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About Sandra

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ABOUT SANDRA

Donna Larson

Sandra, a young woman from Sarajevo, has been a part of the life of my family for the past seven years. Sandra, now 22 years old, is like one of my daughters. Her current situation is chilling; I think of her daily...and nightly.

My family first met Sandra seven years ago, when both my husband and I were exchange professors at the University of Sarajevo. Because we were a “complete American family” (our two adolescent daughters accompanied us), we were invited into the homes and lives of many families in Sarajevo. They freely shared with us that they were intrigued by the rather rare opportunity to get to know an intact American family right there in Sarajevo. These wonderful Sarajevo families graciously shared their homes, themselves, and their cultures with us.

We spent that summer in Sarajevo living, learning, and teaching. Sandra, the only child of a University of Sarajevo engineering professor and a high school chemistry teacher, first came into our lives because of our daughters, who were the same age. Sandra, a bright, adventurous, and delightful teenager, became a part of our family.

During the following year, Sandra came to spend much of the summer with us. She was a welcome addition to our annual summer travels as a family. We roamed around the eastern United States, camping in our elderly travel trailer. Sandra was up to everything—eating what, to her, were very strange and exotic foods at an Amish “family style” restaurant in Pennsylvania, pounding cooked crabs with wooden mallets on a roadside picnic table in Maryland, swimming in a hurricane-churned surf in Delaware, climbing to the top of the Statue of Liberty in New York. She loved it all!

We’ve regularly corresponded with Sandra since those joyful summers that now seem so long ago. Her letters have chronicled her development from the carefree teenager we first knew, to the thoughtful university student working very hard at becoming a computer engineer, to her current status as a frightened refugee in a hostile place.

Sandra had just completed her studies at the University of Sarajevo when the war began. She had only to take her final examinations to graduate with honors as a computer engineer. Because of intense shelling, the University was unable to hold its examinations, so Sandra was unable to graduate. As conditions worsened, Sandra’s parents arranged for her evacuation to a refugee camp in Germany. Although she was now physically safe, she was alone and frightened, in a country where refugees from the former Yugoslavia were rapidly becoming too great of a social and economic problem.

But Sandra has a way of bringing out the best in people. She was able to find an engineering professor at the University of Weimar who served as her mentor, arranging Sandra’s final examinations at Weimar so that she could complete her degree. Following her graduation, she moved to Frankfurt, where the economy was

stronger. Indeed, engineering jobs were more plentiful—but not for former Yugoslavs. Sandra encountered hostility, hatred, prejudice, and rejection. So far she has been unable to secure a job in her field; she is currently delivering newspapers in the neighborhood.

Sandra's letters to us over these past two years have changed dramatically. Whereas two years ago her letters were filled with the excitement, hopes, and dreams of a young woman about to embark upon her adult life, her letters have become increasingly filled with hopelessness, despair, and fear. She wants nothing more than to be reunited with her parents in a time and place of peace. Such a simple wish in such a complex world.

We've tried to help Sandra throughout this period. We've sent numerous "care packages", money, and letters filled with concern and love. Our thoughts are never far from her, nor from her fear and loneliness. We feel so helpless.

So what's to become of Sandra? Will she become reunited with her parents? Will she be able to find work as an engineer? Will she be able to join us, her "other family" here in the United States? Will she be able to live her life in a future that holds promise and peace? Will her letters once again contain her hopes, dreams, and excitement? And what about the other countless young people like Sandra, forced to suspend their lives to exist in a brutal, hostile world not of their making or choosing? What's to become of these young people, so like the students we work with every day here at Grand Valley? What's to become of them all?

May each of us think of each of them, daily...and nightly.