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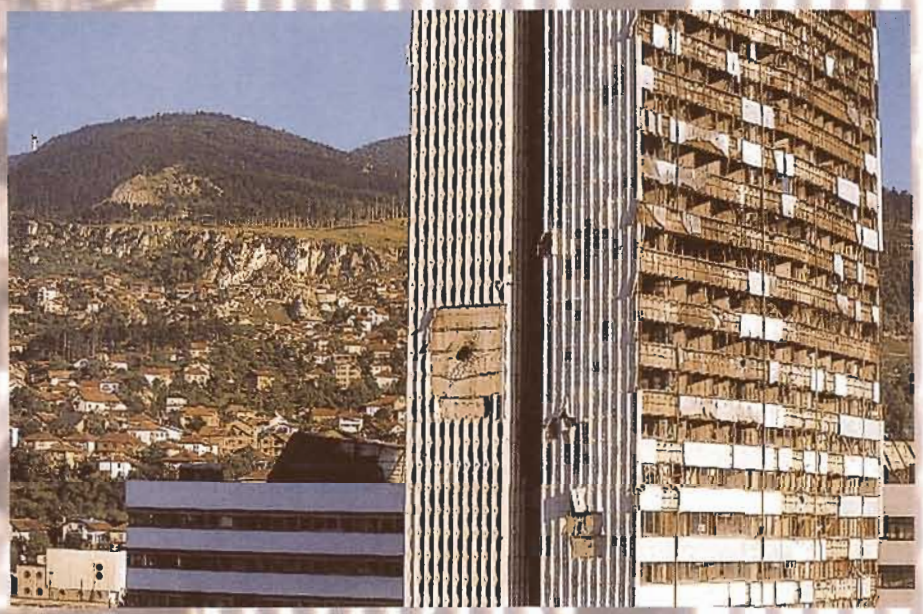
WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE



Bosnia: split between the living and the dead.

Andy Houghton surveys a sports-venue-turned-graveyard in Sarajevo.

Bosnia: DYING TO LIVE

BY ANDY HOUGHTON
WITH MARK CROMER

THE MOMENT SHAKES ME TO MY CORE.

It's a warm July afternoon and I've pushed my wheelchair to the edge of the former Olympic Village in Sarajevo to gaze across the grassy playing field where the world's best athletes gathered just 12 years ago. Since then, the field has again become a meeting place—this time for the city's dead. Thousands of grave markers now fill the expanse once illuminated by the Olympic torch. Facing this stark monument is a personal reality check. The death toll overwhelms me.

"We don't live only to live
We don't live only to die ...
We die to live."
—From a Bosnian war memorial

The disability toll overwhelms me, too. Many of the wounded have not fared well, and it's simple to see why: Bosnia is a small, poor nation that once had very few wheelchair-users, so there is little in the way of formal rehabilitation. After four years of war, however, thousands of people now need wheelchairs, and just as many need the less tangible resources that make adjustment possible. As it is, survivors have virtually no knowledge of how to cope physically and emotionally with their injuries.

I have come to Bosnia with Peace Works, a South Carolina-based humanitarian group that sends relief supplies to children trapped in war zones around the world. The organization had contacted me to see if I could send some wheelchairs and perhaps join the team to bring hope and sports education to the many people who became spinal cord injured during the war.

I understand the healing power of sports. It was wheelchair hockey that brought me back into an active life after my own accident. I knew I had to do it.

I arrive in Zurich on July 13. The following day I catch a flight to Zagreb, Croatia, and then board a crowded NATO C116 military transport into the tense skies over Bosnia. I roll out of the huge plane and onto the ground at the heavily guarded NATO airbase in Tusla. Though the guns in Bosnia

Houghton talks with Bosnian survivors about everything from sports to sexuality. For many, this is their first exposure to modern rehab's tools for active living.


New Mobility debuts in Bosnia.

have fallen mostly silent, heavy equipment and weapons are scattered across the base—covered in camouflage netting, but ready if needed.

At the base, I meet my guide, Mario, an International Rescue Committee worker who was a pilot for the Croatian Army during the war. As we drive through the streets, I am stunned. Old-world remnants such as horse-drawn hay carts are juxtaposed with the destruction of modern artillery. Crater-filled streets and gutted buildings form a grim backdrop for Bosnians trying to get on with their lives.

After we check into a hotel, Mario takes me to the rehabilitation hospital in Tusla. A small wooden ramp leads from the dirt road to the door of the hospital, where a physiotherapist ushers us into what could be a scene from the darkest of war movies. The smell of decay burdens the air. Elderly people lie on cots scattered haphazardly around the rooms. The physical therapy "department" consists of some parallel bars and a few floor mats, dumb bells and wrist weights. Almost all of the patients are chain-smoking. It seems like prison and, in a way, it is; it is often impossible for people to leave. Even if they have the right equipment, there is nowhere else to go. It is the first hospital I've been in that actually scares me.

Nurturing Change

That afternoon, I meet with the first group of wheelchair-users. Finally faced with the people I have come to help, I am gripped by uncertainty. What should I tell them? Will they find my personal story a source of hope, or will they be offended by my relative affluence and comfort? Speaking through an interpreter, I know I have to choose my words carefully.

Halfway through my introduction, I stop and scan the eyes of the dozen or so men in the room, searching for any hint of anger, dismay or boredom. I find their gaze riveted to me. They are dying for information. Any little morsel of knowledge that might help them improve their lives. Anything at all.

I spend the next five days trying to feed as much of that hunger as possible, traveling between Tusla and Sarajevo, meeting with men, women and children, doing what I can to instill in them the idea that using a wheelchair doesn't mean *existing* in a wheelchair.


Inappropriate equipment doesn't stop the intense drive to improve quality of life.

We discuss everything openly and with a sense of humor, which proves to be an ice-breaker with those too nervous to initiate a conversation about sex or bowel and bladder issues. I hope I am planting the right seeds, but I know it is people like Faruk Sabanovic, Mary Lou Hunt and Dr. Emir Kapidzic who will be charged with nurturing any real change.

Sabanovic was shot by a sniper in Sarajevo, a moment captured by a CNN camera. He has a copy of the tape. An articulate, good-natured guy, he underwent a month of rehabilitation in New York and has seen what good rehab can offer. At 21, Sabanovic has turned himself into a one-man rehab drive in Sarajevo, launching a program that focuses on social needs and sporting activities.

Hunt is an International Rescue Committee worker who is organizing a wheelchair basketball team in Tusla. Boston

Celtics assistant coach John Jennings and I spend some time with her players, working on drills and team strategies. We watch as they speed back and forth across the court with no real understanding of the game, its point system or its rules, but with an intense drive to improve their quality of life.

Dr. Kapidzic works long hours at the hospital, where he makes something like $200 a month. During the four years of war, he worked for no pay at all. He treated an endless stream of war casualties with dwindling access to proper medical supplies, but he hung on and did what he could. He still does.

The Shadow of Death

There are uplifting moments when I think about how these dedicated people might help change things, but there are times when I am still overwhelmed by the magnitude of the injury inflicted on the people of Bosnia. At one hospital, I enter the room of a woman who was hit by shrapnel

that ripped into her legs. She doesn't have a spinal cord injury, but she's had no therapy and can no longer walk. Lying in bed, she tells me how her father, mother, husband, grandmother and baby were killed by the Serbs during the fall of Szbrenica, one of the so-called U.N. "safe areas."

Her entire family was wiped out in a matter of hours. She starts to cry as she tells me her story, and I can only sit and listen. What can I say to her? What hope can I possibly offer to this woman who has lost everything she holds dear in her life? I reach out and hold her hand.

Later in the week, I watch children playing in the glass-strewn wreckage of Sarajevo's office buildings. It's only a rifle shot away from Sniper's Alley, where gunmen were said to have fired at kids to create more terror. They were easy targets. Even in war, children want to play.

These images weigh heavily on me on Saturday morning, as I rise in the predawn darkness to pack my gear for the trip home. The power has been shut off for safety reasons. A Serb warlord, under NATO pressure, has given up his formal position and Bosnian officials fear that Serb snipers will seek revenge. I pack my bags in the bathroom, occasionally flickering a flashlight. I can't help but wonder if a gunman might have me in his cross hairs. I remember that the Bosnians lived with such fears every day for four years.

I feel bleak. I question whether what I have tried to do for a few survivors can possibly make any difference in the shadow of so much death. But before I leave, one of the doctors catches up with me to say thanks.

Although a ramp to the post office was built during Houghton's stay in Sarajevo, that kind of access is the exception to the rule. Here he teaches wheelchair-users necessary stair skills.

At the week's end, survivors express more hope.

"Look," he says, "now these guys are hounding me for more information about sexuality and hygiene and all of the products and equipment that can help them. Just a week ago, they would have been too embarrassed to even mention those things."

That's something, I think. It is small, and it is not so small. They want to live.

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