



BALKAN YOUTH VOICES

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A Word from the Editor:

Greetings, all, and *sincerest* apologies for the tardiness of this newsletter! As some of you know, I was in Serbia for the first two weeks of November, which delayed much of the newsletter editing process.

However, the trip was great, and it was especially great to reconnect with alumni, spend time with American Councils staff in

Belgrade—Cassandra, Liz, Sanja, Vesna, and Slavisa—and get to know the cities of Novi Sad and Kragujevac. I think I must have eaten my way half way through Serbia and brought home plenty of coffee, chocolate, and ajvar for my friends.

I hope everyone's fall/winter has gotten off to a great start, and I'm really pleased to send out this edition of *Balkan Youth Voices*, as it's the first newsletter written by *you*. I will send out a Call for Submissions for next quarter's edition fairly soon, so keep on the lookout.

Skye Wallace
Program Officer
A-SMYLE and YES
American Councils for
International Education
Washington, DC



Bulgarian Folk Dances in American High School

Plamena Solakova, YES Bulgaria
Richland, Washington

It has been 2 months since I arrived to the US, and most of my relatives already wish I were back in Bulgaria. However, I am determined not only to experience

American culture, but also to make American people see what Bulgaria is like. And what would be better than our world-famous folk music?

The idea of organizing a course for Bulgarian folk dances as a part of the activities for the International Club in my school really interested a lot of students. As soon as I mentioned it, there were

lines of people waiting to hear more about Bulgaria and how we were going to dance.

Success came very soon, and we had our first "rehearsal" right after I gave my presentation about Bulgaria on October 14th. Now we already know some basic steps, and I hope soon we will be able to perform our first completed dance. I am really excited and determined to do my best with my new "students".



Dreams ARE Coming True

Dusan "DJ" Djordjevic, A-SMYLE Serbia
Lexington, VA

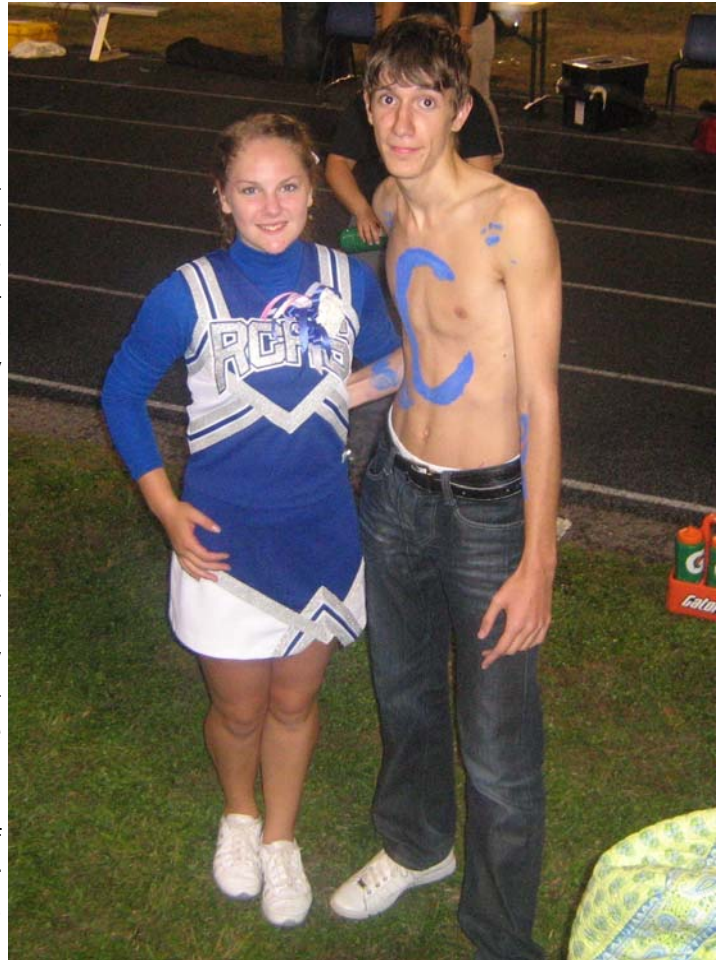
It was a cold, foggy Friday—the 9th of October. Someone may think it was just a regular Friday as always, but for my school it was a special day... That night, our team was playing its homecoming game and everybody was excited about it. For me, the homecoming game had no more meaning than a regular Friday game. But as soon as I stepped to the field, I saw I was wrong...

The atmosphere was indescribable. There were blue and silver crowds shouting as loud as they could: "Go, RCHS, go!" For the first time since I have been going to the games, I was afraid that I would not fit in with my peers. But I joined the crowd, completely unaware that I was just about to do one of the craziest things in my life...

For every home game, four boys get initials of our school (RCHS) painted in blue on their chest. I always looked at those guys as the bravest of all the cheerers for our school, and I had a secret desire to get a letter on my chest. I was thinking that there is no way for me, especially not for a foreign student, to wear one of the most sacred symbols of our school.

But miracles do happen here, and in the second half we were down both on the field and on the cheering squad because two of "letter" boys had to leave. Since I was the closest to the remaining "letters", a not-so-bright idea crossed my mind, and I thought to myself: Hey, why don't I get a letter tonight? Within minute or two I had a big, blue letter C on my chest.

It felt like I had officially become part of the Rockbridge County High School, the order of WILD-CATS! But that C did not just represent my school, it represented my country too. C in Cyrillic means S, and that is the initial of my home country, Ser-



bia. So, at the same time, I had a symbol of two of the most important things for me: my school and my home country. I felt so proud, and like I got some extra energy along with that blue paint on my chest. In spite of the fact that winning was unreachable for our team, I started cheering and singing with my classmates. Nobody seemed to care that we were losing; they were just trying to cheer up our team to score at least one touch-down.

After the game, one more exciting thing happened to me: I got a picture with a cheerleader. It felt like a dream come true standing there, next to Emily, and getting my picture taken. Only two months before this, I did not even think about this happening but, as I said, dreams ARE coming true here in America...



A Great Weekend in Philadelphia

Emiljana Hoti, YES Albania

Bow, NH

Being an exchange student in the USA has given me lots of opportunities to travel, see new places, and experience new cultures and traditions. My visit with my host family to Philadelphia was very special and beautiful.

It was a great and fun trip that lasted four days. The city of Philadelphia is one of the oldest cities in the USA. It is the city in which America was built. One person infamous in Philadelphia was Ben Franklin, a great, hard-working person who was very influential in the mak-

ing of the first USA government.

During my stay in Philadelphia, we went to Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence was signed. It was very special being at Independence Hall and is something that was very meaningful to me. Another thing we did was visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This museum was very interesting and contained a lot of culture.

Our trip also included the Polish neighborhood, the Italian

Market, and the oldest functional candy store. I also had a Cheesesteak, which I have heard a lot about. This delicious sandwich is famous for being served in Philadelphia. The most fun thing to me was eating a banana split, which was something I never imagined. It was very special sharing it with the people that you care and have lots of fun with.

This was my great weekend in Philadelphia. I had a lot of fun while learning and experiencing new culture, art, history, and food.





A-SMYLE Alumni Continue to Volunteer for American Corner in Nis

Ana Brzakovic, A-SMYLE Alumna, '07
Nis, Serbia

It was eight months ago when the American Corner in Nis (also known in Nis as American Center) presented us with the idea of making an alumni club (a club for all alumni who have been on a program funded by US State Department). That's how it all started: our brilliant minds got together, and after a few meetings, many great ideas were born. Not only did we organize a successful clean-up action, which you had the opportunity to read about in previous newsletter, but we have also started to volunteer at the American Corner in Nis.

Today, you can still see our enthusiastic faces heading to the American Corner to play games with students and kids, teach them English, hold a presentation on a certain topic, and organize a Halloween party for the youngest ones.

"I can see that the children that I work with are having fun while learning English. They don't even see me as a real teacher, which is good because they are not scared that they will say something wrong... It's nice knowing that you can help someone, even if it's such a small gesture," said Ana Prokic.

It feels great when you know that the efforts you put into helping someone are being appreciated. As Aleksandra Radojevic mentioned, "The kids who come to the American Corner for board games have asked several times for their classes to happen more frequently with comments that they love this method of improving their language skills."

But students and kids are not the only ones who benefit from this. By volunteering, we are also improving and learning a lot. Maja Ignjatovic states, "As a psychology student, I've dealt with children



so it has been quite an experience for me. It is great practice."

We give a little and gain a lot. Since there are many of A-SMYLE alumni in Nis, we are able to stand in for one other when someone can't make it for the workshop or the lesson.

Now that we have a regional alumni coordinator, and more alumni have joined us, I am sure that we will have more great ideas come to life. As a matter of fact, two new alumni who have just returned from the USA—Iva Filipovic and Maja Dimitrijevic—have joined our 'volunteer team' and are going to play American games with high school and college students.

"I keep coming back because every time there is someone new willing to do what I'm doing, just because they saw me, or some other volunteer, bringing good to the society," said Milos Radovanovic.

As you can see, we don't lack enthusiasm, motivation, or will; we plan to invite others to join us. Apart from the volunteers mentioned above, Dusan Ilic, Ksenija Pesic, and Ljupka Sibinovic have also been volunteering for American Corner Nis.



Meeting the President

Milena Milosavljevic, A-SMYLE Serbia
North Olmsted, OH

I came to the United States as an A-SMYLE scholar about one month ago. As I started this new journey in my life, I knew that I would meet a lot of new people. But I couldn't even imagine that I would get a chance to meet the Serbian president, Mr. Boris Tadic.

These past few weeks I was busy getting used to the new lifestyle, making new friends at school, and getting used to a new family. Since I was so busy doing all these things as well as practicing volleyball and going to school, I didn't have time to follow what was going on back home. This is why I didn't know that my president, Mr. Boris Tadic, was coming to the United States and that he would be visiting Cleveland, OH.



News that Mr. Tadic was coming to visit Cleveland didn't go unnoticed because my coordinator Mr. John Church heard about it. He told me and my host family about this. John told me that Mr. Tadic would visit the Serbian Cultural Garden in Cleveland on September 21, 2009, and I really wanted to use this chance to go and see my president.

My host father told me that Mr. Tadic was going to meet with Mr. Alex Machaskee, who is the honorary Serbian consul, and is putting together a project about the bioethanol factory in Smederevo, my town in Serbia.

An idea came to mind: I wanted to see Mr. Tadic, but I also wanted him to see me! I knew it would be hard for him to notice me because I knew that the Garden would be crowded, so I came up with the idea of mak-

ing a sign with a symbol of his political party and to write on it the name of my city.

It worked! There were a lot of people, but I did catch his attention with that sign. He saw it and came up to me. My heart started pounding very fast, my voice was lost, and I who am known for being very talkative

couldn't say a word. I froze. The feeling was something special—I had never felt like that before.

Shaking his hand and seeing a big smile on his face made me relax and get back my talkativeness. I was able to answer his question and have a little talk with him. We also took a picture together, and it will definitely be one of my most precious memories. Meeting the president and having a little talk with him will always remain in my memory.

None of this would have happened if it wasn't for A-SMYLE to bring me to United States, my coordinator John Church who informed me about this event, and my host family, the Russells, who took me to this event. Thank you all for making this possible for me.

Somewhere deep inside of me, I hope that I will get a chance to meet the president of the prettiest country in the world: Barack Obama. When I came to United States, I had no idea that I would get to meet my president, but it happened, and maybe my other dream will come true sometime in the future.



Alumni Ambassador of the Month, November

Katarina Kohen, A-SMYLE alumna, '07

Note from Regional Director for South East Europe, Cassandra Payton:

Katarina Kohen'07, our first ever Alumni Ambassador of the month, has shown great excellence in her work and commitment to the A-SMYLE Alumni network not just during the past month, but also ever since she returned from the U.S. With her hard work, enthusiasm, and leadership skills, she has inspired many alumni; and she has also set an example of what it means to be a committed A-SMYLE alumna. Together with a few other alumni, she is currently working on establishing an NGO called Think Big Team, and she is also getting ready for the new cycle of alumni projects. Without any doubt she is the person who most deserves to become our Alumni Ambassador of the month for November 2009!

Note from Katarina:

Somewhere 6.000 feet up in the air, as I was making my way across the Atlantic that warm August morning in 2006, my mind was racing with thoughts about the experience that was about to be upon me almost as fast as the airplane carrying a group of enthusiastic young people in bright green t-shirts to the United States—we, the first generation of year-long A-SMYLE-ers. I knew I was on the verge of something that was going to change me, change my life, forever. Reflecting upon that day now, I realize how little I knew about the impact A-SMYLE would have on me.

I am very honored to be the first Alumni Ambassador of the Month. To be awarded with such a thing and chosen among such incredible individuals as all alumni of A-SMYLE are is truly humbling. I can without a doubt say that A-SMYLE has shaped who I am today. It has influenced the way I see the world, the way I see myself in it; A-SMYLE takes young people from Serbia, exquisite gems, and during the year of its course makes them into diamonds. They return full of enthusiasm, with their eyes and minds wide open, fully aware of the incredible potential they have in their hands to change the world. The creative flow! The amazing ideas! The big thinking! It's all so intense among the alumni that it's almost tangible in the air when we gather.

I see the future being very bright for A-SMYLE and Serbia having A-SMYLE-ers in it. With the new merge of the Serbian Youth Leadership Program (SYLP) and A-SMYLE alumni networks and the alumni NGO, whose creation is in motion, the path ahead is a bright and exciting one! We are thinking hard and thinking big; everything is possible and the possibilities are endless. And we have just begun.

USA

*Hristina Trifunovska, YES Macedonia
Portland, OR*

United States of America! My strange for me, but that is normal. more freedom in contrast to Macedonia, where the school is stricter. dream finally came true. My name It is normal to be different. My school here is totally different Another thing is that here there are is Hristina Trifunovska, and I have My school here is totally different from my school in Macedonia, not many after school activities, and in been dreaming about it a long time. just in the way of teaching, but also my home country, we don't have those kinds of opportunities. Now I am here in Portland, Oregon. in the relationship between the stu- dents and the teachers. In Macedonia, we memorize things, and For example, here I participate in I have a host mom, and I'm study- ing at Jefferson High School. I'm here we practice them, especially one after school program, which experiencing a new culture and new people; everything is new and different. Nothing really surprised me about my community because I was expecting that. I was expecting it to be different and maybe About the students, here, they have here in America. This program is





good because, besides the other things, we are going to go to other schools in Portland and work with other students.

Also I had two volunteer days at the Oregon zoo. I was making masks and helping the kids to do that as well. I was working with one coordinator, and there was another exchange student, from China. I had a really great time. Looking at the kids with smiles on their faces, being happy with their masks, made me feel happier than them. That was one of the happiest days here in USA. Because of that great experience, I went there again.

The second time there, my local coordinator came too. Also there were exchange students from India and Indonesia. They all are really good people. We all had a really great time together.

That event really made me happy. I always want to help everyone,

but helping the kids and especially seeing their happy faces made me feel really special. I hope that I will have more experiences like that one in the future.

About the people here in Portland, the difference is that here people

cling and you can see that in every part of the city, in every store, in every home.

Also they are using bikes and public transportation, while you can't really see so much usage of the bikes in the my city in Macedonia.

There people use cars a lot.

Another thing is the art, which is very developed here, especially in my school. Jefferson High School has one of the main dancing schools in Portland, so I am taking dance classes, and that is really good.

My family is great. I have a host mom, and everything that she is doing for me is the best. And I think that this experience will help me a lot in my life because I am seeing a new way of life all the time. I'm going to learn new things about life in the sense that

I'm going to learn other ways to solve problems. I'm going to become totally independent, and take things in my own hands, and start planning the future!





One Hour for You, the World for Someone Else...

Vojin Mitic, A-SMYLE Serbia
McHenry, IL

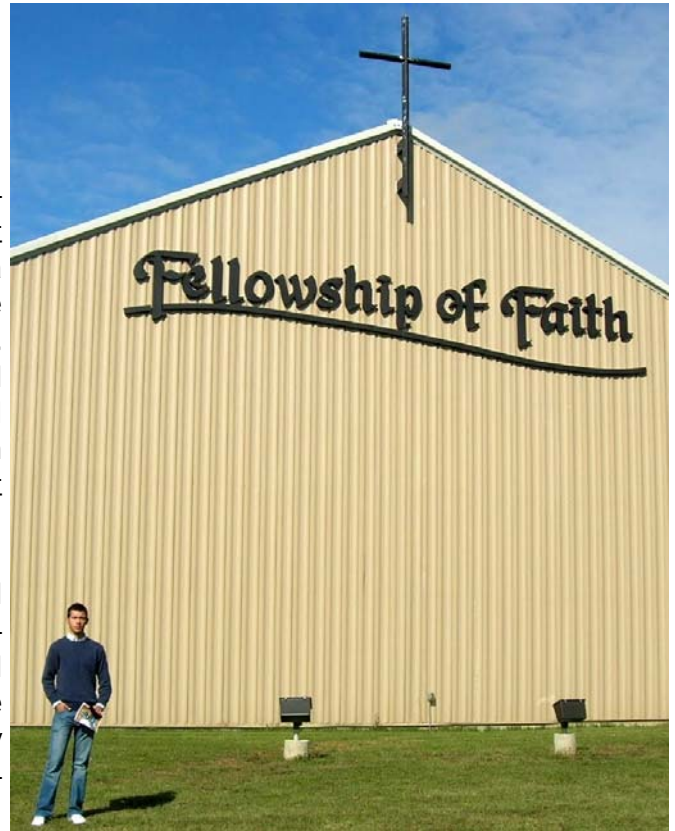
When talking about exchange programs, I will always remember this year, the opportunity that was given to me, the experience that will stay a memory as long as I live—meeting all of these new people, participating in many activities, hanging out with new friends, feeling the United States of America in the best possible way. I knew that the way you see an opportunity given to you will determine the way you will use that chance to gain and to give as much as possible.

The spirit of multiculturalism, of teaching and learning about cultures, people, of meeting people all around the world, breaking prejudices and stereotypes, connecting nations... I was given the opportunity to take part in doing all that by simply trying to be part of one other, different community for one year.

Many interesting things happened in first two months of my international experience, things that I will always remember. I am situated in McHenry, in the state of Illinois. I've met many new people here, experienced new feelings, attended US high school, played soccer for the school team (which helped me see more of Illinois), travel around a little bit with my new friends, and fill my days with new and interesting things.

There's not enough place to write about everything. I would like to point out one of the things that made me feel complete. That was an action at a local church, where we collected food for people who needed financial help. That simple type of volunteering made me feel better about myself, and that was followed by me getting engaged in a big range of volunteering actions. The simple two-hour action at the local church was at first just one nice way to do something kind for the community.

About 20 people from McHenry gathered on September 26th to pack and bring charity food for



about one hundred families that needed financial help and to show them that they were not alone and that there was someone who cared about them. After an hour and a half of separating food and making packets for families, we gave them packets and delivered food to families who weren't able to come to the church at the certain date and time.

The best reward for a couple of hours of work was seeing all those people's faces when they realized that we are all part of the same community, the same world, and that we all have the same problems, that other people know that we need to help each other in order to make this world better.

The action marked a big step in my life because I got a chance to experience the feeling of helping somebody in need, so now I am volunteering regularly at the same church. I applied for participating in some other volunteering activities; I contacted some elementary schools in



McHenry and became a member of numerous clubs with the main goal of community service.

doesn't have to be a whole month, week, or day of your commitment. It can be an hour for you, but it can mean a world to someone else.

This article is also my little contribution to spreading awareness of how important it is to show someone in need that you're right there for him. It

My American Career

*Maja Hristovska, YES Macedonia
Camp Hill, PA*

Being an exchange student is as wonderful and exciting an experience as anyone can imagine. I can't believe that one of my biggest dreams will come true in the United States. I've always wanted to become a lawyer and it was unbelievable when my host mom told me that she found something for me.

She told me that there was a firm with nine lawyers and that they were willing to interview me for an unpaid internship. That is how my American volunteering career started. I was so happy, but scared of the interview, all at the same time. Luckily, everything went just great.

My first day interning at the Reager & Adler Corporation was on the 5th of October. I was so happy to be there and I still can't believe that really happened. It will be a great experience for university, since I am planning to study law.

The people in the firm are very nice, they introduced me to everyone and my boss gave me the schedule, telling me that they would introduce me to all the different aspects of law during my year here.

So, since then I have been going to "work" every Monday and Friday after school. Every day there is a new experience, gaining a better understanding of what law is really about (not just the big incidents in the

court). I am sure my law teacher will be proud of me. Well, that is all what is happening right now in my adventurous life. I'll make sure to let you know when I'm going to get someone out of jail ☺

I hope that all the other exchange students are having as much fun as I am. I am so glad to be here and I can certainly claim that the decision to come to America was my best choice ever.





Thoughts on the Beginning of a New Life

Vuk Lesi, A-SMYLE Serbia
Charlotte, NC

Here I am! Well, the trip was good, arrived in one piece, no problems, nice ride. School's fine; adapting takes some time, but it's fine. I'm getting used to saying some words a lot, and people are very nice here.

A lot of big differences everywhere, right? Yes, I guess that's not a strange thing. I'm getting used to doing some things a lot—people are very different here. Many things are different, and it's nice to have a chance to see all the differences. Drawing good comparisons and, even better, conclusions, if the comparison was good, is very important.

Right on the beginning of a new life, which might last longer than the staying in a new environment, I feel well. I feel nice to have a chance to change something. I felt fine, but I still wanted to change something, I wanted to feel even better.

No matter if I succeed or not, I feel thankful to have a chance to try something new. I feel thankful to realize some of my previous mistakes, and to have a chance to do everything I can so that some things don't happen again. Those things are not so important, but they affect memories. I can also remember of all of the good decisions I

made. I might realize what real life is, right now. I actually do have an opportunity to learn about my own life, thinking back of some things, and thinking a lot more to the front.

Thinking about what I do right now and implementing ideas that never stop coming tomorrow—the feeling for that is great! The goals we have are bigger and bigger, every second, but that is the point of living, isn't it? To die in chasing perfection, that can be only imagined? Or maybe not? The masters are those who see the things they have as perfect. Or maybe those who do both? The choice is mine, I want to be everything that allows me to go further and further.

Here, today is tomorrow, and I have a chance to make tomorrow never end. Just listen to these perfect words:

"I want to live,
I want to give
I've been a miner for a heart of gold.
It's these expressions I never give
That keep me searching for a heart of gold."

(Neil Young - Heart of gold)

Photo Runners-Up

Djordje Trickovic



Tsvetomil Ivanov



Nikola Stojanovic



Photos in the Spotlight



Congratulations to Shpat Grajcevci (photo above) and Irina Conevska (photo right) for submitting two great photos this quarter that *really* capture, at least I think, the spirit of the A-SMYLE and YES programs!

Shpat, YES Kosovo, snapped this shot of Ekaterina (Katya) Kobeleva (FLEX) and Jelena Preradovic (A-SMYLE Serbia)—two friends of his from his cluster in Pueblo, Colorado—at a football game between Central and Centennial high schools, “the oldest football rivalry west of the Mississippi River.” Great school spirit, everyone! Shpat, this picture is also hanging in the doorway to the A-SMYLE/YES SEE office in Washington, DC ☺.

As for Irina’s photo, in which she is pictured, can anyone tell who’s who? Or, better yet, who is from where? Irina, YES Macedonia, placed in Chattanooga, TN, is on the right, a Czech exchange student is in the middle, and their American friend is on the left.



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