

One young woman's painful path to a place of safety

Severe injuries in her war-ravaged homeland didn't keep her from achieving.

By JAMIE FRANCIS

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[Times photo: Jamie Francis]

When Maja Kazazic, 24, is asked what happened to her leg, she usually simply responds that it's a war story. She says, "My accent has faded; I drive a red sports car; they seem surprised." The

Bosnian Muslim from Mostar now lives in Clearwater and likes to swim in the apartment complex's pool each morning before she leaves for work.



On June 15, 1993, when Maja Kazazic was 16 years old, she left her apartment in the Muslim enclave of Mostar to meet with friends. Civil war in the former Yugoslavia was being fought among Croats, Serbs and Muslims. According to Kazazic, anyone who lived in Bosnia during this time has a war story. This is hers.

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No drugs were available to relieve the pain when Maja Kazazic's leg was amputated in a makeshift hospital in her homeland in 1993. She bit on this little blue teddy bear during the agony of the surgery.



I never ran from the bombs; I didn't think they would get me. (Sometimes I would) run across the rooftop of our apartment building to feed my pet rabbit, the one we ended up eating anyway. The snipers never shot me.

Like always, I went to see my friends when I heard them whistle. We had codes for each other, and I could hear them from our third-floor apartment. During war, childhood is not normal. When they called I would go, and when I called they would come. Serbs were to the east, Croats to the west, but we felt safe behind the tall walls of my courtyard.

The bomb exploded 10 feet away from me. I was sitting on a small wall, and the blast knocked me off in the same position I had been sitting in. There were six other people -- my friends -- and I could see pieces of them all over. I think they heard the bomb coming and ran where it fell, thinking they were getting away. I didn't think I was injured, just choking on the smoke. I tried to get up but my legs didn't go with me. All I could think was . . . please let me be dreaming.

There wasn't a hospital in the Muslim section, just a basement where all the sick and injured were taken. My father is a nurse, so he was there when I arrived. I was a soccer freak, and my dad often played with me. I asked him if I was going to play again. He said, "Oh yeah, in three weeks," and I passed out.

As a nurse, my dad helped a lot of people, so they gave blood for me. I'm O-negative and can receive only O-negative, so some people gave three or four times a day, but my legs didn't get better. They were infected from the injury and from the salt and vinegar mixture the Croats put in their bomb.

There was no electricity in the basement, no antibiotics, no pain killers, no anesthesia and no doctor. A dentist did the work on my legs. He used a handsaw to amputate one of them. I still have the blue teddy bear that my friend brought for me to bite when they did the cutting. Two times a day they cut the meat from my knee and cleaned it, but the infection was getting worse. It was the heat of summer, and I had fever. I wasn't eating. There was nothing to eat.

I was seeing yellow when Sally Becker, a nurse from England, came with the humanitarian (UN) convoy. She had permission to take three people. She said to me, "I'm leaving in 20 minutes, if you want to go."

My dad had taken three pieces of shrapnel in his chest, so he was now three beds down from me in the basement. He carried me to his bed, and we decided I would go. There was really no decision. I didn't get to say goodbye to my mother.

(I ended up at) an American hospital in Germany. I had my first shower in about three months, and I ate a hamburger and french fries. My other leg still hurt. My first English words were: heel, pain and don't touch.

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Kazazic's parents and brother made it to America two years after she did. They lived together for four years in Cumberland, Md. Kazazic has been in Clearwater for nine months and works as a Web designer for Student Resources, a St. Petersburg company.