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LESSONS OF THE BALKANS

For six UB Law students and their professor, the January bridgeterm brought them face to face with the harsh realities of war and its aftermath. For a seminar called “Identities, Nationalities and the Rule of Law,” they traveled to Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo in a three-week learning adventure that left all involved both sobered and inspired.

The students say nothing can compare to meeting the people whose homelands were so deeply affected by the 1999 war and its aftermath. For a seminar called “Identities, Nationalities and the Rule of Law,” they traveled to Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo in a three-week learning adventure that left all involved both sobered and inspired.

“Risk, the board game – pieces on a playing board. It was statistical and removed. Then we went to the country and met people, made friends our age, and those who experienced personal grief and loss. For me, I learned the importance of things you can’t read in books,” says Professor Isabel Marcus, who led the seminar and the trip, was largely the point of the experience.

“I have been going to the Balkans since the middle of the 1990s and have spent a lot of time standing in solidarity with the protest group Women in Black in Belgrade,” Marcus says. “The purpose of this trip was to try to listen, and hear, and learn from people from numerous sectors, especially non-governmental organizations, which have played major political roles.”

While they were there, the students – all in their second or third year at the Law School – decided to make a film documenting their experiences and the voices of some of the people they met. The 23-minute film covers Serbia and the breakaway republic of Kosovo. (The video can be viewed at www.youtube.com/UBLawSchool.)

“The images and voices are striking: a cemetery where the war dead are buried; a sad-eyed gray-haired woman from the Mothers of Srebrenica, a group that seeks to give voice to the survivors of genocide; a warehouse full of green and blue duffel bags containing the bones of unknown victims; the ornate University of Pristina.

To a one, the students said the experience was life-changing.

“I am writing my seminar paper on the International Commission on Missing Persons, and in particular the human rights aspects of being able to identify human remains and provide them, at the very least, for their family members,” says Serra Aygun. “One thing the ICMP will never be able to give the families is an understanding of how their family members died. Most of them were fleeing through the mountains or en route to other areas of Bosnia. They don’t know exactly how they died or when they died.”

“I got a more expansive view of the society and government than you would get as a tourist,” says James Farrell. “I could see the entirety of the societies in this country, how the government works and how it doesn’t work, the operation of NGOs, and intergovernmental work through the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.”

The experience also led the students to examine their own attitudes. Says Aygun: “I went over thinking Serbia was an aggressor. That was the blanket association I had with Serbia. To go there and spend time with people puts a face to that. A lot of the younger individuals who met were 5 at the time. At what point do you take accountability?”

But it is the people of the Balkans who will stay close to their hearts.

“The Mothers of Srebrenica is amazing how much loss they had endured,” James O’Shea says. “There was a woman in her 40s who said she had lost 56 men in her family, who was all the men in her family. She was able to say that very matter-of-factly. Some people our age said they never talked to their own parents about what role they played in the war, because they were afraid to know the answer.”

But the student group also recognized that learning the law through an experience like this was invaluable.

“It reaffirmed my passion for international human rights,” Feldman says. “At many law schools, the demand is for the firms and the public interest. That’s why programs like this are so important. This gives me hope and guidance on the kind of path I want to pursue.”

Adds Sarah Brancatella: “This trip was not in isolation from my Law School experience. It was like a Napoleon - layers upon layers. For example, in the course I’m taking now on the federal courts, it strikes me about the complications of having a national court system in Bosnia. … The trip was not something that was an afterthought, an asterisk for me. It was woven into my Law School education. It was an amazing experience, and I’m so glad it went.”

For video, go to:
Bosnia: www.law.buffalo.edu/forum/spr09/bosnia.asp • Serbia: www.law.buffalo.edu/forum/spr09/serbia.asp
Kosovo: www.law.buffalo.edu/forum/spr09/kosovo.asp