Lejla Bridges Divides through Forgiveness

Lejla Hasandedic-Dapo grew up in a war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina. She lived in the divided city of Mostar, moving from one dark shelter to another, hiding from shelling and gunfire, often overwhelmed with fear for the safety and lives of her loved ones. Religious and ethnic stereotypes and prejudices fed off her constant fear: she hated people from other national and religious backgrounds.

The school system in Bosnia and Herzegovina was completely segregated along ethnic lines, but she attended an experimental secondary school where Bosniak (Muslims) and Croat (Catholics) children studied under the same roof. While the Bosniak and Croat children followed separate curricula and had different teachers, they studied in the same building. School authorities kept children from these two ethnic groups separated out of fear of potential conflict. These divisions were challenged when students from both ethnic groups set up a student council and Lejla joined.

The most symbolic activity of the student council was crossing the Old Bridge of Mostar. The Old Bridge was built in the 16th century and remains one of the most famous places in Bosnia. It was destroyed during the war and later rebuilt. The bridge is in the Bosniak section of the city and many Mostar residents of other ethnic backgrounds had never set foot on the bridge.

Lejla struggled with the student council for nearly a year to convince the other students that it would be safe to cross the bridge together. When the day finally came for this ethnically diverse group of students to cross the bridge together, tourists couldn’t detect anything atypical, but this bridge allowed them to cross the societal divides that kept them apart for their entire lives.

“It was the start of building a new and better future for all of us,” stated Leila.

On that same day, Lejla met a boy whose father was a soldier and learned that he was probably responsible for the death of her grandmother during the war. After this heartbreaking experience, she was overwhelmed by negative emotions and hatred but brought herself to speak with the boy and learn more about his family and situation. A long conversation allowed her to decide to forgive him and his family. On that day, they agreed to continue building a better community for future generations.

It was not just crossing the iconic stone monument: it was eliminating the deep chasms between them.