



Lincoln resident Elma Vlasak, left, sits with Samka Deumic and her daughter Alma, while Samka's husband stands nearby. The Deumic family including their son (not pictured) fled to the United States six months ago from war torn Bosnia.

New life is bittersweet

Refugee family finds fresh start in America

By **Jeffrey Robb**
Senior Editor

It would have been different had the family not been forced out.

That is the reaction of 36-year-old Samka Deumic to her family's move to the United States from its home in war-torn Bosnia.

After six months, family members — Samka, her husband Emsud, son Salko and daughter Alma — say they like the United States.

Things are good here, 35-year-old Emsud says using his son to interpret, but not everything. The family has had to sacrifice independence and accept help in its effort to start over, he says. The love and care of family members is now far away as well. They scattered throughout Europe to escape the war in Bosnia.

Freedom is the best part, Emsud says, though that wasn't the case about seven months ago. Emsud was a prisoner in a concentration camp in Central Bosnia.

The family was mired in a horrible situation with an even worse one firing up around them. Nobody had food, clothing or medical care, Emsud says. The basic needs of life were stripped by the war.

Political factions and army officials fueled the war. Emsud says the people of the former Yugoslavia got along fine; it was the leaders who were causing the

problem.

Then, the family of four was sent to Croatia. There, the U.N. officials were making arrangements for people to leave the country as refugees.

About that time in Lincoln, the First-Plymouth Congregational Church decided to sponsor a Bosnian family's relocation. Church World Ministries accepted the church's offer, but the Deumic family was never specially selected to go anywhere in particular.

"They had no idea where they would come to," says Elma Vlasak, a member of the church and now close family friend.

Vlasak said the family was given the decision and told to go to Nebraska. The process was impersonal, Vlasak says. There was just as good a chance that they could have gone anywhere else.

"It turned out to be a very good match," Vlasak said.

Life nearly is back to normal, Emsud says. At least the family can walk the streets safely, he says.

It was a good match for a tough situation. The family has its life and freedom. They recently moved into their own apartment. And Emsud has a job sewing tents with Awning Classics of Lincoln.

But rebuilding still is tough. For one, everyday deeds, which the family previously handled on its own, now are unfamiliar and require outside help.

Finding health care has changed. The family qualifies for Medicaid because of its refugee status, and doctors

from the church have provided some services.

Even with such things as cleaning supplies, problems arise. Upon moving into their new home, Samka noticed areas that needed cleaning. She knew what she needed to do, but didn't know the products that would do it.

So Samka made a list of what she needed to clean, Vlasak says. Samka and Vlasak then went to the store, searched the aisles and grabbed whatever was needed. Communicating and getting around in their new country has been difficult, but both are becoming easier. Emsud's English is developing, Samka is being tutored in it, and the children both are fairly fluent.

Emsud says he can write and understand the language well, but reading and speaking English still requires some consulting from a dictionary. That dictionary goes to work with him every day, Emsud says.

Church members are helping Emsud with his driving, and he says he's almost ready for the road. The family also is trying to save for its own car.

"I like the people from the church, the people from Lincoln — from the United States," Emsud says in broken English.

Accepting all this help from others has been hard on the family, Emsud says, and he doesn't always feel good about accepting it.

Fifteen-year-old Salko says it's nice

when people want to help, but before it was their family who was doing the helping.

Other members of the family aren't there for the Deumics anymore. Their entire family used to live within blocks of each other in a city roughly the size of Lincoln, Emsud says, but no longer.

Emsud's mother and twin sister are now in Sweden, some of Samka's family is in France, and others are in Germany. That separation weighs on Emsud, and his head sinks in sorrow with thoughts of his sister who is so far away.

Salko says he misses the friends he used to see everyday and he feels alone at times. Salko says he stays in the house more now. It's hard to be so bored.

A new extended family is beginning to come together, though. Members of the church have gone from being sponsors to friends, and Vlasak says she considers the Deumics family now.

Though the family may adjust, they acknowledge things will never be the same.

"We'll never forget what we had, a nice life and friends, we'll never forget them," Emsud says in English.

And someday, Emsud says he hopes that life will return. "We'll go back for sure. ... We are in America now, but our heart is there," Emsud continues with his still limited vocabulary. "I like how I am, but leave in three, four years?"

He shrugs his shoulders as if to say, "who knows?"

Photo by Travis Heying