

Dita Dauti-Heilman

SHE PROVES THE POWER OF ONE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY DEBORAH HAMILTON-LYNNE

IN A WORLD FILLED WITH WORTHY CAUSES AND MUCH NEED, MANY PEOPLE ASK THEMSELVES, "WHAT CAN I POSSIBLY DO THAT WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE?" OFTEN THE NEED FEELS OVERWHELMING AND OFTEN PEOPLE FEEL POWERLESS TO AFFECT A CHANGE. THE ANSWER FOR ONE AUSTIN WOMAN WAS TO CHOOSE A PROJECT TO DEVOTE HERSELF TO THAT IS SMALL IN SCALE AND PERSONALIZED AND PROVIDES ASSURANCE THAT 100 PERCENT OF DONATIONS GO DIRECTLY TO THE SOURCE OF NEED.

Aferdita "Dita" Dauti-Heilman is a storyteller. She is a docent for the Eanes History Center and a member of the Central Texas Storytelling Guild, Story Circle Network and the Word Weavers Writing Group. At the Summer Solstice, Dauti-Heilman served as the Storytelling Fairy Princess at Wild Basin Nature Preserve.

Last year she visited her hometown of Stanterg, Kosovo, for the first time since the war and came back to Austin with a story to tell. Although she had worked for many years as a processing coordinator for refugee resettlement agencies of the Church World Service Agency and Episcopal Migration Ministries and had worked in the disturbing Kenyan refugee camps that housed those

who became known as "the lost boys of the Sudan," she was not prepared for the emotions she felt to see Stanterg mostly destroyed. The war had claimed many businesses and most of the cultural buildings – the library, theater and her childhood school – and the community.

"I felt overwhelmed, and I did sit and cry, but I wanted to show my children that we do not just sit and cry when we see a need," says Dauti-Heilman. "We pick ourselves up and do something to help."

She returned to Austin determined to link her American hometown with the village where she grew up. "I wanted to be an ambassador of hope," she says. "I wanted to tell the story and build cultural bridges. I wanted to show my children by personal example how things could change for the better, how an individual can make a difference."

Dauti-Heilman's own story is one of courage and determination.

Born in Mitrovica, Kosovo, she moved with her parents and sister to the mining town of Stanterg. Both parents were educators and taught at the local school. She says she remembers Stanterg as a peaceful community set in the rolling hills, which the view from her Westlake Hills home reminds her of.

When she was 18, Dauti-Heilman left Stanterg to attend the university



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in Kosovo's capital, Pristina. It was while doing social work in Pristina that she met Dr. Stephen Heilman, who was in Kosovo with Doctors of the World, a New York-based relief agency. They married in 1992 shortly before Slobodan Milosevic ordered all relief workers removed and their passports confiscated. After a harrowing week of uncertainty, the Heilmans were summoned to the local police station, where they were given their passports and 24 hours to leave the country.

Fleeing by way of Macedonia and Bulgaria, the couple eventually landed in New York. Saddened to leave her family, Dauti-Heilman was determined to bring them to the United States. She eventually succeeded in 1999, reuniting with her parents, her sister and her sister's family.

The Heilmans settled in Austin, where their sons Kron and Lorik were born. Kron, now 11, will enter Hill Country Middle School this month, and Lorik, 9, will be in the fourth grade at Eanes Elementary. Dauti-



Dauti-Heilman in Kosovo

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Dauti-Heilman making a speech at a bridge building between communities

Heilman is devoted to her children and serves as chairman of the Cultural Enrichment Program of the Eanes Elementary PTO.

As much as she loved her new hometown of Austin, to think of Stanterg Dauti-Heilman had only to sit rocking on her back porch looking over the hills and sipping strong coffee made the Balkan way from a demitasse cup brought by her parents from Kosovo. Her hometown was never far from her mind.

When she went back after the war, Dauti-Heilman was particularly devastated to learn her beloved Trepca School had been heavily damaged and leveled. The 400 children of Stanterg resumed their education in 2000 in unheated tents and currently attend classes in the shell of an old hotel. Broken-hearted, Dauti-Heilman resolved to tell their story, to be their voice. Thus, her organization,

400 Voices, was born.

Back in Austin, Dauti-Heilman began speaking to schools, church groups and civic organizations, urging each to get involved. "I gave thanks when I came back to the U.S., where we are so blessed," she says. "I was so happy to build a bridge between Austin schools and children and those in the school where my parents dedicated the best years of their lives. When I went to Trepca to give the students supplies and letters from Austin school children, the principal of the school introduced me with tears in his eyes, 'This woman is the daughter of the woman who taught me my first letters.' I may be an American now, but those children knew I was one of them."

Dauti-Heilman recruited an active group of dedicated volunteers, mostly Eanes Elementary school moms. The timing was right for Kala Philo, a Web designer and film producer. Philo liked the international emphasis and the local tie. She designed the 400 Voices Web site and produced a short documentary on Dauti-Heilman and the project. Dauti-Heilman refers to Philo as her "rock." Both women agree that by working for 400 Voices they get back more than they give. Dauti-Heilman quotes Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Dauti-Heilman dreams big. She hopes to persuade the City of Westlake Hills to become the sister city of Stanterg. She is urging Eanes Elementary to become Trepca's sister school. She envisions exchanges and visits of city council members, educators, clergy and students. Her wish

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DITA DAUTI-HEILMAN from page 51
list includes basic school supplies for the Trepca students as well as laptop computers. She would like to initiate fund-raising concerts and dinners. She is confident her dreams will come true.

For now she has built bridges between school children in Austin, Houston, Westlake, Round Rock and Pflugerville and the children of Trepca School. She hand-delivers letters and school supplies and delights in the response. "You should see their faces as they wait for the letters from their American friends. They really come alive," she says. "American children have become so attached to computers and television that a personal letter is special, a way to build a relationship and learn about our differences and commonalities.

"I look at those faces in the classrooms of Texas and Kosovo, and I think, This is it, what life is about, connecting people." Of her efforts she says, "I know from personal experience the devastation of war. I didn't want to talk about making peace in the abstract. I wanted to show how to do it by example."

Dauti-Heilman proudly displays a backpack full of supplies and a friendship quilt from a 4th-grade class in Houston that she will deliver to Kosovo – along with more than 400 pounds of school supplies and countless letters she has collected during the past year. She will return this fall as an American ambassador of good will and a daughter of Kosovan educators.

She convinced the Minister of Education that Trepca should not be a forgotten place. Rebuilding began this spring. Tears of pride spring to her eyes when she says, "With luck it will be complete within a year, and they will have a real school with a proper library, heated classrooms, and lavatories."

Dauti-Heilman lives her motto, a quote from Benjamin Franklin's almanac: "Tell me, I will forget. Teach me, I may remember. Involve me, and I will learn." Her work is testament to the power of one determined individual to make a difference. ★

Aferdita Dauti-Heilman
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