

# Gloria's Gift

*An Air Force civilian  
has helped hundreds  
of Bosnian and Kosovo  
refugees banished to  
small camps in Slovenia.*

*In the process, she's  
touched their hearts and  
inspired the goodwill of  
an entire community.*

by Master Sgt. Tim Barela ✦ photos by Master Sgt. Keith Reed

**W**hen Gloria Leonarduzzi first visited a Bosnian refugee camp in

Slovenia, she was overcome with an emotion she hadn't expected at such a bleak site: utter joy. Like a Santa Claus, she had taken gifts of food and clothing, as well as candy and toys for the children, and they all seemed so happy to see her.

Through this momentary bliss, Gloria spotted a stone-faced man in his late 40s sitting alone. A haunting look in his dark brown eyes unsettled her. He almost appeared as if he were



in physical pain. But Gloria was on a roll. She'd helped cheer everyone else and couldn't ignore this one gloomy Gus. So she approached him.

"Why aren't you smiling? Aren't you happy to see us?" she asked cheerfully, hoping her own high spirits would lift his.

Straining every muscle in his sunbaked face, the man forced a mock grin. But those disturbing eyes weren't friendly. "You want me to smile?" he asked bitterly. Then he paused, the silence and his hardened gaze making Gloria even more un-

easy. "Tell me, if you saw [Serbian soldiers] slit your three sons' throats and stick a bayonet in your wife's belly, would you be happy?"

Gloria burst into tears. Unable to form words any longer as if someone had taken a remote control, turned it on her and pressed the "mute" button, she walked away from a man whose torture she couldn't comprehend.

"I left the camp that day and didn't return for months. I was too afraid I'd see that man again," said Gloria, an Air Force civilian who works as a

31st Supply Squadron mission support supervisor at Aviano Air Base, Italy. "I learned a hard lesson. Helping others had to be done unconditionally. You shouldn't expect any kind of rewards, gratitude or specific reactions in return."

For the past seven years, Gloria has lived her life by those rules of unconditional kindness. In the process, she's inspired much of the Aviano AB community to do the same.

The two camps she visits in Slovenia not only have Bosnians still in hiding from the war in 1991, but now are filled with Kosovo refugees as well. Because Gloria was born and raised in Croatia and didn't move to the United States with her parents until she was in high school, she speaks the language of the people in the Balkan area. She has worked at Aviano for the past 30 years.

Since she began visiting the camps on her goodwill missions, Gloria has seen thousands of refugees come and go through the revolving door of this community of despair. With the end of both wars, the camps have dwindled from a height of nearly 700 to just more than 300 refugees. Many of the Bosnian refugees remaining have been there for eight years, possibly escaping death but still living in prisonlike conditions.

"They want to go home, but they still fear for their lives," Gloria said.

The compound the refugees are restricted to is no bigger than a small-town high-school campus in the United States. That's their tiny world. Gloria tries to visit the camps monthly, attracting Aviano members like a modern-day pied piper to accompany her and help make that small world a little better place to live.

**Another Mother Teresa?** An angel from heaven? Gloria Leonarduzzi has been described as both for her work to ensure Bosnian and Kosovo refugees stay clothed, fed and unforgotten.



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**Gloria  
Leonarduzzi**

On a recent trip, Gloria was walking from room-to-room giving families necessary food and toiletry items. When she came to the door of one room, she encountered a mother trying to comfort her baby.

"I saw this beautiful little girl, but she was crying and so was her mom. I picked her up, and she was nothing but skin and bones. She was so sick," Gloria said, her eyes welling up. The girl's mother, Luljeta Pireva, explained that while in Kosovo, a doctor had diagnosed her infant with a heart defect. Without treatment, 9-month-old Brikena was going to die.

"I went home that night and couldn't sleep," Gloria said. "All I could think about was Brikena."

So the next day she contacted a doctor in Trieste (an Italian city near the camps), who agreed to do the necessary surgery for free. Now all she had to do was convince the compound supervisor to allow them to take the little girl across the border for medical care. To hedge her bets, she enlisted the help of Dr. (Maj.) Lowell Sensintaffar, a family physician at Aviano's clinic.

Sensintaffar took the day off from work and traveled to the camp with Gloria. When they got there, he examined the girl, who weighed a frail 9 pounds, and confirmed that she had a life-threatening defect causing a heart murmur. Without intervention, he gave Brikena a month or two to live. A common cold could kill her.

With the doctor at her side, Gloria approached the camp supervisor as determined as a bulldog. While Gloria translated, Sensintaffar told the supervisor of Brikena's dire need for medical attention. The response wasn't what the doctor expected.

"The camp supervisor told me that this helpless little 9-month-old girl was in their country illegally, therefore she was a criminal and not entitled to

medical care," Sensintaffar said. "She and her mother were to remain restricted to the compound as they were illegal aliens under house arrest."

Appalled, Sensintaffar took a different approach.

"I said, 'Listen, if she dies because of this bureaucracy, her blood is on your hands. Because she will die the same as if [Yugoslavian President Slobadan] Milosevic put a gun to her head,' " the doctor said. "The commandant's wife got emotional. It pulled her heart-strings. That got the ball rolling."

### **New hope for Brikena**

Gloria still had to get the cooperation of the Red Cross from three different countries: Slovenia, Italy and the United States. With red tape slowing everything down, her first thought was to smuggle Brikena across the border. But if the girl died, there'd be a lot of legal trouble. So Gloria, who has been described as a one-person Red Cross, worked tirelessly to make the surgery happen.

"This kid just needed an advocate — someone to step up to bat. That someone was Gloria," Sensintaffar said.

"She recruited me and the doctor who performed the surgery. She coordinated with three different Red Crosses, translated and was bringing the child food to help build her strength for the surgery. If there's a hero in all this, it's Gloria."

Gloria blushes a light crimson at the term hero. And Brikena's mother doesn't even know how extensive a part Gloria played in saving her daughter's life. That's just the way Gloria likes it. As a matter of fact, the only reason Gloria reluctantly agreed to be interviewed is she believes the publicity might help attract more people to donate time and goods to the refugees.

"The Bible says if you do a good

deed, you don't need to brag about it. It's enough to do it," Gloria explained.

Nevertheless, the surgery fixed a hole in Brikena's heart. She is now 15 months old, about 12 pounds heavier and a whole lot happier.

"Gloria saved that girl's life. She's just too modest to admit it," Sensintaffar said.

What she does confess to is a glowing change in the girl's mother. "The first time I saw her, Brikena's mother was crying. She was so afraid her baby was going to die. The second time I saw her, she was concerned, with a worried look because Brikena was going into surgery. This last time I saw her was the first time I'd seen her smile. She now has a healthy baby girl."

Indeed Pireva, who still lives with the fear that she may have lost her husband during the war as she hadn't heard from him in months, found reason to grin ear-to-ear while cuddling a healthy Brikena. "Thank God for everyone who helped my baby," she said.

### **Refusing to forget**

Adorned with the elephant's fabled penchant for memory, Gloria is driven by an inability to forget or overlook someone in need.

"The worst fear of the people here is being forgotten by the rest of the world," she said. "The most important thing anyone can do is sit down and talk to them. It gives them hope."

Through her conversations, Gloria finds out more about the people there than a daytime talk show host ever could. Many of the children came with their grandparents and still don't know if their parents are alive or dead. One boy, whose father was killed in the Bosnian war, arrived at the camp when he was 4. He's now 12. All have stories of missing family members and lost homes. All want to go home.

"One lady was offered the chance to go to Canada," Gloria said. "She asked me, 'Can I walk from Canada to Bosnia?' I said, 'No, it's too far.' So she didn't go. She only knows one home. She wants to go home to her family and her small corn-field."

While restricted to the compound, which is actually an old army barracks, the people are jammed into one-room dorms. Seeing five-member families in a one-room home still brings tears to Gloria's eyes.

"I hope that one day I will return here, and everyone will be gone. They will have made it home," Gloria said. Until then, she plans to return, even if it takes forever.

"At least the camp with children offers hope," Gloria said. "Children always find a way to bring happiness. They still play games, they still laugh, they still dream. At another camp I visit, it's only filled with the old and the sick. There's no hope for the people at that camp."

For the old and the sick, who will probably never return home, Gloria sometimes daydreams about winning the lottery, building a nice home for them and using her nursing skills to take care of them.

## Pulling together

Until she does win the lottery and is able to hand out cash like it was Monopoly money, Gloria will con-

tinue her crusade and depend on the goodwill of the Aviano community.

Much like she recruited the doctor, Gloria enlisted the help of Riccardo Lieffort, the commissary officer at Aviano. He helps arrange food and hygiene item donations for refugees through companies that service the commissary.

"People can't be free if they're hungry," Lieffort said. "When Gloria took me to see the refugees, it was an eye opener. I saw pain in their eyes. We [Americans] are fortunate to live in a world where we don't have to worry about where our next meal is coming from."

## A call to glory

Again at the refugee camp, Gloria is busy writing down the shoe sizes of dozens of people. "The kids love sneakers," she said. In another instant, she takes the address of a woman's relative in New York with a

**What's up, Doc?** In this case, it's 1-year-old Brikena's weight and health. Dr. (Maj.) Lowell Sensintaffar checks Brikena's heartbeat a couple months after she had surgery to fix a hole in her heart. Brikena and her mother, Luljeta Pireva, are Kosovo refugees. Gloria arranged for the life-saving operation.

simple message: "Please get me out of here." Gloria promises she will try to get the message through.

Following her own advice of not seeking recognition for her work, Gloria says she doubts many, if any, of the refugees actually know her name. "They probably just know me as 'that lady,'" she said.

She was only partially correct.

Asked if the refugees knew if her name was Gloria, Davor, a 21-year-old Bosnian who has been in the camp for seven years, looked surprised. You see, she was right about one thing. They never knew her as Gloria.

"Here," Davor said, "she is simply known as 'Glory.'" ♦

