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BOSNIAN TEEN'S ROAD TO RECOVERY BRINGS HER TO U.S.< SHE WAS 16 WHEN AN ARTILLERY SHELL TOOK HER LEG.< THREE YEARS LATER, SHE'S A CABRINI COLLEGE STUDENT.

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Index Terms:

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Article Text:

A pleasant place to talk, Maja Kazazic suggested, would be the Peace Pole - a wooden obelisk inscribed with messages of goodwill in different languages and set in the heart of the Cabrini College campus.

As she bent to sit on a bench there, the prosthesis that has replaced her left leg strained against her jeans, making two hard ridges just above the knee. On her right leg, the fabric rode up just enough to reveal a metal brace attached to her sneaker to steady her foot. She rolled up her shirtsleeve; dozens of pieces of shrapnel were visible beneath the scarred skin of her left arm.

Next to the Peace Pole, Kazazic talked about war.

She figures she's the lucky one. She only lost her leg. The six others who had been near her lost their lives, blown to bits when an artillery shell, fired from the hills outside the Muslim community in Mostar, Bosnia, landed practically in their laps.

"I saw pieces of them everywhere," said Kazazic.

On that summer day in 1993, Kazazic, then 16, was in her family's third-floor apartment, making a sandwich. Spotting a friend outside, she went downstairs and stood chatting on the small cement porch.

Kazazic never heard the whine of the shell, only the explosion. There was a huge cloud of smoke and, where children had been playing a moment before, a large crater.

When the dust cleared, Kazazic's journey began - from a makeshift basement hospital in Mostar to a U.S. Army base in Germany to a small town in Maryland and, finally, to an idyllic campus on the Main Line.

She came to America without her family, a clue about her future, or a word of English. What she did have was the help of Samaritans - and a deep reserve of pluck.

Now 19 and a freshman at Cabrini, Kazazic is experiencing something that had been gone from her life for years: calm.

Despite the horrors she witnessed, she smiles easily. Humor slips into her recollections.

“When you're in the hospital, in so much pain, you have to learn English so you can say, ‘Don't touch my leg,’ ” she said, laughing.

The nightmares haven't completely abated. But when they do come, her Bosnian friends are not the ones killed in the explosion. Instead, she sees her American friends dying.

For Kazazic, caution had been a part of each day in Mostar. Still, she never expected to become a victim of war. “You know how everyone thinks, ‘That won't happen to me.’ ”

Right after the blast, her mother rushed downstairs, hysterical at the sight of the carnage.

“But I wasn't crying,” said Kazazic. “I saw my legs were all blown up. But it didn't hurt that much. I told her to wake me up because I thought it was a bad dream.”

A passerby - himself later killed in the fighting - carried Kazazic to a basement that served as a medical ward. It was staffed by nurses and others with medical training, but no doctors.

Until that afternoon, Kazazic had been an athlete, playing soccer and basketball for club teams in the city. Until that afternoon, she had planned to be a coach or a gym teacher.

When her father, a nurse, arrived at her bedside, she asked him one question: Will I be able to play soccer again?

“He said, ‘Yeah, sure, you'll be playing in a couple of weeks,’ ” said Kazazic.

Then she lost consciousness.

After a week's wait to see if she would survive, her left leg was amputated at the knee. There was no anesthesia; she was tied to a table and a teddy bear placed in her mouth so she could bite down on the pain.

Kazazic spent a touch-and-go month in the Mostar hospital when a British nurse from an international humanitarian group received permission to take three children out of the country for treatment. She wanted Kazazic to go.

That meant leaving her parents and brother behind. ``They carried me to my father, because by that time he was also in the hospital with a chest wound, and we had a kind of family conference," said Kazazic. ``But I knew I had to leave. There was no choice. If I wanted to live, I had to leave."

Accompanied by an aunt, Kazazic passed to the Croatian side, where she stayed for a week before being sent to a U.S. Army hospital in Germany. After a month, a group called Veterans for Peace, based in Cumberland in western Maryland, arranged for her transfer to the States.

Kazazic spent nearly five months in a Cumberland hospital, undergoing numerous surgeries and skin grafts. She was immobilized for weeks at a time, constantly stuck with needles, and tethered to intravenous tubes.

There, she became a celebrity of sorts. Everyone, it seemed, knew the tragic story of the Bosnian girl and offered help. An apartment was found for her, a wheelchair donated, and in early 1994, Kazazic was able to leave the hospital. That fall she was enrolled in Allegany High School as a junior. She did well academically, and played in the band, which presented her with a plaque that now hangs in her dorm room. ``For outstanding service and love of life," it reads.

With no mail or phone service in or out of Mostar, Kazazic could only wonder about the fate of her parents and brother. Not until last year did a letter bring the news that all of them were still alive. That June, they arrived in Cumberland, where the family now lives and the elder Kazazics work in a plastics factory.

Meanwhile, Kazazic was sent to Altoona to see a man named Harry Penny, a podiatrist and an Army reservist familiar with war wounds. As he worked with Kazazic and built the prosthesis that would literally get her on her feet again, they talked about the future.

``She said she wanted to go to college, but didn't have any money," said Penny, a 1977 Cabrini graduate. ``She figured she'd have to work for at least a year. I told her I knew a good, liberal-arts college."

Penny called his alma mater and arranged a visit to campus and an admissions interview for Kazazic. It went well. But Kazazic was insistent on one point: She didn't want charity.

``She's somebody who's willing to work for what she receives," said Penny.

Backed by a combination of loans, scholarships and work-study programs, Kazazic became a college student in America.

She hopes to return to Bosnia next summer. But just for a short visit. ``About two weeks," she said. ``No more. The more you stay, the more you find out, and the worse it is."

Kazazic has given up her plans to coach. It would be hard to teach soccer, she said, if she can't play herself.

"I can do it in my mind," she said. "I can imagine the ball in front of me and I can see me kicking it and I know exactly where it will go. But, of course, I can't do it."

So she thinks she would like to be an occupational therapist.

"I know I want to work with people," she said.

That desire has sent her into schools to share her experience with students. Her talks have been part living history lesson, part admonition; she thinks American teens take too much for granted.

"I was at one school, and I heard there was a drug problem," she said. "So I said to them, 'You have so many choices in this country, and you are choosing to kill yourself. In my country, my friends are fighting just to stay alive.'"

The difference between there and here, between surviving in Mostar and studying in America, sometimes astounds her. Somehow, things worked out for her.

"Everything is great," she said, and lightly punched the arm of the bench.

"Knock on wood."