

BRIDGING *cultures*



School children walk as much as one hour each way, braving the elements, to attend school in a tent in Stanterg, Kosovo.

Photo by Martha Grenon

Resident takes the heart of the Westbank home to Kosovo

By Catherine Hosman
Staff Writer

When Dita Dauti-Heilman returns to her hometown of Stanterg, Kosovo next month, she will journey back in time to the war torn city of her youth.

Her mission is to evaluate the needs of the local school destroyed by the war in 1999 and bridge the cultures between Stanterg and the Westbank.

"I want to see what needs they have and what we can do, as a community, to help another community in the world that is in need," says Dauti-Heilman, a docent at Eanes History Center. "Our little community here is almost the same as the Stanterg I left many years ago. When times are tough, the villagers would convene and make plans to help other community members. They came together with strength, compassion and passion to help another place in need."

Dauti-Heilman is hoping to duplicate that personal philanthropy by introducing Eanes Elementary School children to the children of Stanterg with the exchange of letters, notes, pictures and stories she will hand-carry with her to and from Kosovo.

"Our town was destroyed by the war in 1999," says Dauti-Heilman, her eyes welling up with tears of remembrance. "In 1999, the entire region had to leave. An exodus of more than 800,000 people in less than a week."

When residents of Stanterg were allowed to return, the survivors found their town ravaged by the war and



their three-story school heavily damaged. For safety reasons, the school had to be leveled.

"After the war, most people wanted to pick up where they left off and keep the school going," she says. "I know how much they respect education."

But it wouldn't be until late in 2000 before school could resume, and when it did, it was under a tent with no heat to warm students against the harsh Kosovo winters.

The tent has since been dismantled, and 380 children from Stanterg and five surrounding villages now attend classes in the shell of an old English hotel.

Although she says the ministers of education want to rebuild a school with eight classrooms, they don't have the funding.

"Or the hope for funding anytime soon," she says.

A different kind of childhood

Dauti-Heilman was one of two daughters born to Rasim and Remzije Dauti in Mitrovica, Kosovo, just outside of Stanterg, a mining town of 4,500 in the mountains of Kosovo, where she grew up. She recalls a stable environment in a peaceful place where people were always ready to help one another.

"Both of my parents taught at the local elementary school," she says. "Children from six surrounding villages would walk one hour each way in all kinds of inclement weather to attend class."

While children attended school, mothers were at home preparing meals and fathers toiled in the mines where zinc, aluminum and silver were extracted for commerce.

"My parents always had a full class," she continues. "It was rare if two or three students didn't come to school."



FAR LEFT: When word leaked out to the community that Dita Dauti-Heilman was taking this trip, managers of Albertsons and Office Depot donated school supplies.

LEFT: Dauti-Heilman and her son Kron take on the roles of an Eanes pioneer family at the Eanes History Center.

When it was time to attend high school, Dauti-Heilman would board a city bus ridden by miners that would take her from Stanterg to Mitrovica.

"Regardless of how hard life was, at 6:30 a.m. the bus would fill with miners," she recalls. "They may have worked a 12-hour shift but would always stand up to let a student sit down. Even with their tired eyes and swollen hands they would greet us with the warmest smiles and say 'That's my boy, or that's my girl.' They wanted us to have a better life than what they did."

In 1980, Dauti-Heilman moved to Pristina, Kosovo to attend the university. While working in Pristina, in 1992 she met and married her husband, Dr. Stephen Heilman, who worked with Doctors of the World, a New York-based relief agency. By this time, however, Slobodan Milosevic was in power and wanted to remove all re-

lief workers. The government confiscated Dr. Heilman's passport for one week. After being summoned by the interior ministry, the Heilmans were granted 24 hours to leave Kosovo. They drove through mountainous terrain to Macedonia and to Sofia, Bulgaria, where they boarded a flight to the United States and were able to join her parents and sister already in America.

Bridging cultures

Dauti-Heilman's Westbank home is filled with artifacts from all over the world, including pottery from the American Southwest. The bookshelves are filled with tomes that tell the history and customs of different cultures. One of those books is "The History of Eanes," by Linda Vance, which she has studied to prepare herself as the docent of the Eanes History Center.

"I became involved with the history center two years ago when I wanted to be close to my children's school," she says of her two sons, Kron, 11 and Lorik, 8. "I like to tell stories, and I like the fact that Eanes Elementary has the rich history behind it."

A member of the Central Texas Story Telling Guild, where she shares her stories of the Balkans' lives, she found the history center to be a perfect fit.

"It felt like I was at home," she says. "Through the history center, we have a greater sense of community. Everyone comes together and learns about one another and how the first settlers lived. I had the interest to be there and teach third graders the old way because I come from an old culture myself."