

**Rasim Gusinac, a Re-settled Bosnian Refugee and new Gilford Resident,
is Citizens Council's Newest Member**

Rasim Gusinac, the newest member of the Belknap County Citizens Council on Children and Families, brings a lifetime of experiences sown in the soil of his Serbian homeland in the former Yugoslavia. While now home owners in a area in Gilford, their lives have been full of wrenching

Rasim grew up in a traditions and family life with respect and honor for

“We were taught to harm others,” says Rasim family since 1992 when the Bosnia began.

A schoolteacher by educated at a college in

received a Bachelor’s degree in History and Geography. After teaching for a short period in Serbia, Rasim moved to Zvornik, Bosnia where he taught history and geography to middle school youth in a public school in the city. It was here that he met his wife, Umija, also a teacher, but from a less traditional and more contemporary upbringing.

“These differences don’t matter,” assures Rasim. “We get along so very well.”

While they were living and teaching in Zvornik, Serbia invaded Bosnia “coming closer and closer to us”, he says. “Checkpoints were everywhere and everyday, it got worse and worse. People were killed or put in concentration camps.”

Fearing for their lives and guided by the International Red Cross, the couple fled in their automobile in middle of the night, leaving everything behind. “We left our home so quickly we didn’t even have time to bring our college diplomas or family photos. All we had were the clothes we were wearing.”



RASIM GUSINAC

he and his wife Umija are comfortable residential over the past fifteen years pain, terror, and flight. community where folk tied generations together each other.

love life and to help, not who has not seen his own Serbian aggression on

profession, Rasim was Macedonia where he

The couple traveled back to Rasim's home community where they stayed for several days. Leaving Umija with his family, Rasim then drove back to Zvornik where he snuck out Umija's sister-in-law with her two preschool children along with the four-year old child of Umija's younger brother. These adults, chaperoning three young children over 600 miles of war-ravaged terrain, made their way to Macedonia.

After weeks of confusion and without any possessions, Rasim and Umija were finally given permission to move to Istanbul, Turkey where the couple lived and worked for more than eight years, Rasim as a translator and Umija as a teacher and secretary.

Having been groomed in personal responsibility and resiliency by their eight-year sojourn throughout southeastern Europe, Rasim and Umija had one more lesson in courage and



Rasim Gusinac (R) talks with guest musician at the 2005 Multicultural Market Day held each year in Laconia.

independence. In September of 1999 the couple was tossed from their apartment in the middle of the night by the 7.9 magnitude earthquake that ultimately killed more than 55,000 people.

“We had to live in the public park for seven days before

the rumbles stopped and it was safe to return to our home.”

“Our hope was always that we could return to Bosnia, but even in 2000, things were not well in our country,” explains Rasim.

Encouraged by a friend who had moved to Florida to consider America, Rasim and Umija began working with the Immigration and Nationalization Service and a refugee resettlement agency. The couple planned to move to the United States; however, they did not know where in America they were headed until they were handed plane tickets at the airport.

“When they gave us a one-way ticket to New Hampshire, we said ‘Where and what is that?’” he laughs.

While Rasim is a skilled linguist who speaks Russian, Turkish, Bosnian, and Macedonian, he and his wife did not know a word of English when they landed at Kennedy Airport in New York City on September 6, 2000.

“For awhile we communicated just through body language!” he says.

After arriving in Laconia, Rasim and Umija enrolled in English classes through the Laconia Adult Education Program and Lutheran Social Services. Rasim quickly found employment as a machine operator “without any experience”, he laughs, at Freudenberg NOK where he continues to work today. Umija is now the Community School Coordinator with Project EXTRA in Laconia.

“We are learning to speak English and about American customs as fast as we can,” adds Rasim. “While the climate and seasons in New Hampshire are similar to Bosnia, the food is quite different!” He explains that the taste of American pastries and such practices as “eating in the car and during meetings are all new for us.” Umija still likes to “cook from scratch, using Bosnian spices to make lots of stews, ragout, and cookies.”

When asked what his dreams and hopes in life are, Rasim quickly responds, “To find health and peace to be healthy and happy. And this comes only by helping others.

“You cannot lock yourself in between four walls. It is too easy to become selfish and suspicious and you soon lose your health that way. There are so many people in our communities that can use help. All we need to do is look and ask.

“If we can make some small changes here in the Lakes Region and elsewhere throughout this country, soon it will also change in Washington too.”

Rasim and Umija are both “helping others” through their ongoing work with other refugees, traveling throughout the state to guide others through the maze of healthcare, social security, court and legal transactions. Both are busy and active with the Laconia Human Relations Committee and Laconia Multicultural Day. Umija is a recent Parents As Leaders in Society (P.A.L.S.) graduate and Rasim is enrolled in the current P.A.L.S. class. Both are popular guest speakers in Lakes Region schools and organizations.

As the newest member of the Citizens Council, Rasim will continue his support of emigrant families in Belknap County. “I also want to help the connections between all children and parents. Both need to better understand each other.”

While Rasim and Umija are seeking American citizenship, a process that should end in early 2006, one dream Rasim still holds “does seem impossible”, he says. “I really would like to do my job – I want to be back in the classroom,” noting that the transfer of teaching credentials from Bosnia to America is very difficult.

“I have to go back to Macedonia myself and search through all my college credits. They tell me that this is something I must do as no-one else can do it for me. Right now, that is too expensive and complicated, but perhaps one day I can.

“But,” concludes Rasim, “While I am not saying that I am always right, being ‘right’ means you love people and truly try to understand everybody.”

And that is the gift that Rasim, along with his wife Umija, bring to their community wherever they live.