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When You Don't See His Plan: The Nadine Hennesey Story

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After a long, sleepless night, I finally gave up, got dressed, and slipped outside as the rising sun profiled buildings on the dusky horizon of Mitrovica. Just over two months earlier, this city in the tiny European territory of Kosovo had become my home. As an educator from the United States, I had come to join an international humanitarian team assisting survivors of the civil war that continued to tear the country apart. Even now I could peer through the early morning light and see a small helicopter perched on the hill behind us, guarding the site where a new building was being constructed—a learning center for kids who had, in a moment’s time, lost childhood innocence as they witnessed family members being beaten or shot to death.

“We’ve been attacked,” an American friend living nearby had called to tell me the day before, September 11, 2001. At first I thought she meant Kosovo was under siege—we were always
alert to that possibility. “No,” she responded, “the attack was in America.” As soon as I heard that, I ran over to the guard’s shack on our compound, struggling to understand the quick, terse news reports that kept coming in, spoken in Albanian.

I ran to find the nearest phone, and after repeated attempts over jammed phone lines, I connected with my parents in the States, who assured me they were safe.

Later that evening, the wife of our construction chief called. She was a doctor who specialized in blood work and was responding to the call to help American victims by organizing a couple of blood drives. If I wanted to come, she told me, she would pick me up early in the morning on her way into town. “I’ll be ready,” I assured her, thankful for the opportunity to do something.

So, on the morning of September 12, I had just stepped outside my apartment and was standing by the train tracks that edged our property when the young doctor pulled up. We drove past the marketplace, still quiet at that early hour, and entered the gate in front of an old military building that had been turned into a makeshift hospital.

Inside, even as the doctor was setting everything up, Albanian soldiers began coming in to donate blood. Steadily the line behind me grew until it extended out of the room, down the stairs, and outside. As we stood, waiting quietly together, I thought about the incredible carnage these soldiers and the citizens they served had lived through in the bloody struggle of the last three years. They had witnessed cold-hearted murder of fathers and brothers; some fearfully waited for the discovery of another mass grave that might reveal the remains of loved ones still missing. Every day’s routine was marked by unavoidable reminders as the survivors walked past the places where friends or family had been killed. Many had lost their homes
and any documents that gave them ownership rights to property. Yet, upon hearing news of thousands of injured Americans, these soldiers came, in sympathy and support, to give the only thing they could, their blood. Next to them, I felt small and insignificant.

After the first few of us in line had given blood, a man I assumed to be the men’s commanding officer walked through the hallway, calling all the soldiers outside for a flag-raising ceremony. I slipped in behind and joined them. Standing on the dusty pathway circling the hospital, we came to attention as the Albanian and American flags were raised together, and then in honor of the 9-11 victims, the commanding officer called for a minute of silence. Although I had met this man at an event in town, I didn’t think he would remember me, and I was humbled when he and his officers walked over, shook my hand, and expressed gratitude for America’s support during Kosovo’s recent political trauma.

Walking back home after the blood drive, I passed through Mitrovica’s market area. Although I was out earlier than usual on this day, a quick walk to the city market had become part of my morning routine in Kosovo—one that let me meet people and connect with a growing network of friends. I usually slipped past groups of men sipping coffee at outdoor cafes as I headed toward one of my favorite bakeries for fresh croissants or rolls. Inevitably, a strong-spirited grandmother, her head wrapped in a scarf, would greet me with a kiss on both cheeks and whisper advice about the best places to shop. Young mothers dressed in more contemporary styles, without head coverings, would stop to talk, usually accompanied by little children who peeked up at me shyly. And older kids, walking arm-in-arm down the street, would run over to ask me about the new center being built near the train tracks.
“Teacher,” they already called me. “Teacher, when does the center open?” At first, I didn’t have an answer for their question. But after my best effort at diplomatic negotiation with my fellow administrators, we had finally committed to a date. “We’ll open our doors on the fifteenth of September,” I would promise those young people from then on.

But on this morning of September 12, I slipped into the marketplace with my eyes fixed on the sidewalk in front of me. To my surprise, someone coming toward me stopped suddenly. “Is your family safe?” he asked. A few moments later, another passerby touched my elbow. “We’re so sorry,” she said. As strangers and acquaintances continued to stop, echoing the unexpected support I had experienced at the hospital, I began to look around. I was touched by the sight of American flags draped in the windows of several stores and candles lit in others.

Mental images of devastation in America heightened my sensitivity to the political turmoil tearing Kosovo apart. As I did every morning, I passed the train tracks that came from beyond the bridge that separated the city into fiercely defined ethnic zones. Panic and terror could flare in an instant as Albanians and Serbians faced off in acts of war and revenge, resistance and survival.

I thought about the first time I saw the train coming our way carrying workers from “the other side.” Little boys playing ball in the dirt nearby had been instantly galvanized into champions of their territory, running alongside the train leaving just enough distance to feel invulnerable, screaming angry obscenities accented with gestures of unmistakable intent. Recognizing some of the children from my visits in their homes added sad complexity to the scene, for this was more than “boys will be boys;” it was a change of persona. While unfiltered expressions of rage reflected
what seemed to be a permanent emotional scar in some, for the most part these little boys looked different when you saw them up close in other settings. They loved to joke around, they were polite, and in rare moments of vulnerable self-disclosure, they were amazingly tenderhearted. I had already come to love them.

As I walked along the tracks that would lead back to where I had started that morning—the site of a new learning center rising out of the rubble of war—I thought about the dream that had led me to call this Eastern European city “home.”

On July 5, 2001, while crossing the Albanian border into Kosovo on the way to my new adventure, I had traveled through a countryside banked with rugged mountains and dotted with one red-roofed house after another, all sitting empty. Initial framing of the houses had begun, but then they had been left unfinished. The job description I had been given was “to help orphans and semi-orphans in the war-torn city of Mitrovica, Kosovo.” On a site visit the previous February to see what was at the time a pile of bricks bolstered by a big vision, this war-ravaged city had, against all odds, captured my heart. I wanted to make sure that I didn’t leave my job unfinished.

During the two months since I arrived, as those bricks continued to rise out of the fragments of bombed-out buildings to form a learning center, I made countless home visits, accompanied by a translator. City officials had given me a list of more than seven hundred parents, mostly widows, who had lost spouses in the recent war. The devastation, vulnerability, and jagged loneliness I saw day after day haunted me. Beautiful, dignified women returned from refugee camps carrying children on their backs;
they struggled to rebuild lives in shattered fragments that had once been their homes.

For example, while visiting a temporary shelter that had been an old, condemned hotel, I heard a mother of six tell me how her children had been lined up and forced to watch as she and her husband were beaten. Leaving her husband lying on the ground, his torturers called out as they left, “You’re not dead yet!” Wiping away her tears, she told what happened next. “My children tried to help me carry him to the hospital, but he died in my arms, in the street.”

Another woman I visited, married the year before the war began, comforted the little one in her lap as she described the last night she had seen her husband alive. Soldiers had broken in, yanked the couple from their bed and through the front door, and set fire to the house. She watched, helpless, as they forced her husband to his knees with a gun to his back, and then they dragged him away. Fleeing across the river, she collapsed in an open field where, surrounded by wailing women and crying children, she gave birth in the pouring rain, not knowing if her baby would ever see his father. And now, she knew, he never would.

“What are your dreams for your children?” I would ask the survivors after they shared their stories. The same quick answer came again and again: “Education.” Because local school buildings had been bombed and many teachers had been killed or injured, children could attend only the most salvageable facilities in half-day shifts, at best. Our learning center, I explained to these young mothers, would be available to orphaned and semiorphaned children as a supplement to the local public school programs.

My goal was to hire four Albanian teachers, and together we would offer classes in literature, math, English, art, and character
training. Two cooks would use the kitchen and dining room to provide a nourishing lunch each day. And because of the vital role athletics play in teaching discipline, fostering teamwork, and building character, I had also lobbied our vision team for a sports facility. "These kids need a place for organized activity," I shared with my team. "More than that, they desperately need a place other than the streets—a safe place—where they can hang out and play."

The response was enthusiastic but conditional. Could I raise the extra money needed, they asked, to supplement the already stretched budget? That night I wrote to my supporters back in the States, promising to mention the request only once and trust God for the result. Just as construction needed to begin, my mission organization confirmed contributions that had come in, including one for $30,000 from a friend in my home church. The total at the bottom of the column was exactly what was needed!

During a lunch break one August day, after coming back from an especially disheartening home visit, I sat in the shade of a tree on the edge of our property and took a hard look at how we were progressing. The sun was scorching. We still had to carry water into the kitchen and bathroom every day, the construction workers were exhausted, and, most troubling to me personally, I wondered if we could make a dent in the grief surrounding us. After eating the bit of bread and cheese I had taken outside with me, I opened my Bible to Psalm 126:1–2. "We were like those who dream," it began. "Then our mouth was filled with laughter."

*The House of Laughter,* I thought, looking up at the construction, which had slowed down lately. I thought of the frightened, fragile little girl I had visited that morning. Her little brother, trying hard to act tough, obviously craved attention; her older
brother didn’t even attempt to disguise his anger as he sat with arms crossed, glaring at everyone in the room. What would it take to see them laugh? More than a building, I thought. More than games, books, and food—or anything we could offer even on our best days. I looked back at the Bible in my lap and read the next verse. “The Lord has done great things for us.” Thankful that grace from heaven isn’t limited by earthly resources, I put a marker at that place, and the next day proposed The House of Laughter as the name for our learning center. My administrators looked at each other, smiled, and turning back to me, nodded their approval.

My dream—that these besieged people of Kosovo could know the joy that only God could give—was one that had grown from seeds planted in my heart many years before. The way I had been raised played a big part in leading me to my new home in the middle of Eastern Europe. My parents had lived out their faith in practical ways. The compassion I saw in them meant getting your hands dirty and your heart broken for needs beyond your own. In the few moments we are given in this short life, we earn the opportunity to put our arms around someone else and help. And I had learned firsthand from my dad, who turned every project into a game, that if you give people a chance to laugh it’s a lot easier for them to get up and move on.

On September 15, 2001, I woke up, asked God for His will to be done, and watched as the dream of laughter came into focus. With pale, yellow paint barely dry on classroom walls and desks delivered just the day before, The House of Laughter was officially dedicated in a public program. Dressed as clowns, one of my teachers, Stacey, and her little helper—a young girl named Lydia—passed out balloons as visitors came through the gate. Standing outside our new building, single-parent families,
friends, and reporters from the newspaper and radio station gathered around the mayor of Mitrovica, who cut the ribbon and welcomed us as an official part of the city. Although no American soldiers were allowed to attend because of the high-alert status still in effect, international soldiers in full uniform mingled with the crowd, joining in the celebration.

During the reception that followed, I slipped into my office for a moment of private celebration. Over my desk hung a poster I brought from the United States. It showed smiling children of many nationalities circling a globe, with these words: “Teachers change the world—one child at a time.” “Please, Lord,” I prayed, “please work through me, in any way you choose, to change their world.”

I heard muffled laughter and glanced up to see three young girls standing arm in arm outside my office window, obviously trying to wait respectfully. “Mom, come back to the party!” the little clown helper in the middle called, jumping up and down.

“I’ll be right there.” The girls ran back to their friends, and I turned to join them, stopping momentarily to straighten the photos on the shelf across from my desk. There was one of my husband and me at our wedding, another of our family taken at Christmas, and one in a silver heart of the ten-year-old girl who had just called me “Mom.”

The path that led me from a supportive home in the farm­lands of Ohio to war-torn Kosovo was not one I could have foreseen nor one which, humanly speaking, I would have chosen. It was only God’s grace that brought Lydia and me here. And that grace, I knew, was enough.

I knew.