

The Advocacy Project: BOSFAM Report 1

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My first month in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina has gone by more quickly than I can believe. As soon as I arrived at my host organization, Association Bosnian Family (BOSFAM), we began working. BOSFAM and The Advocacy Project (my sponsor organization in the U.S.) had a very diverse set of goals in mind, leading to a series of different projects all in order to further BOSFAM's mission.

BOSFAM's goals are to provide female survivors of the Bosnian war with psychosocial and financial support through its weaving centers in Tuzla and Srebrenica. For the last two decades, women gather at these centers to weave traditional Bosnian carpets (*ćilimi*). The project began as occupational therapy. Many women lost family members in the Srebrenica genocide and came together to weave to cope with their grief.



Since the war, BOSFAM's mission has evolved to provide women who have become the primary breadwinner in their families with a means to making a sustainable livelihood. BOSFAM connects these women's goods to the market through two shops (Sarajevo and Tuzla) and an online store. Since partnering with The Advocacy Project, BOSFAM has also developed a powerful advocacy mission for the commemorating victims of genocide, which is especially important this year as we prepare for the twentieth anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre on July 11th.

- **Memorial Quilt Exhibitions:** BOSFAM's most prominent advocacy work began in 2006 with the creation of the Srebrenica Memorial Quilts. BOSFAM women have woven 16 quilts, each with 20-25 squares with a unique design and the name of a person killed during the genocide. While a handful of quilts are in the U.S. and get circulated and exhibitions periodically, the majority of them were folded up in a room at the BOSFAM house when I arrived.



Since my arrival, we have successfully created two exhibitions at each of our shops in Tuzla and Sarajevo. Each exhibition featured one quilt and supporting materials on the project, BOSFAM, and their partnership with The Advocacy Project. Our exhibition in Tuzla got great attention when we brought it to the town square on June 11th during a monthly demonstration memorializing the genocide.

Next week, we will be bringing 10 of the memorial quilts to the former United Nations base in Potočari to be permanently displayed, starting on July 11th. It is estimated that 50,000 people will be visiting Srebrenica for the anniversary, so the quilts and the supporting materials we're creating will be seen by a wide audience.

- **BOSFAM's Websites:** BOSFAM has two websites, one for the organization and one for a shop for the handicrafts the women make. Both were desperately out-of-date and the content management system was not very user-friendly, meaning BOSFAM had to pay a web developer whenever it wanted to make changes.

Since arriving, I have completely overhauled the organization's website (www.bosfam.ba) with a more modern design, updated content, and the more user-friendly content management system, WordPress. I am in the process of doing the same for the online shop.

Once the websites are both completed, I will create a WordPress training manual specific for each site and train BOSFAM's director, so she can make updates easily and better manage their online sales.

- **The BOSFAM Workshop:** about a year ago, heavy rains and water damage destroyed BOSFAM's workshop where the majority of women did their weaving. The workshop has been closed and BOSFAM is only able to accommodate for a fraction of the women it once did, because the looms are so large and they cannot fit many in other parts of the house.



We received an estimate for repairs and will soon be launching an online crowdfunding campaign to raise money to make repairs so BOSFAM can return to functioning at full capacity. These repairs are crucial because for so many women, BOSFAM is the only place they can make an income.

Once the workshop is repaired, the women can resume their work and sustainably provide for themselves as well as spend valuable time with one another as they continue to grapple with the aftermath of the war.

- **Planning for Growth:** While the immediate concerns for BOSFAM as a business are the online shop and the workshop repairs, The Advocacy Project, BOSFAM, and I are working on a long-term plan to increase BOSFAM's sales and eventually bring tourists to the BOSFAM house.

BOSFAM's handicrafts, especially their carpets, are intricate, high quality, and one-of-a-kind. For Bosnians living in a still-struggling, post-war economy, the products can be a bit beyond their means. However, for international markets, especially in the West, these products are very reasonably priced. The added bonus that they support Bosnian women and come with a "story" only increases their value. It is for this reason we are researching outside markets whom we can connect with once BOSFAM has a sustainable, easy-to-manage online shop.



Once the workshop is repaired and BOSFAM is at its full capacity, we also hope to open the house as a tourism center, where visitors can meet the women, hear their stories, have authentic Bosnian coffee and food, learn to weave, and purchase handmade products. This will most likely take place after I have

returned to the U.S. but we are putting these pieces in place to provide an additional source of income for BOSFAM.

- **Building Relationships and Hearing Stories:** An important aspect of this fellowship is to forge strong relationships with the women of BOSFAM to support them during an especially difficult time of year and to build trust so that I can record their amazing stories to share with others.



It has been a privilege to earn the trust and build friendships with the BOSFAM women I have met so far. You can read their individual profiles at www.bosfam.ba/aboutus/whoweare.

- **Advocacy Work:** Throughout my fellowship, I have kept a record of my experiences in a blog through The Advocacy Project as well as through photographs on their Flickr site.

I have also collected a substantial amount of video footage to edit into a series of short videos on a variety of subjects including individual women's stories, the memorial quilts, etc.