

## *Seeing them grow*

**By Samia Zeitoun (Al-Ahram Weekly, 2 - 8 March 2000)**

The war in Kosovo is over, but the dust has not settled in that part of the world. Since June 1999, thousands of ethnic Albanians have returned to what was once home. Little is left of what they remember as Kosovo. Destroyed by the Serbs, on one hand, and NATO's bombing of the country's infrastructure, on the other, they face a harsh life in refugee camps and the derelict buildings of a war-torn landscape.

Recent news of yet more violent conflicts caused by deep ethnic hatred between the Albanian majority and remaining Serbs still causes concern, making the need for continued help crucial for years rather than months to come.

Whilst wartime emergency aid addressed the basics of housing, health and food, social reconstruction of the community is now the main focus of the relief work.

Efforts to rebuild Kosovo's villages and create some kind of daily normalcy are now taking place under the supervision of NATO and around 250 NGOs working in humanitarian relief.

In the midst of this devastation and displacement, the plight of children is perhaps the most poignant. Many have lost their parents, witnessed murder, rape and the destruction of their homes. They have experienced a trauma that will be hard to erase.

It was in response to that suffering that the Balkan Sunflowers was set up by Wam Kat, a Dutch relief worker. He shared his experiences in the form of a diary posted on the Internet from Croatia for over a year and a half. His plea for help won him many supporters. Organisations like UNICEF, USAID, Save the Children, Children Aid Direct, People in Need and many others stepped forward. In an unprecedented wave of good will, many individuals from all around the world offered help.

<sup>1</sup>Balkan Sunflowers' web-site came to the attention of a 24-year-old Egyptian, too. Sherine Zagho, who graduated from the American University in Cairo in 1995 and obtained her MA in Anthropology in 1998. Zagho, who had been working on gender development programmes in Fayoum, had always been interested in community development.

"Reading the statement of the Balkan Sunflowers and the shared experiences of volunteers who were motivated to work directly with the villagers made me eager to join," she remembers. "I filled out the application form provided on the web-page, sent the fee, which covers insurance and housing, and booked my ticket. I had to go through Skopje in Macedonia since there is no direct access to the small village of Gjakova in Kosovo." The journey of 150 miles on the UN shuttle bus took her nine hours, since all relief transportation goes through there.

Sherine is one of many volunteers from France, Germany, the US, Canada, Spain, Argentina and Bangladesh participating in the programme. Volunteers

usually spend three weeks to several months working together as neighbours and friends. Some bring professional skills; others have no particular qualifications, but are moved to help in any way they can.

"Those who come realise that these were no political abstractions but real people like you and me, and decided they wanted to help in a way transferring money could not," writes Wam Kat in his electronic diary.

"When I arrived in Gjakova in October 1999, I was assigned to a transit centre of 300 people, most of them women and children who had lost their husbands or fathers. Volunteers visit the centre every day for two hours and organise creative activities, sports or language classes for children of all ages. For many children, those two hours are crucial because it is the only time they can be children. For a few moments, the harshness in their lives is far away," says Sherine.

The informal, friendly attitude of the Sunflower team struck a chord among the local population. "We walked everywhere, we didn't have walkie-talkies [like the relief workers from major international agencies], and we would spontaneously hug the children we met on the street or call out their names. This overcame any form of language barrier," explains Sherine.

In January, a new and much larger centre housing 400 people was set up to include programmes for children who have physical and psychological disabilities caused by the atrocities of the war.

"Trying to help these children regain their trust in the world and faith in humanity is part of our mission," says Sherine. "They are so happy with so little. They crave attention and every moment spent with them painting, singing or playing is very special."

In January, the Kosovo Youth Council organised a major city cleanup operation. The Sunflowers worked as a liaison between the people and the different agencies.

"Jenny, who is an American volunteer, left her publishing job in New York to work here. Thanks to her contacts and a donation from UNICEF, books like Dr Seuss's works and the Curious George series have been translated into Albanian for the first time. It made the kids so happy," says Sherine proudly.

One of the highlights of her time in Kosovo was an art project on the theme "How do you see Kosovo in ten years?" In December, the children as well as local artists and other community members cooperated in painting a giant wall mural in the middle of the city. "The minister of culture pledged to help with everything we needed. The children painted their homes as they remembered them, set against a sunlit green panorama. They still have so much pride in their city," reflects Sherine.

The Kosovars' strong sense of identity was also in evidence last November, during celebrations to mark the Convention on the Rights of Children. The children marched through Gjakova waving flags, singing patriotic anthems and sending up balloons.

"The fact that Sherine's last name is Zagho endeared her to the Albanians," says her father Anwar. "It reminded them of their last king, Zogho, who came to Egypt many years ago. The fact that she is one of the few Muslims working there helped her make contacts with the women who have lost their husbands, and who tend to be wary of strangers."

Visiting families whose men had been killed, Sherine noticed they behaved "just like conservative Egyptian families in mourning. No music is played, and the children are forbidden from laughing or playing, which puts even more pressure on them."

Enver, at 15, is the oldest surviving male in the 70-member Unuri family. He is expected to oversee the building of their new home with the funds provided by the donors. It is a tough job, and one that must be completed quickly to provide the family with shelter from the bitter cold.

"The two hours he spends at the centre are his only outlet, and he makes the most of his free time, even if it means screaming out loud in the midst of a football game," says Sherine sympathetically.

After a short visit back home this January, Sherine has returned to Kosovo to continue the work she started. Living in a run-down house, sleeping on a mattress on the concrete floor and trying to think up a new dish she can cook with cabbage, she has joined a growing force of young volunteers linking the Kosovars with the rest of the world.

*You can visit the Balkan Sunflowers home page at, <http://www.balkansunflowers.org>  
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