The American Dream is Alive in Yonkers

By Dan Murphy

You may recognize the name and face of Bayan Baker, a senior at Yonkers High School (YHS). Baker has worked on the Yonkers Student Grapevine for three years and was one of three Grapevine interns selected to work during the summer for Yonkers Rising in 2009.

We kept Baker on as a part-time employee, working after school for the next two years because of her hard work and attention to detail. Recently, Baker was awarded a Yonkers Town Scholarship to attend Sarah Lawrence College (SLC) this fall. She will graduate this June with a 97 average, putting her in the top 10 in the YHS class of 2011, and she brings 28 already-completed college credits to SLC.

There is no one more deserving of this scholarship than Baker, and all of us here at Yonkers Rising are proud of her accomplishments. Sarah Lawrence is lucky to have her, as her future endeavors (she wants to become a pediatrician) will make them proud to have her as an alumna.

We are also happy that Baker will continue working for Yonkers Rising while attending college.

We are sharing you her story to show that there are success stories in the YPS and that the American Dream is alive and well in Yonkers.

Read Bayan’s story, reprinted from Yonkers Rising’s July 24, 2009 issue, below.

By Bayan Baker

Escape was the first thing on their minds. Family, safety and freedom; these words all came next. Switzerland was the first suggestion given, Australia the next and America the last, but also the one they chose.

My name is Bayan Baker and I, like my family, am an immigrant from a small eastern European country called Croatia.

On June 25, 1991, Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia, provoking an immediate response from the federal military. Unlike the brief fighting that broke out in Slovenia when they declared themselves an independent country, the clashes in Croatia erupted into a full-scale war.

At first, many residents denied that the war would continue and spread. Many sought out reason to believe that it was merely a political and territorial dispute, one that would soon be resolved. In only the first year, Serbian military forces constituted about one-eighth of the Croatian population, and soon had full control over a third of the entire population. Croatian forces soon blockaded federal barracks, cutting off almost all utilities and food entering the country and many families, like my own, struggled for food.

With Serbia in control of a third of the population, many ethnic people were murdered, the majority being Muslims. In 1992, 14,000 U.N. peacekeeper soldiers fought side by side with Croatian forces, maintaining an uneasy stalemate between rebelling Croatia and the Serbs, who eventually declared the captured territory of Croatia the Republic of Krajina. For three more years, the fighting never seemed to end; the war escalated to Bosnia and Herzegovina within months.

Then, in May 1995, the Croatian army swept through part of the Serbian territory, destroying the town and killing the hundreds of soldiers that took residence there. The Serbs retaliated, sending a handful of missiles into the Croatian capital, Zagreb, killing a couple dozen people and injuring more than 150. This attack fueled the will of Croatian forces; by August, Croatian troops had retaken most of the Serbian-held land and had sent more than 100,000 Serbian military soldiers fleeing.

The war in Croatia officially ended on December 14, 1995, with the signing of the Dayton peace accords. However, the “Cold War” of Bosnia lasted until the end of 1997, due to the numerous accounts of sniper shootings that occurred in the country.

My family and I left Croatia on October 30, 1996, almost a year after the war had ended.
Unlike many families, my own was not anywhere near Sarajevo, the capital city of Bosnia. It seemed as if there was a heavy weight of ethnic slaughtering in Bosnia, at least more so than Croatia.

From my childhood (I was three years old when I left Croatia), I remember very little, but the most important events are clear, and my mother’s detailed descriptions help trigger even the smallest fragment of memory, as a child would see a war through her own eyes.

I remember the night my family spent in the basement of our house, cradled in my father’s arms, my small yellow blanket wrapped around me — as if it held the magic of keeping me safe.

I remember my sister crying because she was hungry and it was too much of a risk to go upstairs to get her formulated milk.

I remember the stench of the murky basement, and how thankful my parents were that we’d never had to spend our nights there.

I remember that one night, and how I couldn’t even sleep. The noise outside was far too loud to be able to rest and, at that point, I doubt anyone of us knew how to rest. It was that day, and only that day, that my family and I experienced the life of a Bosnian Muslim, shut away from the world, and left alone, praying that one day the war would be over and there would be nothing left to fight for.

Zagreb, my hometown capital, felt the effects of the Croatian/Bosnian war on May 2 and May 3, 1995, when Serbian missiles attacked my homeland, killing both people I knew those I didn’t know. A year later, feeling imprisoned and trapped, with no freedom or safety, my family packed up their luggage and took their lives across the sea, in search for a better place — America.

The year is now 2009. It has been 13 years since I left my homeland and my family and I reflect back on our journey and where we were back then. A couple of years ago, on October 30, my parents bought a house in a very quiet neighborhood. My younger sister and I attended highly academic schools and are now both attending Yonkers High School.

Being immigrants doesn’t stop us from doing what we love; we are like every other family. We spend the winter shoveling snow, the summer traveling and visiting new, exotic places and the fall absorbing all of the knowledge we can. We have friends, and our family only grows bigger each day — we have somewhere to feel safe, to feel at home.

Thirteen years ago, when my family came to America, neither one of my parents was fluent in English, nor did they have any means of transportation. We relied solely on the help of family members.

Working our way up, we settled into our lives, adapting them to the environment that surrounds us yet, at the same time, continuing to keep tradition close to our hearts. We’ve visited Croatia a couple of times now, each time harder to leave than the last.

I like to think of our family as role models; people who strived for better lives and, when given the chance, took the opportunity and made the best of it.

I have nothing to thank for that except for America — the land of opportunities.
Bayan Baker