

When Dreams Come True

by Milos Rastovic

Many immigrants came to the United States with their talents and will in search of a better life. Serbian immigrants sacrificed their lives for their ideals of freedom throughout history and have contributed to the United States.

The family of Serbian Orthodox Rev. Presbyter Dejan, his wife Danijela, a music teacher, and their daughter Mina Barac moved from Serbia and settled in Midland, PA, five years ago. By working hard and with firm faith in success, Mina, a member of SNF Lodge 006-Pittsburgh, graduated from Beaver Area High School on June 11, 2021. She will attend Harvard University in Boston and focus on her major in chemistry with a minor in mathematics in the fall. She was accepted to undergraduate studies in different colleges from Penn State University Park, Duquesne University to Temple University, but she chose to attend Harvard. Being accepted at Harvard meant her dream came true. Unfortunately, not many Serbian



immigrants were accepted to this prestigious school because this year Harvard accepted a far lower number of students. I had a chance to ask Mina a couple of questions about her life and work.

MR-What was your experience in school and at home during the time of COVID-19?

"As a senior, my last year of high school was quite different and unique. There were many challenges I had to overcome, especially staying focused on my studies in a home setting. Zoom classes every day weren't an ideal way of learning, but it was something all of us had to get used to. It was important to keep in mind that the students weren't the only ones struggling; teachers faced numerous challenges as well. Despite a few setbacks and difficulties in communication, we all worked hard to make this year as good as possible. I learned that in times like this, keeping a positive mindset is the key. I am beyond grateful to have such amazing friends and teachers who made virtual school quite an interesting experience. I certainly wish I could've spent my last year in person, but on the brighter side, now we all have interesting stories to tell the future generations!"

MR-What is your family's origin, and best memory of your childhood in Serbia?

"I was born in a small town Prokuplje in Southern Serbia. Both of my parents are from Prokuplje, too. For the first few years we lived in a village called Orljane; however, later we moved to a bigger city, Nis. It was a drastic change, but I did enjoy city life more. Regardless, I am beyond glad that I got to experience the peaceful country life. I truly value all the opportunities that I was given through life.

"In Nis, when I was six years old, I started taking ballet classes. Two years later I realized it wasn't something I wanted to do in the long run, so I switched to tennis classes instead. Tennis and school were my main focus. Practices in the morning, school in the afternoon and vice versa. I played tennis for seven years, competed, and dedicated most of my time to it. Over the years I met a lot of friends through competitions and tennis clubs; it was such a wonderful family to be a part of. My years of playing tennis carry some of my favorite childhood memories.

"In Serbia, elementary school and middle school are one and the same. St. Sava School is the one I went to. The time I spent there was wonderful. This place is very dear to me because it was here that I discovered my love for chemistry. The moment I stepped into the chemistry lab, I knew I wanted to be a part of this fascinating world. I went to competitions and truly enjoyed working on different experiments with my classmates. Besides chemistry, at St. Sava, I met some of my life-long friends. We used to be inseparable and did absolutely everything together. I still keep in touch with many of them and I hope to see them very soon! They were the ones that made moving to US difficult."

MR-Your father, Dejan, was already a priest in Serbia. What was your role in the church



by growing up in a priest family?

"I have been very blessed to grow up in a priest family. Throughout my childhood I was a part of many choirs, including church. We attend church every Sunday as well as holidays. My favorite memories are the ones of my father when he used to come to my religious and history classes to talk about church and answer different questions. I remember how proud I was to see him in *mantija* talking to my classmates. My mom was the director of many choirs so, I would attend rehearsals and concerts which was quite interesting. I had an amazing childhood growing up in a priest family."

MR-You moved to the United States at the age of 14. How did your childhood in Serbia influence your life in the United States?

"Serbian culture is completely different from the American one. While Serbia is more traditional in most ways, America is very modern. Moving to the US was probably the hardest thing I had to do. It was difficult to move across the ocean and leave my friends and family. However, with no doubt, this has been such a rewarding experience that I would definitely go through it all over again. It was nice to know that I wasn't alone in all of this. My parents helped me in so many ways. I am where I am today because of their endless love and support.

"I would say learning English and meeting new friends was the difficult part. This is because I had a very thick accent, so communication was an issue. Since I am a very outgoing and social person, every day I went to school an hour early to study English with my ESL teacher. I was determined to become fluent so I could finally talk with other students. After a while I felt more comfortable speaking English, so my ESL teacher asked me to join her Spanish class for a day and talk about my experience of moving to the US. That was the day I met so many new friends, but also the day I realized America would be my new home.

"Through this experience I learned that five minutes of pain is worth a lifetime of happiness. Saying goodbye to my friends and family was hard, but I wouldn't be standing here today if I decided that America could never be my home. Believing in yourself, working hard, staying strong in difficult situations, and giving your best are the keys to success. Now, I not only have many dear friends and family in Serbia, but America as well."

MR- What were your social, cultural, athletic, or other activities related to the school and out of the school?

"For the past four years I have been involved in many extracurricular activities both in school and my community.

- In my junior year I became a member of the National Honor Society, however, in my senior year I became the president.
- I've been a part of a book club, art club, and SHOUT (Social Handprints Overcoming Unjust

Treatment) club.

- I've been tutoring students in every single class I've taken over the years such as chemistry, math, English, Spanish, etc.
- I am in my 4th year of Spanish language.
- I taught Serbian language. I made about 15 basic Serbian lessons with grammar, vocabulary lists, worksheets, activities, etc.
- I am in Sunday school.
- I was a part of a mini project we did in October where we collected donations and bought food and supplies for people in need.
- I always volunteer to help my church during holidays or helping with the 4th of July booth.
- I worked at Fox's Pizza Den (December 2019 - September 2020).
- I've been working at Bath & Body Works (October 2020 to present).
- In summer, I went to the Serbian Shadeland Camp where I met some of my best friends.
- I've been a part of many choirs, including Lincoln Park women and concerts choirs."

MR-You like to read books. What is your favorite book, and why?

"I absolutely love reading books. Reading helped me a lot in expanding my vocabulary. Now, I mostly read in English. My favorite book is *Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. It is a heart-breaking story of betrayal, redemption, family, and war. In his books, Hosseini doesn't make any of his characters a hero or a winner. He realistically represents how people struggle to make decisions in life and what they feel when doing so. This book is a masterpiece in 370 pages. I strongly recommend it to everyone."

MR-What are you planning to study at Harvard or what do you want to do as a career?

"At Harvard I plan on majoring in chemistry and minoring in mathematics. In the long run, I will most likely go into the medical field. However, we declare our major at the beginning of the second year so I will take this opportunity to explore as many different departments as possible during my first year there. I am not a person that likes to have their whole life planned out in detail. I would rather take opportunities as they come and enjoy each along the way. So, right now, I am just focusing on exploring and challenging myself. I am very excited to meet new friends, join many clubs, and make Harvard my new home for the next four years."

MR-How much do you like to visit Serbia, do you still have family and friends there, and what places do you want to recommend visiting?

"Unfortunately, I haven't visited Serbia in a few years. I hope to visit very soon. I have many friends and family there and I try to talk to them every day. The time zone of six hours is sometimes an issue, but we always find a way. When I go, I stay both in Prokuplje and Nis so that way I can see all of my friends and family. I strongly recommend visiting our monasteries. They are my favorite places to be because when there, I feel at peace and closer to God. They are usually located close to the mountains, in nature which is perfect if you like hiking. The monks there are some of the most kindhearted people I've ever met. When people visit different countries, they usually focus on the cities, however, I believe Serbia's true beauty is in the villages where the traditions are kept alive."

MR-You were born in Serbia, live in the United States now, and you speak Serbian fluently. How much is the Serbian language critical for you and your heritage?

"While in America, I usually only speak Serbian with my family, however, Serbian language is very important to me. I often miss writing in Serbian which is one of the reasons I started teaching it. When I composed lessons, I felt like I learned something about my native language as well. This is also why I am excited to visit Serbia and speak Serbian as much as I want. I do have Serbian friends in Boston, so I am glad that I get to speak it despite moving far away from my family. Languages in general are very important to me which is why I love studying them. Every culture and language are unique and that fascinates me."

MR-Your father, Dejan, is the priest at St. George Serbian Orthodox Church in Midland, PA now. How essential is the Serbian Orthodox Faith for you?

"Coming from a religious family is something I am very proud of. I thank my parents every day for being so close to God today. My faith means the world to me and I've been blessed in so many ways. I will continue to go to the Serbian Orthodox church in Boston. I am actually very excited to see it and meet the people there."

MR-As a member of the Serb National Federation, you attended the 3-Day event, Serbian Heritage Night in Cleveland, OH, and other events. What message do you have, especially for young people like you, about preserving our traditions and heritage?

"I would like to share an excerpt from my Harvard application essay: *After we moved to the USA, my father continued his work as a priest at a Serbian Orthodox Church in Midland. It is a small town, with quite a large Serbian community. While most people are Serbians, other than a few words, no one spoke Serbian. However, what surprised me the most is the love they cherish for Serbian culture and traditions. It fascinated me to see someone who loves the country they had never even visited. Many traditions that were lost back in Serbia over time, here in America, are kept alive. One of them is a Serbian dance, kolo. I learned to dance kolo along with my American friends. I have never seen anyone dance such complicated routines with ease to absolutely any given song. With dancing comes the traditional Serbian clothing, nošnja. There is nothing better in this world than the feeling of deep, indescribable connection to your ancestors, and roots when wearing nošnja. It was during those precious moments, that in the mirror, I not only saw myself, but also my whole Serbian heritage and ancestry. The Serbian community I am a part of here in the United States, helps me love and appreciate everything my culture has given me. I understand now that no matter what people of Serbia went through over the years, our culture kept us unified.* – For all the young Serbian people here in America, please keep doing what you've been doing so far. Nothing is more beautiful than the culture and bond we all share as Serbian people. Dream big, but work hard and, trust me, anything is possible. Serbian people are determined and stubborn, so use that to your advantage to accomplish great things. Lastly, if you ever need help in anything along the way, you know exactly where to find me!"

