

From Bosnia to America

By Alisa Houseknecht and Dan Melear

Dan Melear interviewed Alisa Houseknecht about her childhood experiences and adjusting to life in a new country.

Q: Where were you born, Alisa?

A: I was born in 1989 in Sarajevo, Bosnia just before the war started in 1990. I lived in Bosnia for about 6 years. During that time the conditions worsened and people were fleeing, so my family went to Germany. We lived in Germany for 4 years as refugees. That is where I started school and so I learned German. Then when things settled down in Bosnia and the war was over, Germany said ‘we can’t keep all these people, so either go back to your country or go somewhere else.’ That is when we came to the U.S. We landed in Miami but we settled in New Port Richey, near Clearwater, Florida, when I was 10 years old and in the middle of 4th grade. I was fluent in German, able to read and write in it, speaking Bosnian at home, but I did not speak a word of English.

Q: Did you know anyone at school who spoke Bosnian or German?

A: No, not in the U.S. But there was an organization called World Relief and they basically took us on and found housing for us, helping us get Social Security and ID cards. They helped us get established with medical services and things like that. They were our liaisons’ getting our foot in here. When I started school here in Florida, even though I did not speak English, I was in a class of English speakers. We got a lot of services at home and I received services at school. We had people come to our home to help us but of course they did not speak Bosnian or German and we could not speak English. Initially, they helped us access food and shelter. As we settled in more, once or twice a week people came to our home to help us learn English. I don’t know what they were called but they functioned as tutors. They would come in and they would have a book and we learned different words. I remember we all sat at the table as a family. We looked at pictures of objects in the book and learned and practiced the English words that matched the pictures. Also, I grew up watching PBS programs. Those educational shows on public television, like Sesame Street, are really how I learned English pretty quickly.

We arrived at our new school in February which is right before state testing. I have such a vivid memory of coming into class a couple of weeks after starting and the FCAT was being administered that day. They actually wanted me to take it. I remember feeling so anxious about it. I thought, “Oh my gosh, what is going to happen if I fail it? I am obviously going to fail it. I don’t know anything.” At this time, there was probably a hand full of Bosnian students at this elementary school because of that relief



Alisa at age 7 with her sister Emina

organization. Also, I remember there was a woman who actually did speak Bosnian and she worked at the school as an interpreter. She said, “Just write your name so they can have a record of you as a student having taken this test.” So that is all I did. All I put on that whole FCAT test was my name and that was it. That is one of my first memories of being at school in the U.S.

I would be in class with all the students without being able to speak English, not understanding a word, but just kind of being there, really, and I would be taken out for an hour a day to meet with a reading tutor. I learned English pretty quickly. In probably less than a year from the time I began those daily meetings, I did not need to continue with the tutor. Then I felt pretty much acclimated to school. Before that point I had learned German and Bosnian, so I think that part of my brain was pretty active.

But I remember being so lost, feeling so out of place and not knowing what was going to happen. Everything was so different. And I remember being grateful for the people who continued to visit us. The helping professionals, in whatever capacity they were, showing us that we mattered, that we weren’t alone. I was thankful that they were there for us and that they would invest this time, whether it was taking us to the grocery store or taking us to doctor appointments or coming and tutoring us. Later on when I was in high school through reflecting back on how others provided that much needed support for us, I started recognizing the importance of the helping professions and the impact that they can have on people. I remember thinking that this work is really important and it stuck with me. I thought it is pretty amazing that I am able to take honors classes and do well in school and start thinking about college, considering where I came from and the things that I have been through.

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Q: So that lead you to the counseling profession?

A: Yes, I always had a strong interest in human behavior. Coupling that interest with some of my experiences helped me when I applied to go to college to already knew that I wanted to major in psychology. That was the only thing that fit. Then when I was in college, some of my interests developed a bit more. I learned about different professions and knew that I wanted to go into a counseling program. Also, I had a friend who was a year older than I and she started the counseling program ahead of me. I asked her about her experience in it and she told me that she really liked it. The feedback from my friend helped reinforce what I already knew I wanted to do, that I wanted to become a professional counselor.

Q: What do you hope people in the helping professions, who have only spoken English and who have grown up in the U.S., might learn from your experiences that would help them value the helping professions?

A: Yes, that is the million-dollar question! I think I can answer that question based on my view of counseling and my philosophy of what we do as counselors. My experience of being a non-English speaking student developing resolve and resilience through facing challenges while committed and supportive people validated my strengths and the things I did well. I will never forget how there were people who believed that I had the potential to learn to read, who believed that I was worth them investing the time and energy. They affirmed that I am worth spending time with and worth trying to teach. No matter how behind I was compared to the average fourth grade student, I never felt that I was less than or that I was incapable or that I was inferior in anyway. My success was measured based on me and not based on what the average was or what the ideal was or what everyone else was doing. In that way, I was able to reach my potential. When I think about counseling, I think about it in the same way. When I meet with a client, I can give a client a map that might help her or him travel in the direction of their desired destination. I am not actually driving them there, but I am helping them get there by providing a map and some sense of direction but they are picking the destination and they are dealing with all of the roadblocks. I want counselors to see the importance of accepting clients for who they are, expressing unconditional positive regard and allowing clients to reach their potential through the therapeutic relationship. Valuing their experiences as being their own, regardless of whether others might judge it as 'good' or 'bad'. Even though each client's backgrounds and experiences are different from everyone else's, it is important to see their potential.

Q: Was there anything in addition to validation at school that helped you see barriers as challenges instead of insurmountable obstacles?

A: Yes, definitely the support at home. No matter what kind of day I had at school, regardless of what went well or what did not go well, I always came home to a supportive environment. My mom made



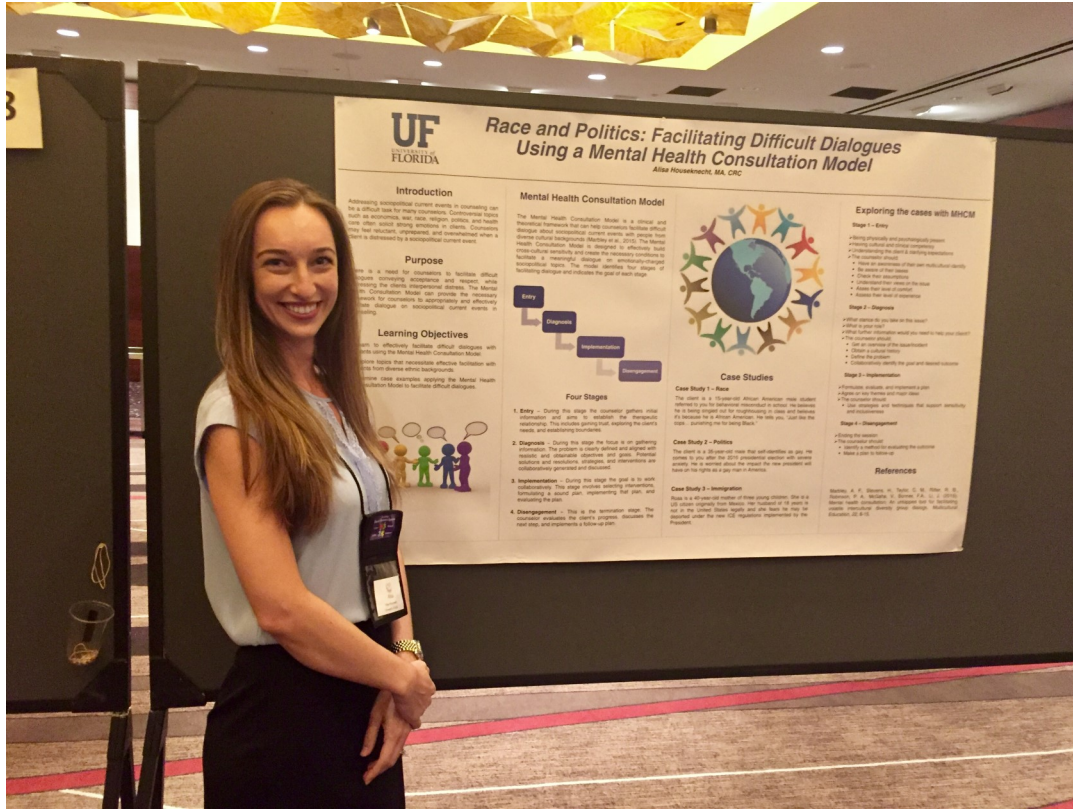
sure to instill in us that we are smart and we are capable. No matter what we did not understand or how badly we did on a test, that is not a reflection of us as human beings. Receiving that validation at home day after day and being willing to pick myself back up the next day and try even harder and continue to work and not give up and not feel defeated, I continued to push myself forward. In that way my persistence only grew and I felt more confident that I could continue and succeed.

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Alisa and her mother

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Alisa presenting at ACES 2017

Q: Can you tell me more about how you interpreted difficulties as challenges that could be overcome?

A: Looking back, I believed that I was worthy. I was not a failure because I had failed at something and that I was able to separate my experience from myself as a person. I would like other counselors as well as clients to see that a set-back is just a set-back. People around me know my love for REBT and Ellis said it the best. He used the term 'unconditional self-acceptance,' saying that people are fallible human beings but should not overgeneralize into the idea that people are bad. Somebody doing something bad does not make her or him a bad person. That idea resonates with me. Failing at something or not achieving something or not accomplishing something is not a reflection of you as a person. It is important to separate the experience from the person and not internalize it.

I want to say more about what I want counselors to know when working with a refugee who does not speak English. I want to speak to counselors who may have to use a translation service and how the language barrier may impact the counselor and what that does to the mentality of the counselor. Using a translator may feel like a hurdle or a burden. The counselor may think, "Oh gosh! What is this going to look like and how can this approach be effective?" It is an inconvenience, right? But I want counselors to realize that this work is worth doing. I hope counselors can see

people as more than their circumstances. To see people as more than their presenting issues, so that the counselor will genuinely connect with that person for who they are, despite all of these things like their experiences, their background, their religion, their race. That work is not easy but it is worth doing. The outcomes may not be what you generally expect to measure and you might not even be aware of what those outcomes are. The counselors who helped us have no way of knowing just how much they did for us. The tutor who came to the house to help us learn English has no idea of the impact she had. I will probably never get to tell her that. I don't even know her name, but we need to know that our impact as counselors may be bigger than we ever realize.

Thank you for giving me a chance to tell about the people who helped instill hope in me. They helped me realize my resilience and my ability to persevere.

All photos courtesy of Alisa Houseknecht

Alisa Houseknecht is a doctoral student at UF and Beta Chapter's Doctoral Student Representative.

Dan Melear is a doctoral student at UF and Beta Chapter's Communication Committee co-chair.