

The New American Dream
by Joe McCrossen

I sat with Emma Halilovic and her four boys at the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) office on a rainy day in San Francisco in December 2001. As we waited for their green cards, I thought about how a war had propelled her thousands of miles from Velika Kladusa, a farming village in northern Bosnia-Herzegovina, to Northern California.

My wife and I first met Esma in 1999 in her cramped two-bedroom apartment in Oakland, CA. We were to be her English tutors. Her formal education had ended at the eighth grade. Her facial features suggested someone much older than her 31 years. It was the face of someone who had suffered a personal loss—a husband killed in the Balkan War while she was pregnant with her youngest son. As a result, she was forced to flee to the U.S. as a refugee in 1998. We could sense that her grief had physically changed her, but that her resolve to learn English, raise her boys, and become an American citizen was steadfast.

Through Esma, I witnessed the effects of the Balkan War in a deeply personal way. Her story is probably not unlike that of other refugees—personal tragedy leading to forced displacement. To me, Esma's story is one that deserves to be told because it is the embodiment of the re-imagined American Dream. Immigrants once came to America desiring material wealth; now, much like Esma, they come to America seeking a degree of peace and normalcy not possible in a homeland infused with hostility.

Sitting in that INS office, Esma was that much closer to becoming an American citizen. A perfunctory task for the INS clerk was a triumphant moment for Esma. When the clerk called the Halilovic family to receive their green cards, Esma said little, but her discreet smile spoke volumes.