

Christ Brings Hope of Reconciliation for Bosnian City

Mathilde, 15, ran her hand along the stone wall of the Bosnian house in Mostar, feeling the scars of bullet holes. "I realized that war is far from being fictional. It's real," she remembers. "For me this was a revelation."

Mathilde, from France, was one of three teens and five adults to visit Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), earlier this year as part of TeenStreet Europe's Raise and Give (RAG) program, through which teens raise money for various OM projects worldwide.

The three teens—from France, Sweden and Switzerland—had raised the most money during TeenStreet Europe 2011 and were invited to visit BiH and the main RAG project for TeenStreet 2012.

The purpose of the trip was two-fold: to reward the teens for raising the most money the previous year, and to introduce them to this year's RAG project, giving them the chance to experience the need first hand.

Bullet holes in buildings, graveyards of mass murder and minefields reminded the teens and their leaders of the war that devastated the country from 1992-1995, leaving its people emotionally and spiritually wounded.

"The picture that sticks most in my mind is seeing thousands of houses in the countryside—beautiful countryside—completely abandoned," remembers TeenStreet Director Ger van Veen (Netherlands), who led the trip. "And hearing the stories of why these houses are abandoned—people being chased out, people leaving everything behind to go to a place where they're safe."

During the visit, the group approached young people in the streets to learn about how they see the future. Many had a hard time answering this question, which confirmed to Ger that focusing on a project in BiH fit the heart of this year's theme—NEWSONG40, based on Psalm 40.

Through NEWSONG40, teens attending TeenStreet from 28 July – 4 August in Germany will be encouraged to identify the old song they sing about themselves and embrace the new song of truth God sings about them. Standing amongst the remnants of war, Ger knew the theme would also apply to young people in BiH. "It's a country that needs a new song," he says.

Though many teens they spoke to did not see hope in the future, some expressed dreams of finding success in sports, which sparked the idea to help fund the building of a sports complex in Mostar, one of the three cities in BiH where OM works.

A memory of Destruction

Mostar was the most heavily bombed of any Bosnian city during the war, leading to the destruction of its most famous and symbolic structure: the beloved Stari Most (Old Bridge) that spanned the Neretva River. It was not only the architectural heart of the city—located in what is considered the historic centre of Mostar—but was also the cultural and spiritual heart of the city.

"Even mentioning the bridge for years after it fell to the bottom of the Neretva River could invoke tears," explains OM Bosnia Field Leader Claudia Costa, a Brazilian who has worked in BiH for almost 10 years. "It symbolised both the city and the country as a whole."

Through the combined efforts of the Bosnian government and international community, Stari Most was rebuilt in 2004, 11 years after its destruction, with some of its original pieces recovered from the river. Today, visitors will find Mostar to

be a lively and charming city once again, particularly the historic areas. "The bridge is Mostar's core," says Claudia, "and its reconstruction means that life is slowly but surely returning to normal."

However, Mostar has not recovered completely. Though the bridge has been rebuilt, the memory of its destruction parallels the division that still dwells in the hearts of the people. Once one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the country, Mostar now suffers geographic division between its ethnic groups. The river splits the city into East and West, separating the Bosnian Muslims and Croat Catholics. This division reflects the country as a whole and the people's wounded hearts.

"The Old Bridge is the link between the two sides and a sign of reconciliation and restoration so needed for the people in Bosnia," says Claudia.

Bridging the Divide

Since 2009, OM has partnered closely with Brankovac Church and the national Bible school, both in Mostar, to disciple, mentor and train local pastors and young leaders.

Church leadership in the country is young and mostly untrained. Though a small evangelical presence existed in BiH before the war, most people died or moved away, leaving no church at all. Today, there are about 25 young churches—none older than 16 years—and a few church plants. In a population of about 4.2 million, only about 600-1,000 are believers.

Just behind Brankovac Church sits an open-air sports complex. During the summer months the facility is available to youth, but it is unusable the rest of the year because of the weather. Currently, there are no affordable indoor sports facilities for the young people.

Ger and the TeenStreet RAG team saw this as an opportunity to partner with OM Bosnia to make a tangible difference in the

lives of the young people in Mostar. With the money teens raise at TeenStreet Europe this year, OM Bosnia and Brankovac Church plan to add a roof to the complex.

OM Bosnia, the church and Novi Most, another local organization working with youth, hope to use this complex for the kingdom. "Our vision is to see the area behind Brankovac Church used for sporting activities as a bridge into the community for expressing the love, grace and blessings of our Lord Jesus Christ," expresses Claudia. They also hope to use the complex as a bridge for reconciliation between the youth of Mostar's divided ethnic groups.

God is the Answer

"Reconciliation is to bring people together again without prejudice," says Claudia. "It is to see the walls in the hearts of people come down, leaving place for forgiveness and the peace of God to come through and bring transformation." But, she says, this is still a sensitive subject in Bosnia: "In Mostar, for example, there are no multi-cultural teens besides those in the evangelical churches who have already experienced the gospel transformation in their lives."

But there is hope. And the teens across Europe who attend TeenStreet 2012 can help. "God is the solution for Bosnia," Ger says. "We as Europeans can play a role in that, which is why I feel it's a godly thing that we're doing this project."

Mathilde looks forward to participating in RAG at TeenStreet again this year. "It's important to raise money for the sports project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, because the Christians there make such an effort to approach the youth, of which some want to hear about God," she says.

The teens who help sponsor the roof may never visit Mostar to see the fruit, but they'll know that they are helping to make the project possible. "It will be a place where teens can meet with people that know Jesus," reminds Ger. "The teens will

actually be contributing to reconciliation and restoration.”

For more information about TeenStreet Europe and RAG, visit .