

Firefly Youth Project

Scottish Charity Number 028744



Education and reconciliation initiative

Annual Report
April 1998 - April 1999

Firefly Annual Report, April 1998 – April 1999

Brief summary of stage 1 (a) of Firefly – August 1997 – March 1998

Firefly was founded by Ellie Maxwell, who has worked with grass-roots youth and community projects in Bosnia since 1995. She has used the frameworks of these successful initiatives to found Firefly in Brcko, a large town in Republika Srpska (the Serb area of Bosnia), while adjusting its aims to meet the different needs of this area. In particular, Firefly was modelled on Mladi Most (Young Bridge), a reconciliation and youth project in Mostar for whom Ellie worked in 1995. The idea for the project came about in the summer of 1997, when the OSCE in Brcko and Sarajevo began looking for an organisation willing to work with young people in the extremely tense and hard-line nationalist atmosphere of Brcko. Mark Shepherd, the Senior Human Rights Officer for the OSCE in Brcko, suggested to Ellie that she set up an organisation in Brcko since she was at that time considering returning to the UK and was looking for work that would allow her to remain in contact with Bosnia. Ellie visited the town and was introduced to various governmental organisations, all of whom reiterated the need for work amongst the young in the area. The setting-up process was aided by Mark Shepherd, now a trustee, and who, with Ellie, carried out much of the research needed to establish the need in Brcko and what could be done to address these needs. The OSCE initially agreed to fund the project. Unfortunately cuts in their budget meant that this could not happen, but this decision was not made until February 1996 when most of the setting up of the project had already been carried out. Ellie consequently decided to go ahead with the idea and supported the project financially in these early stages, with an interest-free loan of £11942.89, to be repaid in 18 monthly instalments starting from September 1999. She has agreed to accept all responsibility for raising this money. She also donated £4000 pounds to the project. Both of these sums were transferred to the project as and when they were needed up to the present day.

In September 1997, Ellie travelled to Berlin to meet Wolf Jung, the director of ASF (a German organisation which co-ordinates many reconciliation projects world-wide, including Mladi Most in Mostar). He agreed to provide Firefly with volunteers and contracts once it was established, as well as assisting in any problems which might arise. In the UK, Ellie advertised for volunteers and received hundreds of requests for information, from these three volunteers were picked, Rosie Rahamin and Franceska Daveport who both had experience of working in Bosnia, and Doug Stokes who is a qualified computer trainer. Friends of Bosnia, an organisation in the US which had supported Mladi Most's photography project while Ms. Maxwell was working there, suggested that Firefly and themselves co-operate with a photography project in Brcko, which they agreed to help finance.

In February 1998, Ellie Maxwell went over to Bosnia with Ms. Rahamin, where she introduced Rosie to everyone who we considered relevant in Brcko (mainly at the OSCE and OHR), Sarajevo (at Nepitani, a nationwide multi-ethnic youth magazine for whom Ellie had previously co-ordinated all Mostar entries) and Mostar (Mladi Most volunteers). Rosie was joined by Doug and Franca in March. They used this initial period to find accommodation and make contacts in the community, as well as working to assist other organisations in the small amounts of youth work that was already being done (a youth hour on Wednesdays and two hours on Saturday mornings, working with about 40 children and young people). Franca spent some time in Mostar meeting young people there prior to setting up links between them and young people in Brcko through Nepitani. By March they had found suitable accommodation and were familiarised with the area, language and culture. The project was ready to begin!

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April

- Rosie co-ordinated the registration process of the organisation in the Republika Srpska. It proved an extremely long and complicated process, but without it Firefly could not begin work officially.
- Doug, IT co-ordinator, taught computer skills to over twenty young people through the OSCE. He also set up an interactive web page with the members of the IT groups.
- In the U.K, communications began between Sarah Butterworth of 'Crossing Borders', a CEWC (Council for Education in Worldwide Citizenship) project and Ellie, setting up a project that establish a link between children from Bosnia, Romania and England through internet-linked art projects. Sarah and Ellie worked together on an art project for children from the orphanage in Mostar, in 1995, and were both keen to continue the collaboration.
- Firefly assisted with the OSCE's (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) youth hour every week. Regular classes took place each week within this hour in English Language, an Introduction to the Internet and journalism activities.
- Franca (media co-ordinator) re-contacted 'Nepitani' (a regional youth magazine) and formed a group of young journalists who became involved and contributed to this magazine.
- A Youth Party was held at the OSCE. Young people attended from Brcko Town, Federation and Orasje (a small Croatian/Muslim town 20km from Brcko); this was one of the first attempts to bring young people from the different entities together since the war.
- In the UK, Antony Chambers, a director of Flemings Bank in London, donated £1000 to Firefly. Volunteers began looking for a vehicle which would greatly increase the range of areas in which they could work.
- Maurice Rahamin donated a computer which would be brought over to Brcko by Mark Shepherd (on leave from the OSCE) in May .

May

- Firefly was officially registered in the Republika Srpska area of Bosnia, allowing volunteers to begin to work independently of other organisations.
- The money donated by Mr. Chambers was used to buy a fax/photocopier and a vehicle (a Subaru estate) in Brcko, as well as a modem and a printer. Firefly was now contactable through e-mail and fax, this made a huge difference to the project in terms of the communication between the UK and Brcko as well as between Brcko and other youth organisations in Bosnia.
- Kevin arrived on the 5th, he brought with him the modem and a lot of photographic and darkroom equipment which he generously agreed to leave at the project in return for his travel allowance. He began a photography project through which young people from the different entities began to meet and spend time together over their shared interests. In the last week of May Kevin went to Montenegro with the local secondary school, to train them in photographic skills and to document the trip; this was a valuable way of making contacts in the community as well as being able to help the school.
- Ellie Maxwell visited the project for a fortnight to take part in activities and to keep up to date with what was happening in Brcko.
- Franca and two members of the media group attended a meeting of young people from all parts of Bosnia during which the next issue of Nepitani was discussed and planned. This was the first time young people from the town had become involved in activities with young people from outside Republika Srpska, and the media group continued to write for the magazine and to communicate with other young people from elsewhere in Bosnia.
- A youth group was set up in the Zone Of Separation (the ZOS, or the returns area surrounding Brcko town where accommodation was being built for refugees originally from the town). Lack of any facilities, including schools, meant that young people had nothing to do and were missing out on valuable years of education. Firefly volunteers

began teaching English, computer literacy, and photography in the area. An emphasis was also placed on teaching young people mines awareness, and on giving them alternatives to playing in fields and on the river side – the area is heavily mined.

- In Brcko volunteers were teaching English language, journalism, computers and Internet design. On the weekends an activity session took place for young children in the ZOS, where football and games and arts activities were arranged in safe UN cleared areas. Again, this gave younger children a chance to take part in group activity without exposing them to the dangers of mines.
- In the UK, a student society was set up to support Firefly. They proved extremely inventive, raising funds through pub collections, club nights, sponsored events and numerous other ways. It is at partly due to their efforts that Firefly has begun to be self-supporting this academic year (September 1998 onwards).

June

- A former colleague of Ellie's at the ECMM in Sarajevo arranged the donation of a mini-bus by ECMM to the project. This meant that different volunteers could work in separate areas at the same time. More importantly, it meant that Firefly could transport young people to activities in the town so that they did not have to walk long distances along roads which are often unsafe, used mainly by SFOR to move armoured vehicles and artillery from their camp in the ZOS to the town. A few weeks earlier, a man was killed after he jumped out of the way of a truck onto the verge and stepped on a mine. With the mini-bus, we were able to run mixed activities without endangering young people. Most of them were more appreciative of the fact that they didn't have to walk 3 or 4 kilometres! Unfortunately the new mini-bus could not be brought from Croatia into Bosnia until July, as the registration procedures for bringing new vehicles into the area are extremely complicated, and could not be carried out until Ellie was in Bosnia and able to devote a couple of weeks to the process.
- Tom Rice, a student from Edinburgh University who runs a student radio project there, contacted Ellie Maxwell about coming to work in Brcko over the summer, teaching skills and making a series of programmes about the project and life in Brcko and Mostar, to be run in Edinburgh in October. It was agreed that he would arrive in early July.
- Firefly gained permission to use a building (built by World Vision for the new Bosniac school which would start in the autumn) in the ZOS for activities. This was extremely welcome as with temperatures rising to incredibly high temperatures it was no longer viable to run activities in the port-a-cabins which they had subsequently used. It also meant that more people could attend activities; again, this was wonderful as the small rooms previously used were becoming ever more packed.
- 35 Serbs were made redundant from the local municipality as authorities attempted to create multi-ethnic institutions in the town. Tensions over this process were high, and the OHR asked Doug to teach computing and Rosie to teach English to these Serbs, as an appeasement measure, mainly to increase their employability. This also helped to raise our profile locally, as Serbs who often feel ostracised by the international community began to feel that Firefly was truly impartial and willing to work with anyone, whatever their ethnic background. In return, the OHR donated a new computer to the project from AT&T in America. This meant that classes could be doubled; in addition the new computer had sufficient memory space to be able to install radio editing programmes and other programmes donated by Microsoft.
- The municipality created problems with the opening of a darkroom for young people. As we would discover, bureaucracy is often endless in Brcko!
- Shin Yasui, who ran a similar youth project in Foca, & who had also been instrumental in the setting up and planning of Firefly, offering inspiration at points when it had seemed the project could not become a reality, was killed in a car crash on a visit to Germany. This was a low point for the project, with everyone who knew or had worked with Shin left stunned by the tragedy. Christian, who ran Nepitani in Sarajevo, was also in the

accident and was in a coma for some weeks; consequently the magazine project came to a stop until new Nepitani co-ordinators arrived in Sarajevo to continue the magazine in August. For the duration of July, the media programme consisted of the Radio project run by Tom Rice.

July

- Tom Rice arrived and devised various programs with the young people of the town which were broadcast in Edinburgh over October. His project was a great success, in part due to the fact that many students in Brcko were extremely interested in meeting someone their own age from abroad. The project was a big step towards creating permanent links between young people in Brcko and outside the area. It also established a Youth Radio group in Brcko which has since set up an independent two hour weekly slot as part of the Media project.
- Rosie, Doug and Franca left the project; Ellie Maxwell and Sarah Johnson joined Tom, running the project for July. Ellie taught computer skills and English, with Tom running the media project and Sarah starting a very popular dance and drama programme and teaching English. Problems abounded, with a storm destroying roads and houses in the ZOS, cutting off electricity to the centre there and preventing students from attending activities.
- In the town, a young Bosniac from the ZOS was attacked and killed outside the nightclub. Samir, Firefly's local volunteer and a Bosniac, felt he could not work in the town for the present but continued to work in the ZOS. The atmosphere was such that attempts to reintegrate young people from each side were stopped for their own safety. However, a few volunteers from the town continued to attend activities in the ZOS, showing a real desire to maintain contact with young people from all areas and ethnic backgrounds.
- In late July, Louise, Chip and Claire arrived to take over and continue the project. Claire would begin a drama project, with Chip teaching photography and Louise running the media programme and teaching computer literacy and French. All three volunteers taught English at numerous places in the area.

August

- OHR North donated a HP laser printer with two cartridges. This was of great benefit to the magazine project, as the magazine could be printed out at much higher quality.
- The Bedlam Collective, Joe and Jon, arrived and set up a music project in Brcko. They stayed for three weeks. Proposals were written to the British Embassy for funding and Marin, a local young musician, was given the position of music project co-ordinator. Percussion workshops, with around thirty children, drums, guitar and bass lessons took place in the ZOS and the three bands were set up in Brcko town.
- Firefly and Proni Institute of Social Education, decided to organise a theatre group with young people to work towards a performance of 'The Little Prince' in December.
- Chip began to plan a photography exhibition showing work from both entities of the area, in a local gallery. The municipality was approached for permission but were very slow to respond.

September

The following regular classes were running:

- Computers - two hours in the ZOS, and two in the town; twenty children and 15 adults participated. The main computer broke down, meaning that this was all the computer classes that could be achieved.
- English Language - two hours in the ZOS with twenty children involved. Two hours at the OSCE, with mainly adult classes numbering 30 students, and three hours at the media centre in town, with 30 students.

- Photography - two sessions in Brcko town, with fifteen young people involved. One session in the ZOS, with ten people involved. The groups worked towards the exhibition in Brcko Town Gallery that took place in December.
- Journalism - The media group met two times a week to discuss each issue of the magazine; the group consisted of twenty young people. As a result of the main computer breaking down, the magazine had to be designed and printed in Word rather than Pagemaker, with a subsequent reduction in the choice of layout available. It also meant that the radio project could not be continued, as the editing programme stored on the computer could not be accessed. Ellie began to try and find a replacement mainboard; standard types in the UK were not suitable as it was one of a limited number produced by AT&T in America. Ellie contacted AT&T to try and get another mainboard, but they do not sell outside the US and it took two months before we were able to convince them to donate one to us!
- Drama - The group involved thirty-five 13-14 year olds, meeting for four hours a week. Proceedings were hindered by the municipality's refusal to write a letter giving permission for the performance to go ahead. Without such a letter, local schools were reluctant to become involved in the project; there is still a lot of suspicion of the international community felt by the schools and other authorities in the area. Many of the leading institutions are run by very hard-line Serbs, who made numerous attempts to block any attempts to run any major multi-ethnic event. The local Municipality, with the help of a support letter from the OSCE, eventually granted permission for the theatre performance to go ahead.
- Music - Three bands were established in Brcko town and rehearsed regularly. Musicians from the music project in Brcko were driven with the equipment to the ZOS to run workshops which were very popular with young musicians in this area. There was a hint of problems to come in terms of the levels of hostility between the two groups; this was particularly true of this project since it is predominantly late teenage boys who take part, some of whom were involved in fighting during the war. All however expressed a desire for the project to continue to allow them to work together.
- Ellie returned to the UK to continue with administration and fundraising there.

October

- Chip received a permission letter from the municipality for the exhibition but the photographers and the pictures had to be from the Republika Srpska only. We agreed at this point to comply with these terms and that next time, after the success of the first one, we would push for a multi-ethnic exhibition.
- All other classes were running well apart from the Music project in the ZOS. Marin, local music project co-ordinator, no longer wanted to go to the ZOS as there was too much tension between the musicians from the town and the participants in the ZOS. It was agreed that Marin would concentrate on the bands in Brcko town and one of the Firefly members would supervise and fundraise for the group in the ZOS. Firefly had facilitated the donation of some musical equipment for the project which at this point was to remain in Brcko alone, as there was no way of allowing both groups to use the equipment without co-operation between them, and all felt that the musicians in the town had started the music project and were consequently likely to feel extremely aggrieved if the equipment was taken from them. However Firefly made clear that we were not happy with this situation. Funding proposals were written to gain equipment for the groups in the other areas.
- The Crossing Borders Project was due to arrive in Brcko for a week of activities leading up to the start of the Internet Art project. Due to the tense political situation at the time they could not come. Contact continues between Ellie and Sarah, and connections between the children from here and England are being made, with plans for the participants to take part in a art and activity camp over the summer. Sarah Butterworth, of

the project, met up with Chip and Claire to hand over a computer to be used for the internet links between the children in Britain and Brcko.

- The magazine group were well established, producing a fifteen-page magazine and contributing to Nepitani. The group involved sixteen writers from Brcko town and eight from the ZOS. They came together for meetings in the media centre (close to the edge of town on the way to the ZOS) and it worked well, with no tension between the groups.
- Louise wrote an article for UK Youth (the official magazine for Youth Clubs UK) about Firefly, which was published in December, inviting young people from youth clubs across the UK to become involved in communication with young people in Brcko.
- All other projects were running well.

November

- Rehearsals for 'The Little Prince' were continuing, now occurring three times a week. Two casts were formed to involve all the children. With some logistical assistance from the OSCE, a performance of the same play began to be prepared with a school in Orasje. The school held their own rehearsals and Firefly attended once a week. The school children attended a series of art workshops to make scenery for the play. The British Ambassador, Graham Hands, visited the project and allocated DM2500 to be donated via the OHR to fund the theatre project.
- The gallery in Brcko was given a bit of a face lift, with new lights and frames, in preparation for the exhibition. The local gallery assistant, Nenad, was extremely helpful and was pleased to see the gallery being used. Photographic equipment was donated by 'Friends Of Bosnia'. They donated an enlarger, large amounts of developing chemicals and a lot of darkroom equipment. This aided the project enormously.
- Ellie began looking for the new group of volunteers, with a huge response as in the past. By placing ads on the internet she was able to target other countries, and one of these applicants, Sylvia Adlesic from Sweden, was successful; we hope to continue to be able to include volunteers from many different cultures at Firefly in Brcko. Dan Barlowe, from Edinburgh, and Joanie Magill, from Northern Ireland, were also successful.

December

- The magazine improved constantly under the supervision of Louise Orton who received many positive responses about the improved contents and layout of the magazine. The magazine was at this point still printed on the computer and funds were being sought to print the magazine professionally.
- The productions of 'The Little Prince' were held in both Brcko and Orasje. The performances were extremely well attended (over 400 people attended each performance) and they were considered a major success for all involved. Everyone expressed an interest for more performances to take place and saw these productions as positive signs of the development of the cultural life in the area.
- The exhibition was also a great success for all involved and every body was pleased to see the gallery being utilised in such a positive way. Both the theatre and photography events were covered by the local press and radio with good reports, with local TV saying that Firefly was 'bringing back cultural life to Brcko'.
- The year finished on a very high note as the volunteers returned home for Christmas.

January

- Dan Barlowe arrived to set up the IT classes and managed to run many hours of computer training. There is virtually unlimited demand for these lessons; in order to try and meet this demand, OHR have agreed to donate 14 second hand computers to the project, to be

distributed around the community in areas where Firefly run classes. Dan would also take over the photography project on Chip's departure.

- Silvia Adlesic arrived to continue the magazine, and Louise returned to England after producing a successful issue of the magazine in co-operation with Sylvia.
- The British Embassy donated 2,000DM to the Music project which was divided equally between the different groups. It was decided that part of the money would be spent in the UK where cheaper instruments and equipment are available.
- With more volunteers, more English lessons were set up and there were over one hundred people participating in this course. The computer courses were also popular, totalling sixty young participants in addition to the adult classes; Firefly is currently only able to meet approximately 20% of the demand in the area. To try and increase our ability to meet this demand, Dan is training a local volunteer to run the project concurrently with him; the volunteer will take over on Dan's departure and will in his turn train others over time.

February

- Joanie Magill arrived from England to take over the theatre project. With the group from 'The Little Prince', a group was re-established and is now working towards a play for the Summer Arts Festival, which will take place in July of this year.
- The project suffered some financial problems at this point. With five international volunteers in Brcko, costs of wages and food became extremely high. The projects continued well but there was some concern as to whether the project could support the high level of activity, especially as the problems in Serbia and Kosovo were beginning to have an extremely adverse affect on the funding of the project – many organisations were unwilling to support work in Serb areas, and much of the funding Ellie had found through business sponsorship in Edinburgh was lost, with public support also dropping. In particular, it seemed that plans for the festival over the summer might have to be put off until the following year, which was a major disappointment for all involved.

March

- Classes in the ZOS community centre proved impossible to maintain because of the disorganisation of the local leader who held the key for the centre. Classes couldn't take place and eventually, after continual disappointment, stopped. The situation began to improve when the IRC (International Rescue Committee) invited us to use their information centres on a regular basis in order both to solve our problem and to establish the buildings as community centres, which would be of benefit to them as the buildings needed to be used to justify continuing their upkeep and renovation.
- St. Mary's School, in Ascot, donated £2000 to the project. This was extremely good timing as the local post office (which runs the telephone service) revealed that errors in their system meant that they had not billed us fully for December or January, or at all for October and February, and we were faced with an unexpected £400 bill!
- More constructively, the money allowed us to employ Gordana Karkovic as the local co-ordinator. She proves to be invaluable to the project and is giving her full time and energy.
- The March issue of the magazine was printed professionally and looked extremely good; there was some disappointment from the group concerning a number of mistakes in it. It has been decided that the next issue will be checked at each stage of the printing process by members of the media group – this would also have the added benefit of teaching them something about all stages of the printing process itself. The printers were happy to agree with this. The media group consisted of an equal mix of Serbs and Bosniacs who were all working successfully together.
- Silvia decided to leave the project, feeling threatened as the conflict in the Balkans escalated (Sylvia's parents are Croatians from the Krajina, formerly the Serb territory in

Croatia). Everyone was very sad to see her go. The media project is temporarily being run by one of the members of the media group, with a new volunteer to arrive in May.

- The photography group and the music group attended an Arts Festival in Travnik, Central Bosnia, with Firefly photography exhibited and with members of the music project performing. The festival went well and the Travnik musicians and artists will attend the Firefly Festival in the summer.
- The Arbitration Decision was finalised at the beginning of this month. The decision made was that Brcko will not be governed by the Serb authorities which control the rest of the Republika Srpska, but will be administered by the UN for three years as an ethnically neutral district. The OHR will put pressure on local authorities to allow Brcko to become truly multi-ethnic; Firefly's work is invaluable in this process.
- The Kosova Crisis escalated at the end of the month which provided a wealth of problems for our work. There remains a lot of hostility towards the International Community in Brcko for both of these major political situations. The project had to scale down due to security reasons; Claire and Dan returned to Britain and took part in meetings in Edinburgh with Ellie Maxwell at the end of the month, but have now returned to Brcko where they report that tensions have diminished. We feel that it is more important than ever that we continue to attempt to bring young people from different areas together, and to attempt to give them an opportunity to take part in activities that allow them to escape from the ever-present problems of nationalism and suspicion.
- Firefly gained funding (12,000DM) from the Canadian Embassy for the Summer Arts Festival which is going to involve artists, theatre groups and musicians from all over Bosnia and the Republika Srpska.