a word. As we approached the sound of the saxophone, I started to panic. What do I say? How do I start the conversation? In spite of all my education in PR and communications, nothing came to mind when I needed it most. I swore and cursed inside, only to realize that we were standing in front of him and that he was "looking" at us, slowly lowering his saxophone.

"Good evening, sir," I started. He returned the greeting, while Mirjana was still quiet. He seemed a bit confused and surprised. I came closer, so that people couldn't pass between us any more. I introduced myself and explained why we recognized him. I also introduced Mirjana, told him where we were from and that we were on a study tour. I apologized for potentially being out of line and explained the reason for our confusion over his playing on the street. I said that where we come from, and maybe luckily, it would be incomprehensible to see a teacher from any school, let alone one of the most famous in the area, playing on the street for money, and that I would like to know why he is doing it.



Faith and Community April 2008 participants in Philadelphia, PA

"I was not sure whether you are collecting money in humanitarian purposes or simply promoting jazz music during a jazz festival..." I started my questioned carefully.

"What did I get myself into," I thought, upset and already regretting this little adventure.

After a long sigh and something that resembled a look in my direction, the gentleman got up, put down his sax and said:

"You know, money never hurts anyone. But, I play spiritual music and I see that as my mission. Music is something I love that makes me happy. It is a part of me and the only way in which I can actualize and realize myself, whatever that may mean."

I deserved this. I felt tears coming to my eyes from all the mixed up emotions, some sort of shame being the strongest. It was at the same time a most diplomatic, polite and humane responses to a basically rude question, especially by American standards. But luckily,

the gentleman – who at that moment in my view "rose to simplicity", as Andrić would say – quietly continued:

"You said you were in Washington. My daughter studies there at American University. Semester will be finished soon and she is coming home. I am very much looking forward to seeing her soon. And what do you do in your country? What did you say your name was?"

Mirjana and I hastily reintroduced ourselves and explained our purpose for being in Philadelphia. Then it dawned on me that this is exactly a story about a life of a real American that needs to be told. I asked the gentleman if he would agree with my publishing a story about our meeting, and if I could take a photo to go along with the story.

"Of course," he said with a smile, slowly sitting back down and taking his instrument.

While he was sitting down, I put forward my hand. Meanwhile, Mirjana lowered two bills that we pulled out of our pockets into his bucket, and then noticed that I was crying and trying with all my might to make sure the gentleman didn't hear me.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked with tears in her eyes. "He does not see my hand," I said as

I took his right fist with both of my hands, so as to greet him. Mira then just took his hand into hers, while I was adjusting the camera to take a photo. Then it dawned on me: whose name do I put in the caption for the photo?

"Mira, we didn't even ask him for his name," I said, now completely embarrassed and wound up, with a knot in my throat that was choking me. Mirjana dismissed me with a wave of her hand and head, and made for the concert hall, pulling out paper tissues from her pocket. With more apologies, I asked the gentleman for his name.

He said it with pride, or so at least it seemed to me. Then he waved in my direction, brought the sax to his lips, and played "Amazing Grace."

And that is how Mirjana and I met William (Bill) Douglas. And it was our honor.



Faith and Community: A Dialogue

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About the Faith and Community Program

The exchange program Faith and Community: A Dialogue, funded by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Office of Citizen Exchanges (www.exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens) and administered by IREX, provides opportunities for youth leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia, and the United States to better understand each other.

Partnered with the International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center (IMIC) in Sarajevo and the International Visitors Council (IVC) of Philadelphia, IREX will strengthen the role of clerics, educators, and community leaders—heavily influential forces among youth groups—in creating religious tolerance and understanding.

Participants were asked to write something about their experience in the United States. This newsletter includes a select number of those stories.

advantage of, it can only serve as a good example of what we should be doing in our own communities.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina faith is still considered a battle ground for conflict between youth, and a source of eternal and divisive debate. Under the influence of certain political currents, the youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina show no interest in building peace and cooperation or improving the situation in their country.

Finally, I can say that as a student I had a great opportunity to learn from the example of American youth how to view the colorful religious diversity of my country as an asset that other countries in the region don't have. I also learned what I need to do in my own community to help my young colleagues open their eyes and move forward, proud of the treasures and assets we have in our country - a home to three peoples with different cultural and historical roots and traditions.

Faith, Pride, or Shame

By Dženan Karač, Bosnia and Herzegovina

I start this article with a saying - "Faith begins where reason stops." One could say that faith drops into the depths of the human soul and rouses strength in people. If we look back on the history of mankind, we will notice that faith was frequently the cause of evils in the world. Many wars were waged under the banner of faith, and many lost their loved ones and their homes in those wars. Often we are witnesses to incorrect and insufficient knowledge of one's own faith that prevents recognition and appreciation of the faith of others.

Faith needs to be food for the soul and a starting power that gives a person hope to succeed when he is struck by sorrow and misfortune in life. Faith has a very important role in the upbringing of youth, especially in today's world where we are witnesses to growing juvenile delinquency worldwide. Faith also helps young people to resist such vices as alcohol and drug abuse.

During my stay in the United States I had a chance to visit American University and Georgetown University in Washington, DC, where I noticed that young people in America pay attention to the relationship between faiths in their communications. It is apparent that they take faith less seriously than the youth in our region and in Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular. American students treat faith as a treasure that allows them to get to know each other better and to work towards common goals for the entire community. Faith helps them to meet people from other cultures, to learn about their different values, and to exchange experiences with them. If we look at the colorful tapestry woven by American universities and see the great cultural diversity in them, which the students take

Where Differences Are an Asset and Not an Obstacle

By Zoran Maksimović, Srbija

Washington, DC was the first United States destination for our 12-member group from the Balkans. The goal of this little "expedition" was not only to learn about the experiences of American experts, religious leaders, and institutions working on religious pluralism and inter-faith dialogue, but also to see how religious tolerance in the United States looks in real life and how people can live together regardless of their differences. Our first destination, the United States capital, was an ideal place where you see but don't feel the differences. There is so much diversity in one place, and not only within the population...

Buildings lean on one another... different colors but with many spe-



Al Aqsa Madrassa, Philadelphia



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About IREX

IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development.

For more information about IREX or the Faith and Community: A Dialogue program, please visit www.irex.org.

cific details. Some have only one or two floors, others many more... but everything seems so perfect.... Just like that, the religions also seem to lean on one another... and people... people of different religions... In that respect it all looks perfect...

How was this achieved in the United States?! That was the question on the minds of most of the participants, since we in the Balkans seem unable to do it ourselves. The best answer came from Jon Crocitto of the U.S. State Department. When we asked him whether there are any mechanisms for good interfaith dialogue, he explained that there are no mechanisms, but there are people all over the United States who are committed to developing interfaith dialogue.

Maybe it is better to say that instead of people, there is the entire system that works on establishing an effective interfaith dialogue. We could draw that conclusion after our first few meetings in Washington. Many institutions work on interfaith dialogue. We had a chance to meet with just a few organizations in Washington, but those experiences will be very useful for our entire group. Particularly interesting was the Interfaith Conference, which gathers representatives from many religious communities – Muslims, Catholics, Hindus, Jains, Mormons, Jews, Protestants, Sikhs and others – all with the goal of facilitating dialogue, understanding, and a sense of belonging among peoples of various faiths. Interfaith Alliance is likewise committed to improving interfaith dialogue through discussing the meaning and role of faith in the community while promoting tolerance and other values.

Educational institutions are integral to the system of improving interfaith dialogue. At American University we heard about the positive experiences of young people involved in the Key Center for Spiritual Life. Although the students come from all over the world and represent many different faiths, the Center uses religion to bring them together. They can not only practice their own faith, but also learn about other religions.

We also heard about the need for young people to work on interfaith dialogue at Georgetown University. Father Godfrey told us it is important to understand that everyone is different, that we have different religious practices.... this is the only way we can better build a new world – a world of tolerance and understanding. He emphasized that universities and other educational institutions, just like churches and other religious institutions, must be included in development of religious awareness and religious dialogue.



Program participant Haris Gorak, an Islamic teacher from BH delivers a Friday prayer at a mosque in Philadelphia.

Although Georgetown is a Catholic university, it is attended not only by Catholics, but also by members of other religious communities. This openness of religious educational institutions to all, regardless of their religious views, is something we could see at every step of our trip, not only in Washington but also in Philadelphia. We saw that Madrassas in this city, where the Declaration of Independence

was signed, are not attended only by Muslim children, that Quaker schools do not only teach young Quakers, and that the Roman Catholic high school for boys had Muslim students. One of the high school students of Islamic faith described to us how it is possible for everything to function properly, when there is a will. Although he is an active football player at a Roman Catholic school, he is always able to maintain the obligations of his Muslim faith by fasting during the month of Ramadan.

Everywhere we went, we witnessed acceptance and understanding of the differences we could see all around us. These differences are seen in the United States as a source of wealth. We still don't have such a view in the Balkans. During the '90s, differences in the Balkans were a reason for war, killing and persecution among neighbors. Differences are still a barrier here, and they are hard to overcome on the way to a tolerant and democratic society. Yet every little experience, every individual effort however small, is very important for this change to happen. Time will be needed for differences to stop being a barrier and become a treasure in the Balkans. But optimism and individual efforts by each and every one of us active in the civil society can contribute to this change. And every new experience supports our efforts.

Friday Prayer

By Haris Gorak, Bosnia and Herzegovina

During our 20-day stay in the United States, we visited various institutions in Washington and Philadelphia. Every visit was interesting in its own way, and offered to the participants various experiences and information.

To me, the most exciting was the April 18th visit to the Foundation for Islamic Education and Villanova Academy. My excitement started a few days earlier when Ms. Ann, our IVC host in Philadelphia, told me about the offer from the Villanova Academy director, Dr. Mustafa A. Ahmed. Dr. Ahmed said that if there was an Imam in the group, he would be welcome to lead the main Friday prayer and sermon, Juma namaz and Khutba. Since I was the only group member who met the requirement (even though I currently don't work as a religious figure but rather as a teacher of religion in school), Ms. Ann started to talk me into accepting the offer. This would also mean a lot to her, given the great relationship between IVC and Villanova Academy. When the rest of

the group found out about the proposition, they started encouraging me to accept it as well. All of my arguments to turn it down were rejected, so I decided to accept the offer and spent the next two nights in intensive preparation for the 18th of April.

That day will remain ingrained in my memory for a very long time.

Had I not come to the United States on the Faith and Community exchange program, I would never have had a chance to have this unique experience.

I have prayed Juma namaz as a "regular" believer many times, and several times as an imam, but this Juma namaz in Villanova was definitely something special. This was the first (and maybe the only) sermon I have given in English. Moreover, the jamaat, the gathered faithful, for the service was indeed exceptional. On the one hand, it included Muslims I had never met before and did not know, except for group members Dženan and Sead. On the other hand, there were group members Igor L., Igor R., Ankica, Mira, Minva, Zoran, Petar, Siniša and Sanja, who I did know, but who were not Muslim. It was a very interesting combination, demonstrating that America is an interesting country indeed.

Of course I have to say a few words about Dr. Mustafa, who left particular impression on me. I know that Islam promotes tolerance through its teachings, not only among Muslims but also between Muslims and people of other religions. Yet all too often that idea remains theoretical and declarative. Dr. Mustafa is a man who has managed to put this idea into practice in real life. It is not very often that one meets such a tolerant and generous person as Dr. Mustafa.

Finally, after all I have seen and done in America, I can say that it is America's "fault" (and also that America is a very lucky country) to have institutions such as the Villanova Academy and people such as Dr. Mustafa as their leaders.

Ave Jazz Maria

By Ankica Dragin, Serbia

In Philadelphia we met William (Bill) Douglas. Even though his name was the last thing Mirjana and I learned about him, it was our distinct pleasure to meet him during this year's Jazz Festival in Philadelphia, after he finished his performance of Ave Maria on his saxophone.

Truth be told, we had already met Bill earlier that same day, but in a different place and under completely different circumstances. We were aware of his existence, but he was not yet aware of us. That morning we had been visiting a Catholic boys' high school where he was teaching a music class when the fire alarm suddenly went off. Everyone had to leave the building, including the school principle who was our host. While standing outside, we watched a stream of excited students, professors and administrative staff pour out of the school. Passers-by looked surprised and slightly worried, frowning as they heard the piercing sound of the alarm - half a bell and half a siren.

In the midst of the general bedlam and bustle, I noticed a middle-aged couple moving slowly in the same direction as the frenzied mass of students. A white lady was leading an African-American gentleman by his hand, as if she was giving him instructions where to go. The entire scene seemed out of place amidst the surrounding chaos. The gentleman wore a bright bordeaux suit, white shirt and colorful tie, and was holding a long white cane in his hand. At that

point, I realized that he was blind, and more interestingly that he was a member of the school staff. I asked the principle who he was, and she explained he was the music teacher. I don't know how to describe my enthusiasm when I realized that one of the oldest high schools in Philadelphia, with an excellent reputation, where it is really hard to get a job and where it is a particular honor to work, hired a person with special needs, and what kind of a message this sends to the young people. I was truly touched by that example and pointed it out to the rest of the group. Later, when I looked at the agenda for the day, I thought that the day had started really well and that the evening jazz concert would be a great way to end such a day.

As we were approaching the concert venue later that evening, the sound of a saxophone emerged from the general noise and bustle of one of the busiest streets in Philadelphia. I recognized the tune - Ave Maria. "Truly unusual," I thought and hurried to see the performer.

I pushed my way towards the music, saw the performer, and stopped as if petrified. I could not believe my eyes. It was the same music teacher from that morning. He was sitting on a chair without a back, still wearing the same suit, shirt and tie. His white cane leaned against the adjacent wall, and his saxophone case was in front of him with a small, white plastic bucket for people to toss money in.

My shock was instant. Someone else from the group asked if he was the same teacher, while another excited voice confirmed that he was. Others immediately reached for their wallets and threw some money into his bucket, while wondering whether he was playing because he felt like it, because he loves to do so, or because he needed the money. None of us could comprehend how a teacher from such a prestigious school in our minds could be playing on the street due to financial need - making money in a way that is reserved for beggars and homeless in our country. While someone made a comment that he was probably playing for humanitarian purposes, I started to say hello and ask him whether this was true. Then I stopped, realizing that we had not actually met him at the school. For God's sake, he didn't even see us! How could I approach a blind man and possibly put him in an embarrassing situation when he had no idea that I knew where he works and what he does. I got lost in questions and dilemmas about a situation I had never before found myself in as we made our way to the beautiful concert hall.

As I wondered about the music professor from an elite school who plays on the streets for money after hours, my thoughts were interrupted by a flash from a colleague's camera, asking us to smile. As if I felt like smiling! I turned to Mirjana and said:



William (Bill) Douglas. Philadelphia