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From Concrete to rubble

Growing up in a small homogenous town in North Carolina I had the opportunity to be isolated from the world. I could have easily been able to watch the local 6 O'Clock news and been content by the notion that was all I needed to know. Many of my friends back home have this mentality: *What's it have to do with me? I can't do anything about it, so why bother?* When they do get the notion to travel it's more for a materialistic and touristic experience: *I want to see The Eiffel Tower or layout on an exotic beach!* Before I had the chance to grasp the idea that you could travel just for the fun of it, my international experience had, by that time, shaped my mind to see the world as more than destination hotspots.

I remember arriving at the Sarajevo International Airport, tightly squished in between my mom and aunt who were crying - crying so heavily that I, who was too young to know what was going on, began to cry too. Just the intense emotions and tearful, wordless stares at each other was what I remember my very first time in Bosnia to be. It was the first time my parents had been back to see what they had ran away from, to find out who had survived and what was left of a mass genocide, taking with them an American born child. Bosnia to me at the time was strange, my world in North Carolina was the typical American life yet I had this other world inside my house where I would hear this language being spoken between my parents that I had no history behind, only a brief edited version of what happened. Soon enough, the entirety and scope of it didn't hit me until I went and saw it for myself.

My eyes were filled with dusty and burned to the ground ruins, and shrapnel holed houses everywhere. In a moment, I saw my mother crumble into pieces as she saw her childhood

home burned to the ground. Wild greenery and figs grew out of the ruined empty window sills, like coming through empty eye sockets, where, my mother said, once was ironically a place of serenity. I didn't realize when I found my mother's shoe and a small toy truck under the rubble of rocks and dust that this could ever happen.

I was in complete shock to see people begging on the street with no legs, and mothers holding their passed out kids, from hunger and heat, in their arms. Shocked to see how, at every stop light, homeless kids would run up to our car washing the windows hastily before the light turned green, hoping to get some money - then to return to the U.S. and come back to a life of complete difference, where none of my friends knew where the country I had just returned from, was. It was a struggle to reconcile these two very different lives. From complete fulfillment, having everything I wanted, to seeing my family and a whole country try to pick up the pieces after such horrors and dismay of war.

Seeing such a struggle, that seemed so far away from the U.S., yet so close to me personally and to experience a level of emotions and struggle, in ways made me mature quickly. I saw how hard my father and mother had to work as refugees to give me a better life from an early age. It is a mental note that clicks in my head everytime I go back to Bosnia, but not only Bosnia. When I see a Burmese man walking down the street, a woman cleaning tables in a packed mall or a Mexican construction worker walking to a construction site early in the morning, as I walk to my 8:00 a.m. class. I always make a mental note of them, it's as if I can't walk past someone like that and feel their struggles, their tiredness and their push to go on. I have this natural urge to know what they are going through, because I see my father in them, I see my mother in them... As I grow, my compassion seems to grow with me. It does not stop

with my immediate knowledge of war and displacements, but more so, I recognize the struggle of those who came before us, like Native Americans, Irish, Chinese and for that matter, all of us in one way or another. I see how connected we are in this world.

The struggles I see have created a force in me to do better for myself. My cousin who even today, 20 years after the war, has to go to a high school that separates him and his classmates because of their religion, and while he wants to be a doctor he has to deal with prejudice teachers and unpaid light bills that cancel his school for days at a time. I see my father watch politics every night and fall asleep to it, since I was a child because it was his dream to be in politics but wasn't able to because of the war.

To have an international experience like this has given me such compassion for others. I see underdogs, minorities, oppressed people or people just working hard in whatever they do, as though I am looking at my father, my cousins and my people in Bosnia. I take this drive with me that I inherited, through these strong people and I use it as a reminder that I can make something out of this world, no matter what the circumstances are. The world is at my feet and I have the opportunity to do anything I want! I see the world to my advantage, while keeping humility and compassion for others, because I wouldn't be here without the others who gave me wings.