



The participants of the Bosnian's women's support group at the Center for Survivors of Torture and War Trauma in St. Louis.

# Healing Lives — Building Futures

by Jenny Beatrice

For many Americans, September 11, 2001 was the first time “terrorism” jumped out of the headlines into their homes and hearts. For Sister Jean Abbott, CSJ, that day served as yet another example of how terrorist acts can continue to destroy lives long after the violence subsides.

As the clinical director of the Center for Survivors of Torture and War Trauma (CSTWT) in St. Louis, Abbott hit the streets when the news of the attacks broke out to connect with her clients from war-torn Bosnia, knowing that they would be in a state of utter



S. Jean Abbott (right) celebrates with one of her Bosnian clients who just received her first passport as an American citizen.

panic. She recalls, “I tried to assure them, ‘That’s in New York, far away from here. We have it under control,’ and they said

to me, ‘In our country, in our home, it was far away—and it came.’”

“That’s what terrorism is,” Abbott says, “the instillation that you have no ability to control anything.”

Many of the 9000 survivors in the St. Louis region arrived in America from areas experiencing political and social unrest, carrying with them hidden stories and visible scars that prevent them from living functional and fulfilling lives. “Sometimes we don’t see the person—we just see the scars that keep them from holding a job or learning English,” Abbott says. “Think about what would force a person to leave his

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home. It could be war or violence or oppression. The refugees come with this tremendous energy to survive and to find a safe place, but the trauma, the grief of the attack, stays with them and they have to find a way to deal with it.”

Abbott became aware of this profound grief in the late 1980s when she opened a sanctuary for survivors of Guatemalan refugee camps where hundreds of thousands of people were being kidnapped and massacred. Abbott says, “I began to notice something different in the energy of the women who were tortured. After they were finally safe, something seemed to cave in.”

She saw this same breakdown manifest itself in the violence exhibited by the male survivors. When Abbott witnessed a man beating his wife at the sanctuary, she reminded him he was in a house of non-violence. He went into an altered state and shouted, “You don’t know what violence is!” as he revealed a chest full of electric burn marks.

“I thought, ‘This guy is going to pay his whole life because he’d never dealt with the extreme rage and helplessness about what was done to him,’” Abbott remembers. “That was the beginning.”

At that time not much was known about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) but Abbott immersed herself in the subject. In the early 1990s she identified other health care professionals who were seeing an increase of refugees suffering from PTSD. She formed a coalition, which grew to become CSTWT, officially incorporated in 2001.

The center’s mission is to help refugee and immigrant survivors man-

age their symptoms that make adapting to life in a new culture difficult while facilitating the healing process through holistic mental health services. “Just giving someone their first month’s rent is not going to do the trick,” says Abbott. “The center speaks to the power of relationship, working to replace cruelty with love. It’s a creative instillation of my CSJ values, a way of giving back to people that have been so degraded.”

Many of the clients have been through unimaginable experiences, such as the Bosnians who suffered in concentration camps, the Somali women who were brutally raped, and the Afghan widows whose husbands and sons were murdered. Abbott strives to see the world from the survivor’s perspective. “I was in Nicaragua for a year and by the eighth or ninth month, I felt the uprooting from my culture and a profound loneliness even though I knew I could go back,” she says. “So what does a person with no ‘back’ to go to feel? Everything in their past has been destroyed.”

CSTWT is a place where survivors can heal from their pasts and form new paths for their futures. The staff provides and coordinates individual and group counseling, integrative therapies, youth programs and support services. “Jean built a great place that provides creative skills to help the healing process,” says Kristin Bulin, executive director of the center. “What we are working toward is strengthening the foundation to keep that piece going.”

The core staff of seven relies on the extensive network of community partners that help provide translation



services, transportation assistance, social service needs, legal support and guidance, and health services for the clients. “Part of my work is therapy, but part of it is fostering a network of compassion,” Abbott says. “It’s like being in the middle of a web of people who have good will. Sometimes I get a call and I don’t have one more minute, but I’ll respond anyway because people have responded to me when I needed help.”

Volunteers also respond to fill the center’s specialized needs, enabling the center to provide integrated therapies for its clients—therapies that focus on the connection between healing the mind and the body, such as acupressure, hypnotherapy and movement therapy.

“Separating the mind from the body is a Western model,” says Abbott. “The research shows that if you don’t get the body toned, it can’t hold the emotions that go through it.”

Integrated therapies also offer the clients new ways to cope with everyday events that act as triggers to panic



*Left: Another Bosnian client, who recently became an American citizen, fills out her first voter registration card.*

*Below: S. Jean Abbott embraces one of her clients.*



attacks. For example, a recent yoga class at the center turned into an exercise in self-control during a tornado warning. When the sirens sounded, the volunteer instructor told her anxious Bosnian students to keep breathing and go downstairs. "That was the best exposure therapy we could have done," Abbott recalls. "There they were, in a dark basement, surrounded by people who care and doing good things for themselves."

Two programs at the center facilitate the healing of children suffering the debilitating effects of PTSD, although they may not have been the direct victims of violence. "Sometimes the parents are so traumatized, they can't give their children the relationships they need," says Abbott. These children struggle in school both academically and socially, with truancy and anger management as some of the most common issues.

The Open Door after school program provides a place for them to share, learn, create, express and heal. The

International Play Ground performing arts ensemble provides a creative outlet to facilitate healing while educating the public. Middle and high school students develop original scripts and put on annual theater productions. Abbott's long term goal is to open a charter school "so that children can have a year of tendering before they get integrated."

Abbott calls herself a "cheerleader" who finds the strength in her clients so they can start to heal themselves. "Somebody has to be around to say, 'did you see what you just did?' That's what the Sisters of St. Joseph did for me. It embarrassed me but it also strengthened me."

She sees her work as a symbol of the totality of all the ministries of the Sisters of St. Joseph. "It's a symbol for those in need—the sojourner, the homeless, the tortured—and how we are facilitating the healing of their souls so they can become whole."

Ultimately, Abbott's ministry is a testament to the transforming power of forgiveness and God's limitless healing

grace. She recalls the moment she witnessed the transformation of a young man from Russia who was degradingly tortured in his teens to serve as an example to rising protesters.

"Every time I tried to talk with him about his journey, he tried to avoid it," Abbott recalls. "Then one day he says, 'You know I was thinking about the men who did this to me and I feel sorry for them. They're trapped in the system just like I was trapped. Don't you feel sorry for them?'"

"It was so powerful," she remembers. "I looked at him and thought, 'Honey, you're going to fly.'" ❖