A foundation for learning in Roma communities in Serbia | In a classroom in Kabul, Afghanistan

A Common Place
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. (MCC), a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, shares God’s love and compassion for all by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. MCC envisions communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation. mcc.org

Cover story
4 A foundation for learning, in Roma communities
In Serbia, MCC supports an effort to provide education in Roma communities and to give students the tools they need to succeed in school.

10 First person
Damir Vrbanec, a teacher in an MCC-supported education program, talks about the journey that led him to work with the Roma community.

Features
12 In a classroom in Kabul
MCC and its partners are providing new educational opportunities for women and girls in Afghanistan.

Departments
3 MCC news
18 On assignment
Connecting people
19 Hello Serbia (for children)

J RON BYLER'S EMAIL ADDRESS IS RONBYLER@MCC.ORG

Cover photograph: Dragana Jovanović works in her exercise booklet during an afterschool tutoring program of MCC partner Bread of Life, outside of Belgrade, Serbia.

“...I am the bread of life. (John 6:35)”

... in a multicultural. Later in the same chapter, he says that he is the bread of life and that whoever comes to him will never be hungry or thirsty.

Among the fine stories in this issue about MCC’s work through education, it would be easy to miss Damir Vrbanec’s story of personal and spiritual transformation serving the marginalized Roma people in Serbia.

Bread of Life, MCC’s partner organization, is a Christian ministry of evangelical and Baptist churches in Belgrade, Serbia, following Jesus’ example of serving others.

With support from MCC, Bread of Life is helping Roma children succeed in school—a huge step for a community where 80 percent of the population is illiterate and unemployment is high.

Damir Vrbanec began his work with Bread of Life by helping in the warehouse. Today, he devotes himself to working with third to eighth grade Roma children and their parents.

As a Christian, Damir believes that his life should benefit others and that working with the children gives his life purpose.

It is a purpose that began more than 15 years ago, when another family introduced him to a community that loved him into the church.

“The bread of life,” says Jesus. As we discover the truth of Jesus’ words for ourselves, we can share bread with so many others.

Chad
In their own language
In a camel-hunting region where few families speak French, an MCC-supported school is giving children such as Om Abasa, left, Gumuri Mahamat and Omi Haki a chance to learn to read and write in their first language, Dazaga. The school also provides French language classes as well as lunches, school uniforms and supplies.

The people of this community in North Kanem, Chad, made 9,000 bricks by hand to build a schoolhouse. In addition to other support, MCC is funding a well for the school community. Go to mcc.org/stories/acp/summer-2016 to read more about this school and area.

School kits
These are MCC’s most-requested item. Notebooks and pencils are treasures for families who struggle to afford basic school supplies.

(NEW items only)
4 spiral or perforated notebooks
8 unsharpened pencils
1 ruler (flat, flexible plastic; indicating 30 cm and 12 inches)
12 colored pencils (in packaging)
1 large pencil eraser

School kits are distributed in useful, double-wastebinding cloth bags (11.75 in x 16.75 in). You may sew the bag yourself. Request bags from a drop-off location or donate contents that we will place in a bag. For bag instructions or drop-off locations, contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2) or go to mcc.org/kits.

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Summarizing the truth of Jesus’ words for ourselves, we can share bread with so many others.

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**A foundation for learning in Roma communities**

In Serbia, MCC supports an effort to promote education in Roma communities and to give students the tools they need to succeed in school.

**STORY BY EMILY LOEWEN**

**PHOTOS BY MATTHEW LESTER**

Watching Arbasana Amzaj help young students with their homework, her head bent over their books with a warm smile on her face, it’s hard to imagine she faced obstacles getting her own education.

She works with confidence on the second floor of a small wooden house, keeping students interested in their work. This MCC-supported “Little School,” as it’s affectionately called, is where Roma children come for homework help in the community of Surčin, a municipality of Belgrade, Serbia.

When Amzaj was a student, the Little School didn’t exist. There weren’t any tutoring sessions, and there wasn’t anyone to help her understand Serbian, the language used in school.

“It was very difficult for me really at the beginning,” she says. “I did not have good grades because I simply did not know the language and I did not understand... I had some neighbors who are Serbs and I tried to find help from them.” Amzaj was the only Roma student in her class of 33.

Roma people, often referred to by the derogatory term “gypsy,” are from an ethnic group originally from northern India but found throughout Europe today.

Roma children in Serbia have a harder time getting an education than other students. They grow up speaking languages like Romani or Albanian, not Serbian, the only language used in school.

Furthermore, 80 percent of the Roma population in Serbia is illiterate, unable to help with homework and fill out the paperwork needed for enrollment, or they simply don’t place much value on school.

Unemployment rates are also higher for Roma, and while school itself is free, the associated costs for books and supplies can be too high.

In Amzaj’s case, her parents wanted her to stay in school, but weren’t always able to help with homework and didn’t have enough money for books and supplies. She was able to finish elementary school with help from friends, neighbors and a local principal who helped cover some costs. But she stopped after eighth grade because her family needed her to start working.
“Of course I knew that elementary education was not enough, but the financial situation of my family was difficult and I simply could not afford it,” Amzaj says.

These days she works as a teaching assistant with MCC partner Bread of Life Belgrade, helping young Roma students get the help she didn’t have.

The Roma education program, offered in the Belgrade municipalities of Surčin and Zemun, approaches the challenge with intervention from all sides.

It includes a kindergarten to help children learn Serbian before entering public school; tutoring sessions to provide individual help; one-on-one meetings with parents; and help with the extensive paperwork to get children registered.

In addition to seven teachers, including the kindergarten teacher, the program has five Roma teaching assistants who are from the community and know firsthand the challenges students face.

Students in first and second grades go to tutoring sessions in a dedicated classroom at the public school. Students in third grade and up go to the Little School for lessons before or after school. MCC support goes toward salaries for teachers and teaching assistants and to cover workshops for young Roma leaders.

Bread of Life Belgrade (BOLB) was founded in 1992 as a Christian humanitarian relief organization supporting refugees from wars in the region. BOLB started the Roma education project in 2005 when local community leaders and public schools asked for help, knowing that education was the way out of poverty.

“Roma leaders themselves were telling us, ‘encourage our children to go to school, find a way to finish the school,’” says Slavica Stanković, general secretary of BOLB. “There was a high percentage of dropouts from school. More than 60 percent of kids in the Roma communities did not finish school.”

Šaban Dramaku and his wife Safeiçe Šabani have seen how the program makes a difference. Their youngest son Edvin started the tutoring in first grade, getting help with questions his parents couldn’t answer. “There are a lot of things that we don’t know how to help him with,” Šabani says of her son.

Edvin stopped attending the program in third grade because the Little School was too far away, but when his marks started to suffer his father made sure to bring him back. And his grades have improved.

Their older son has also started coming to the Little School because he’s been struggling in sixth grade. “If he was able to get some help also like [Edvin] from the beginning I’m sure he would have much better success,” says Dramaku.

In addition to tutoring for both of the children, one of the program’s teachers encouraged Šabani, who had a grade-

Games and songs help Roma students learn the Serbian language. At the Bread of Life kindergarten program in Zemun, teacher Goca Tosić plays a game with students Cela Berisâ-Prezine, left, Anabella Berisâ-Prezine and Djemiba Ramadani.
four education, to attend adult education classes, organized by BOLB and the local school district. “Because of the war in Kosovo and everything, I was not able to finish elementary school,” she says. “Here I have the opportunity to finish… it’s never too late.”

That support for the whole family is common. Amzaj’s sister Eljmaz attended the program’s preschool to learn Serbian and came back for tutoring in seventh grade when she needed extra help. She is now in a secondary school nursing program and continues attending BOLB classes.

Their two younger siblings, Vanessa and Valjon, also go to the Little School, while their mother Besa started the adult classes and participates in an evening women’s group teaching income generation skills.

Besa has noticed a positive shift in community attitudes toward education.

“Ten years ago the atmosphere around education was different,” she says. “Children have really started to see that they can do it as much as the others. The atmosphere changed because of the support.”

To be able to give that support, though, BOLB had to earn the trust of the community.

At the beginning, that meant BOLB staff were simply going into Roma families’ homes, counting how many children they had and urging parents to send their children to school. Today, teachers still visit each student’s home at least once a year.

When the project started, only 17 percent of Roma children enrolled in school in Surčin were actually attending. Today that figure has increased to more than 90 percent. In 2005 there was not one Roma child in the fifth grade there. Now, a decade later, 20 Roma students in the BOLB program are already in secondary school and two are in university.

Staff are dedicated to making sure the changes are long-term. Four years ago BOLB started a program to help young adults in the community learn leadership skills. Today, 10 young Roma leaders are in the program. Five, including Amzaj, are employed as Roma teaching assistants.

The leaders being trained and students being tutored today will keep improving the community for years to come, says Stanković, BOLB general secretary.

“We are completely sure that they as parents are not going to allow their children not to finish elementary school… the change starts with the second generation.”

Emily Loewen is a writer for MCC Canada. Matthew Lester is a photographer in Lancaster, Pa.
A teacher in an MCC-supported education program talks about the journey that led him to work with the Roma community.

AS TOLD TO EMILY LOEWEN

I was in 1995 when I first came to Bread of Life to ask for help after I lost my job. Once the leaders there saw that I was strong and asked me to work, I loaded and unloaded the trucks, helped in the warehouse. Then, because of my computer skills, I was invited to help with organizing data.

In 2004, when Bread of Life approved a project to encourage education among the Roma communities in Belgrade, I had very nice work at the office at a computer in my corner. I was not really impressed by the idea of working with the project.

At that time I had to deal with my own prejudices, the standard prejudices against Roma: they are dirty, they’re the ones who steal and they’re lazy. But none of this is true. Nothing.

They’re really diligent, hardworking people. They’re really intelligent, talented. But most of these things they just did not have a chance to prove.

For the first six months we simply had only one job and that was to go into the community, to knock at people’s homes, to get children to come. After six months of this work, parents started to bring their children to our premises.

In the 1990s when the war started I had a chance to go back to Croatia, but I refused to go. They wouldn’t accept me in Croatia because I spent too much time living in Serbia. My wife and I simply could not identify ourselves with one side or the other—either with the Croatian side or with the Serbian side. People told us that we were traitors. They said, “You are the enemy.”

By then we had found a family among Christians here that actually gave us a sense of identity no matter where we were. That was really the main reason why I decided not to go back to Croatia. We found a church here that we became part of.

But personally I still expect the major change to happen five to 10 years from now, when young people of this generation become parents—when they become active people who make a difference in their community, decision makers. I believe in several years’ time we can freely step back from the community and be at peace that we have done our part.
In a classroom in Kabul

From the outside, Afghanistan can seem forbidding—a place marked with violence and fear, where education is poor and women stay out of sight. But looks can be deceiving.

BY EMILY LOEWEN
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW LESTER

In a classroom in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, women race each other to write out vocabulary words in Dari script, whipping small chalkboards in the air to show they’ve got it right. At a girls’ high school, students trained in peace education use their new mediation skills to solve conflicts and dream of spreading peace across the country.

In another school that brings together male and female students, a first-grade girl breaks into a grin as she talks about how math is her favorite class.

While Afghanistan ranks among the least developed and least peaceful countries in the world, many Afghans are working for change and MCC is supporting their efforts. In the process, women who never had a chance for schooling are learning to read and write. Children from marginalized, impoverished communities, including the Hazara ethnic group, a minority who face discrimination, are finding a path to education they would not have otherwise.

Other MCC partners work at what might seem an impossible task: creating a peaceful culture in a country with a past and present full of violence. But they know peace is essential for education and a stronger future. They are starting with students, hoping to change attitudes one person at a time.

There’s a Dari proverb that says, “Drop by drop, a river becomes a river.” For Mohammad Osman Hemat, executive director of MCC partner Help the Afghan Children, that’s a good metaphor for the work to build peace. “We are doing small things,” he says, “but one day it will be a river.”

Masooma Hashimi, left, and Masooma Hussain practice writing Dari vocabulary at Adult Learning and Education Facilitation (ALEF), an MCC-supported literacy class for women in Kabul, Afghanistan. Hashimi, like many of the women in the classes, attended school as a child, but as she got older her family wouldn’t allow it anymore. That’s a common occurrence in Afghanistan because families either can’t afford supplies or don’t want their daughters in mixed-gender classrooms. Because ALEF is only for women and free of charge, it provides access to an education women couldn’t get otherwise. Hashimi is now in the fourth class, the highest level at ALEF, and has been hired as a teacher for newer students, adding to the income she can provide for her family.

The more informal setting at ALEF, like sitting in a living room with friends, is comfortable for older students who aren’t used to classrooms, says teacher Shaima Asifi. “Most of them are shy, and if it’s in a school way with rows, then it would be really difficult for them to speak. But because it’s a learning circle everyone gets a chance to share their experiences. It gives them the confidence to speak and to participate in the class.”
At Abdullah Bin Omar High School in Paghman District, Afghanistan, students such as Hasiba Hayati are part of a peace education program coordinated by MCC partner Help the Afghan Children (HTAC). Hayati joined the program wanting to learn why conflicts start and how to solve disagreements at home and at school — but also in her community which has experienced bribery and killings. “Peace is not coming to Afghanistan, so we need to change that,” she says.

The HTAC program operates in eight schools in the Paghman District of Afghanistan and will teach conflict resolution skills to 2,400 students over three years. Mohammad Osman Hemat, executive director of HTAC, says that teaching mediation to students will lead to a more peaceful country. “In a fragile country like Afghanistan this is a preventive strategy,” he says. “When they grow up, when they become a president, when they become (government) ministers . . . they will have grown up with a peaceful attitude.”

Aumul Banin is a first-grade student at Le Pélican, an MCC-supported school in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Her father works selling snacks from a trolley and her mother is a homemaker. She comes to the school every day for lessons in Dari, math and drawing.

Banin had attended a public school before Le Pélican, but her parents found the quality of education was poor and sent her to Le Pélican instead. “My parents like this school because there is a good education,” says Banin.

Government-run schools often have up to 45 students per class, and if families can’t afford private school a child’s education suffers, says Le Pélican administrator Saber Samim. Banin, in fact, started Le Pélican in second grade but went back to first grade to improve her math skills.

Le Pélican was started in 2003 in Dashti-Barchi, a neighborhood mostly made up of people from the Hazara ethnic group who often face poverty and discrimination. The school has more interested pupils than it has space and selects students based on need. It has 300 students from first to eighth grade as well as dedicated classes for deaf and mute students. It offers literacy, math and tailoring classes for women in a dedicated women-only space. By offering tailoring alongside other classes, the school increases the chances families will permit women to get an education because they are learning a useful skill at the same time.

All classes are free of charge. Students receive the supplies they need as well as a healthy lunch each day. MCC support goes toward food for lunches and salaries for teachers and administrators.
Students at Le Pélican shoot baskets on the playground before lining up for lunch. The daily recreation time is important because many students come from poorer families and need to work before or after school, leaving little time for play. Le Pélican is unusual in Afghanistan because it has boys and girls in the same class until sixth grade. This helps promote a greater sense of gender equality in a country where segregation is the norm.

At Abdullah Bin Omar High School, Aysha Hamidi, left, and Mihria Bemesh take computer classes supported by HTAC and MCC with computers donated by MCC.

Technical skills are essential. "If you have a PhD and don't know how to use a computer you will not get a job in Afghanistan," says HTAC executive director Mohammad Osman Hemat.

School-based classes are especially valuable for girls who often are forbidden to attend outside classes because they're expensive or taught by men.

Fida Mohammad Hikmat, left, Abdul Fawad Saded and Abdul Wahid Hujat talk about what their daughters have learned in the peace education program at Abdullah Bin Omar High School. Hikmat says his daughter is sharing her new mediation skills with her siblings and parents and that he believes peace education curriculum should be in all Afghan schools. "Children listen to the radio and also to the television, media. They see and they hear lots of violence exists in Afghanistan," he says. "For lasting change we need (peace) in our school curriculum."

At Abdullah Bin Omar High School in Paghman District, teacher Mahnaz Qizalbash works with students during a peace education class, part of a program supported by MCC and partner Help the Afghan Children (HTAC).

"Teaching peace education is a complete joy for me. Every day I learn lots of things from the students," she says. Qizalbash volunteered to teach two peace education classes twice a week on top of teaching grades 11 and 12 math and physics. "Our community needs peace, and through this program we predict that we can support the community," she says.
Connecting people

Name: Emily Bowman

Hometown: Goshen, Ind. (Waterford Mennonite Church)

Assignment: As connecting peoples coordinator in Honduras, I support MCC’s young adult workers here, send out Hondurans to serve elsewhere with MCC and lead learning tours that bring international visitors here. I also work with the Honduran Mennonite church and Mennonite youth on advocacy initiatives.

Typical day: On an office day, I wake up at 7:30, ride my bike to the office and spend the day writing and answering emails, coordinating meetings and checking in with young adult workers, supervisors and host families. I fight computer printers, work with visa processes, translate documents and plan service weekends for youth and logistics for learning tours. Sometimes after work, I go to the gym or to church, but I usually just go home to my wonderful host family. (Other work days, I spend visiting MCC projects.)

Learning: We learn best through telling stories—our own, those of people we meet. We learn by sitting down together, by realizing that all our actions and decisions have a human impact. (Read more online at mcc.org/acommonplace.)

Joys: Moments when you can form real friendships with other people and be yourself, when you have breakthroughs or when you are stuck on a question and realize the complexity of an issue. Watching the progression of workers through a year of discovery. Taking people just far enough out of their comfort zone that they don’t feel paralyzed, but can free their curiosity and question their reality.

Challenge: I previously worked as a wilderness guide in British Columbia and now it’s rare that I get to be in green places with clean air. I miss that.

Find your place

MCC has workers in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as in Canada and the U.S.

Go to serve.mcc.org, contact your nearest MCC office or follow @servemcc on Twitter to learn about current service opportunities.

MCC workers are expected to exhibit a commitment to Christian faith, active church membership and biblical peacemaking.

Word search

Romani is the language of Roma people, an ethnic group originally from northern India but found throughout Europe today. Students like Edvin who grow up speaking Romani then have to learn Serbian for school.

Find Romani words

PENKALO (pen)
KALJEMI (pencil)
LJILJ (paper)
SKOLA (school)
RAZRED (class)
SKLJOLA (study)
CELAJA (play)

My name is Edvin Dramaku.

Age: 10

Lives in: Sutčin, Belgrade, Serbia

I live with my father, mother and older brother; my grandfather and grandmother live downstairs. I have a parrot and a dog.

I am in grade four. I go to school in the morning; then I come home and have lunch. I study about one hour at home, and then I go do homework at the “Little School” for extra lessons. (MCC helps support the Little School, which serves students like Edvin who are from the Roma community.)

My favorite thing at school is playing, to exercise. I also like mathematics. What is interesting for me is how to multiply, how to divide. I like when there is a complicated problem for me to solve.

In the evening I spend time with my brother playing football (soccer). Red Star is my favorite team, and I have friends whose favorite team is Partizan. (Both teams are from Belgrade, Serbia.) We divide into our favorite teams and play against each other. On the weekends I study, and then I go with my grandfather to visit my aunt.

My favorite subject: mathematics

My favorite food: spaghetti with ketchup

What I want to be: a teacher

SERBIA

How do you say hello in Romani?

sar hiJan

(Say SAR-he-shan)
As store aisles fill with rulers, pencils and back-to-school sales, take a moment to shop for students across the globe.

When you pack an MCC school kit, you give students the tools they need to learn. Notebooks and pencils are treasured. Colored pencils and rulers bring some normalcy for refugee and displaced children.

Share your heart for the world through a simple gift of school supplies.

How to make MCC school kits: See page 3, or go to mcc.org/kits/school.