



Kristin Flory

EWI staff with BVSer Gillian Miller, at right.

Agents of change

by Kristin Flory

M meet a group of women doing incredible things

with very few resources: *Ekumenska inicijativa žena*, the Ecumenical Women’s Initiative (EWI). When Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS) worker Julianne Funk told me five years ago that she was interested in working with EWI in a small town in Croatia, that name sounded vaguely familiar. I remembered that the World Council of Churches had set up an Ecumenical Women’s Solidarity Fund in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, around the time of the start of the wars there.

Two BVS volunteers and five visits later, I now know that EWI launched 10 years ago as an independent indigenous organization, shifting focus from women as victims, to women as actors of social change. It seeks “to empower

women and their role in strengthening interfaith and civil dialogue, and the potential of faith as a positive factor in social change through building peace and reconciliation processes.” The organization:

- creates safe meeting spaces for women of faith as peacebuilders in diverse post-war communities
- identifies and trains young women community leaders
- supports women to deconstruct harmful prejudices and stereotypes
- facilitates group training and mentoring for women peace and human rights activists and
- connects women from diverse national and religious backgrounds.

The region includes Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo,

Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

These EWI stories took place in the first half of 2017:

The cross-border project “**Renewing the Mind to Rebuild the World**” brought together members of different Christian denominations. Ecumenical and interreligious cooperation advanced between organization members, as well as between believers from Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Muslim community, Croatia, and Serbia through lectures, workshops, conferences, and visits to sacred sites.

One participant shared about the importance of “talking about faith, prayer, confidence, to women outside my religious tradition, without either having the need or wish to convert those around me and to convince them of being wrong. This is a significant change in my life. . . . I remember



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being full of prejudice, of misconceptions and arrogant, self-righteous views of Islam and especially of women in Islam. After Sarajevo, all of that changed.”

“**The Power of Community**” helped reduce existing prejudices among students through lectures, workshops, visits to sacred sites, and religious activities. Students from Sarajevo, Mostar, and Banja Luka were empowered to witness to coexistence in their communities. Radio Marija documented and aired their experiences to about 700,000 listeners in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“Nationalism-patriotism-realism; the chronological order of my growing up,” one participant shared. “My primary social surrounding was family—one rooted in Orthodox tradition and customs with the enormous burden of war-refugee experience, which entailed a certain animosity towards ‘the other.’ This, supported by biased media and the company I kept, produced an atmosphere of intolerance towards those others: the non-Orthodox (Muslims and Roman Catholics). Now I know the joy of dropping by at the mosque or cathedral and seeing the beauty there, of talking to believers inside, of getting to know other cultures and traditions.”

Our women by Gillian Miller

“My favorite thing about this region is its diversity. This region is a crossroads of many cultures. We are, at the same time, a Southeast European country, a Central European country, a Mediterranean and a Balkan country with rich cultural heritage. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early ‘90s was the first time in my life where I was faced with inter-ethnic hatred, what it means and the consequences it could provoke. One could get killed because of one’s ethnicity. Although I did not understand it, I had to learn how to live with it. I was driven to peace work by a desire to be socially engaged, to not be a bystander.”

—Alma Muratovic-Kajtaz, financial manager and assembly president, Association *Novi put*, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina



Gillian Miller

“I was apprehensive whether I would be able to gather women from all three religious communities,” said the project coordinator of “**Together Towards a Brighter Future**”—a project to educate women on attitudes about Islam. Through forums, work-

shops, and social gatherings, women from the Žepče Municipality gained knowledge about “the other,” thus reducing prejudice and improving coexistence in this post-war area.

“The first meeting was good, women of all three religions appeared,

Our women



Gillian Miller

“I would suggest that future change makers do their best to meet people from all sides, speaking often and honestly. They should try to understand how other people function and what they believe. By embracing honest dialogue, they can be a bridge connecting people and helping them understand each other.”

—Amra Pandžo, *Mali Koraci (Small Steps)*, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

but sat separately in groups,” the coordinator said. “Women from my own community later asked, ‘What do we need this for? Why don’t you organize something for our women only?’ I invited the same women for a second meeting, trying to explain how important these meetings were and that if they kept coming, they would understand the importance themselves. The numbers grew. Each event was more successful and more relaxed than the previous. During one workshop I noticed two women from different religious communities and opposing sides, talking together; one had lost her son and the other her husband in the last war. My eyes welled up with tears. I had succeeded. In their loss both were sharing their sorrow and their pain. What had happened was none of their fault, but they could understand one another best.”

The “**Month of Women’s Activism**” connected and empowered women of all generations in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County by offering education on women’s rights, gender equality, and activism, creating a foundation and basis for networking and cooperation.

“One of the greatest lessons of this journey was realizing how to work on unity where no unity is expected,” the project coordinator said. “Through cooperation with different women and

new locations, such as the Island of Cres, we were in a position where we needed to leave our comfort zone and adapt to new situations and to learn to rely on persons with whom we had not worked before. . . . We had managed to

Our women

“I am a person who doesn’t like conflicts. And I don’t like to cause unrest, which is precisely what I have done from the very beginning of my theological work concerning women. I am often isolated for this reason and my work is ignored. It is a challenge for me to deal with such situations and to persevere in my work. I try to view the world and my own life from God’s perspective. I know that the present is not all there is, that there is a future that God wants, a future that is to come, that we ourselves can sense on the horizon but we are unaware of the steps that lead us to it. When in doubt what to do or how to act, I seek the answer by asking myself whether my words and actions are governed by what people expect from me or what God expects. Much of the time it would be easier for me to simply follow what people expect of me. But far too often I am not able to do that.”

—Rebeka Anić, Ivo Pilar Institute, Split, Croatia

leave our narrow circle and show that bringing an end to patriarchy through different tools is something that concerns women and men alike.”

Julianne Funk was the first BVS volunteer at EWI, working there from 2012 to 2014. “The more I got to know EWI,” she remembered, “the more I thought, it’s a tiny powerhouse of an organization. It looks so insignificant but has a wide impact, not only regionally in the Western Balkans as the only women’s fund of its kind. It also has managed to reach into the global sphere of women’s funds, where its choice to include women’s religious lives initially met with strong resistance.

Nevertheless, over time and with EWI’s proven experience, even many influential women’s funds now begin to take religion seriously as an ally for peace, justice, and human rights.”

BVS volunteer Gillian Miller, who



Gillian Miller

worked at EWI from 2015 to 2017, was so impressed and inspired by the women she met that she had to do something to capture their stories to share with others. She began collecting the women's stories. When her "Our Women" project is finished, the stories will be published online and in a book created to share with the participants and EWI, to use at events and keep in the office.

I was very pleased to have been able to support EWI with two BVS volunteers during the past five years. The volunteers came in as outsiders, which inevitably brings difficulties in language learning—"one never becomes local" said one BVSer—and language is so necessary for getting deeply involved in the local projects that EWI funds. Visiting EWI partners around the region greatly impressed BVS volunteers.

During these travels, Gillian wrote: "I continue to be inspired by these women who have made peace their life's work, no matter how difficult their path has been. I've met women who lived through the war, who grew up knowing only war, who went away during the war but always knew they'd come back, who were born after the war to its legacy. Their sto-

Our women

“A house has bricks and mortar which keeps the bricks together. You can pile the bricks one on top of the other and make a structure of sorts. However, unless there is mortar—and it is of good quality—then the structure will fall apart. So, if you feel unseen, or like what you are doing is not significant to the bigger picture, just remember the mortar between the bricks and you will see that not everything is about being in the limelight.”

—Ankica Dragin, *EIŽ* Consultant, Novi Sad, Serbia



Gillian Miller

ries and their work have been eye-opening for me and I am so lucky to call them friends.”

25 years of BVS in the former Yugoslavia

The Church of the Brethren first became involved in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1960s. Brethren were part of ecumenical workcamps to rebuild houses after the

1963 earthquake in Skopje, Macedonia, and continued to help with ecumenical construction teams. BVS held a conference in 1963 in Split, Croatia, and Brethren Service and the Slovenian Red Cross sponsored a seminar in 1965 in Slovenia. A one-of-a-kind exchange took place in 1965-66 when a Church of the Brethren nurse volunteered for a year in a hospital in Belgrade, Serbia, while a young nurse from there went to work in the US. And a young Slovenian woman came to help with the workcamp program in the Brethren Service office in Geneva in 1966.

In the fall of 1992, I got a call from former BVSer Eric Bachman, who had worked in Germany in the late 1960s and '70s with various peace groups and remained active there. He asked for a BVS volunteer to help with e-mail connections between peace groups in Serbia and Croatia, as contacts were difficult due to the war. BVS volunteer Patrick Morgan met with Eric in Germany, and then travelled to Belgrade in 1992.

“This is the great irony of war,” Patrick reflected on his BVS experience with the Center for Antiwar Action in Belgrade. “In 1993, if you had asked the average person in the US

Our women

“I grew up in a small town in Bosnia. I had a nice childhood until the war. I saw my friends, teachers, and neighbors taken to prison, their houses burnt down. I felt inexplicably helpless. That feeling stayed with me for a very long time. When I started working for the Ecumenical Women's Solidarity Fund my helplessness was turned into opportunity. All of the things I felt I couldn't do, I finally had the opportunity to do. The experience made me a stronger, happier, safer person.”

—Smiljana Kraljević, Ministry of Agriculture, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina




Gillian Miller

what their impressions were of Balkan people, I imagine you would hear words like aggressive, war-like, and tribal. At a certain level, this was (and is) true, but maybe it's not so different from other people around the world. I look at the situation in Spain and Catalonia today and wonder how different Iberian folks are from Balkan folks. Nevertheless, for each intimidating situation I found myself in during a very turbulent period in Balkan history, I can tell 100 stories of dinners I was invited to, of invitations to visit home villages, of offered help by strangers on the street.

“Since that first train to Zagreb, I have been back to the Balkans on several occasions, visiting towns and villages in Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. I have seen a region torn by bloody conflict start to heal. Now that generations have grown up without the memory of bombs falling on people queuing for bread, more people just want to enjoy life peacefully. Younger people may live with their parents’ emotional scars, but most of them seem to want to move forward.

“I hope and believe that with time, patience, and maybe some assistance, the people of a place once known as Yugoslavia will be able overcome their past and thrive as neighbors.”

Patrick was the first BVSer to work in Yugoslavia as the country was breaking apart. Since then, requests for BVS volunteers have come from almost 30 different peace and reconciliation, women’s, youth, reconstruction, and refugee groups, a children’s hospital, an environmental organization, and a theological seminary library. More than 40 volunteers have served in the region, a few for short-term stints of several months, most for the usual two-year overseas term of service, and some even longer. 

Kristin Flory is the Brethren Service Europe coordinator for BVS, a position she has held for 30 years. She works out of the Ecumenical Center that houses the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland.

Our women

“I am inspired by all women who are active in raising their voices against all types of violence and promoting equality for all regardless of religion, race, or gender. We women engaged in peace work have to be persistent and strive towards reconciliation for the sake of our future generations. I was born in Mostar and have lived here my entire life. I survived the most horrible war that happened in Europe after World War II. My fellow citizens were the first victims of genocide in Europe since the Holocaust during World War II. Yet still people from my country who suffered the most are ready to give a hand and forgive. For that you need a great heart and that is why I love my country.”

—**Abida Pehlic**, founder and vice president, Association *Novi put*, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina



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