

My experience with STARTTS

By Imra Krasnic



Good morning to everybody here today; to STARTTS employees, some of whom I know, and to the ones I don't but might have a chance to meet, and to all the distinguished guests present here today.

I would like to share with you some details of my life and especially the last four years, a time that has been in one way or another related to the STARTTS organisation.

Before I do that I would like to mention that I was born in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and with the unfortunate events of the war that my country was caught up in I lived for eight years as a refugee in Croatia.

It is very hard to explain to somebody who has never been a refugee what that feeling entails. Being forced out of your own country for no wrong doing on your part, and then expected to go on with your life and make a decent contribution in the country that has received you. A person's sense of orderliness, fairness, balance and self-awareness and self-respect are utterly shaken.

After the time spent in Croatia I found myself here in Australia. That was six years ago. The first two years of my life in Australia were very hectic, trying to organise schooling matters, understand where I was and what I was doing here in a sense.

However, what is there to understand, when your whole sense of who you are and where you belong has been so altered? When you are reproached by people who tell you to "relax", "if you don't like it you can go back to your country", implying that we had some form of choice and that being a refugee is something we willingly took up so as to bounce upward in society. What people, who have been lucky enough never to have to leave their homes due to war or political uprising of any kind, need to understand is that refugees are victims and should be allowed to have some time to recuperate before being able to move on to the survivor stage. Being a refugee is not a choice! That is where STARTTS comes into the picture.

I came into contact with STARTTS through a Bosnian friend of mine who was going on a youth camp organised by them. That was the first activity I was a part of, and that proved to be the start of a long-term connection with STARTTS. After the three-day camp we started having weekly meetings, and organised a youth group for people from ex-Yugoslav countries. That is, ONE group for young people from Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia together, in order to promote the ideology of peace and tolerance in this country so far away from ours. That group was called Balkan Express Youth Group. Some of the activities of Balkan Express included creating a website, organising further group outings and weekly meetings; all aimed at providing opportunities

to socialise in a safe and tolerant environment.

From the youth group sprung the idea of setting up a radio program for young people which would promote the same ideas, with news stories on things relating to the arts, culture, cinema and music from all parts of ex-Yugoslavia and the rest of the world. That radio program started in 2003, and I am proud to say that it is still on air to this day, every Sunday from 3pm to 5pm. I was a volunteer presenter and DJ on the program for a period of a year and a half, and that was one of the best times of my life in Australia. The word about us spread across Sydney, we had people calling into the show praising the idea of being apolitical. People wanted to laugh, have fun and hear good music, and we made sure that they did it. In doing so, my life became far more fulfilled and the experience helped me to combine the two parts of my identity, the Bosnian/Croatian living in Australia. And I would like to thank STARTTS for that.

After the period of settling in and finding that I accepted the fact that, YES I AM LIVING IN AUSTRALIA NOW, some rather unsettling things started surfacing and I found myself in a distraught state. I was going through a period of hypothesising on what sort of life I would be leading if it hadn't been for the war. My whole sense of reality seemed tampered with, conditioned into being, by forces other than myself and my own free will. I am speaking for myself here, but I am fairly



certain many of the people who have had similar experiences would agree.

Your sense of reality is altered, you are forced into a reality you had never dreamed you would find yourself in, you have to change your habits, learn a new language and the modern world is not waiting for you, you have to survive and in order to survive you have to earn money and be a productive member of society.

So you struggle, and you try, and the issues don't just simply walk away.

So, I couldn't concentrate well, sleep well, I contacted STARTTS and started going to counselling. I cannot describe in words how important it was for me to go through that process and how much it helped me to organise my thoughts and emotions. I do believe that it is ultimately up to the person in question and how ready they are to help themselves, but without professional guidance it would have been five times as difficult and the results would be questionable.

One important factor for me was that my counsellor was Bosnian and that added another dimension of understanding and sincerity to the whole process. For some of you whose native

language is English, this may seem an odd statement to make since my level of English is near native level and I am an English teacher with a degree in linguistics, but no matter how much knowledge and understanding I have of the language and culture, it never allows me to feel as profoundly as does my native language.

So, it was a big factor that STARTTS could offer me a counsellor that spoke Bosnian. That is another point I would like to thank STARTTS for, so, thank you. You really helped me to feel calmer and more at ease with myself and my thoughts.

I ended the counselling one year ago, upon my request, because I sincerely felt that everything was falling into place and that I could go on with my life.

I would like to emphasise this point, things are never completely resolved, being a refugee is woven from many traumatic experiences but we CHOOSE to move on and that choice is a lot easier to make with some help along the way.

I have since enrolled in, and am about to finish, a postgraduate course in teaching English to speakers of other languages, and this proved to be another opportunity to get involved with STARTTS.

I am now a volunteer English teacher at STARTTS and I am very happy that I can give something back to the organization, and the people in their program. As I have mentioned before, STARTTS helped me through the radio program to combine the two aspects of myself, but through volunteering I was given an opportunity to combine my love for language and teaching, which is a big part of who I am, to a group of people who I can relate to on so many levels.

As I have already mentioned it is very hard to describe the many meanings of the word "refugee". It is hard for the person carrying that title to understand it themselves, let alone someone who has not experienced anything similar. Refugees in Australia have at least an organisation that recognises their struggle and that provides help and support in the process of organising their lives again.

STARTTS has been in a way a cohesive link to all aspects of my life, combining into a unified whole and I am sincerely grateful for that and I have no doubt in my mind that it will continue to do so for countless future and present clients through its expertise and devotion to all causes humanitarian.

Thank you.