



STAFF PHOTO BY DILLON LAMETTE

Sharing: Pat Blackard (at left) of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Farm has helped acclimate the family to American life. Agim, Makledone and Agon Vunigi have coffee with Blackard.

Life in America

Opportunities prompt ethnic Albanian family to stay

BY TRACEY BIRKENHAUER
SPECIAL WRITER

Their two-bedroom apartment might seem cramped for a family of six.

To the Vunigi family, it's cozy. Bunk beds and a spacious vinyl couch are luxuries after spending nights in smaller apartments with 20 relatives back home.

The ethnic Albanians fled war-torn Kosovo for Farmington in June. Agim and Donja Vunigi deserted the capital city, Pristina, with their children Agon, 4; Qendresa, 9; Blela, 12; and Vesa, 13, before their home was destroyed.

The south Serbian province of Kosovo has been the source of intense ethnic-based fighting for years between Serbs and ethnic Albanians, or Kosovars, as they prefer to be called.

Agim was a particularly hot target for the Communist government because he was a known pro-democracy advocate and his family has ties to the Kosovo Liberation Army.

Agim told his family what to do if Serbian soldiers came after them.

"I told my children to just hug them," Agim said. "I know children can change their minds."

When the soldiers did come, the Vunigis were hiding out with Donja's mother in a sixth-floor apartment, watching television for news updates.

"I took my son and we go downstairs," Agim said. "I saw a short man with a mask and a gun. I surprised him. Here they had prepared this big plan for ethnic cleansing, and I surprised him."

A neighbor had bribed the soldier to let him free. Assuming Agim was with the neighbor, the soldier told Agim to "Go! Go! Go!" In a Fiat-sized car, 12 family members packed in for a frantic ride to the Macedonian border and, ultimately, freedom.

The Vunigi family became six of 20,000 Kosovar refugees the United States agreed to house. Most are expected to return to Kosovo when fighting eases, but after a year they will be allowed to apply for permanent U.S. residency.

The Vunigis found their way to Farmington with the help of a sponsor and friend living in the area who's also from Kosovo. He lives in the same apartment complex.

"Now we have many friends," Agim said with a grin.

Soon after arriving, they met Pat Blackard, a member of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Farmington. The church helped the family purchase items from clothing to bicycles.

On a recent visit, Blackard entered the Vunigi apartment with gifts, as usual. She was greeted with hugs and smiles.

The Vunigis look like a typical American family: Agim with his carpenter pants and fleece pullover and Donja with frosted nail polish and fuzzy slippers. The Vunigi girls are polite and well-mannered. Agon plays shy around company, but he quickly warms up.

Like father, like son. In Kosovo, "You had to think one thing but say another," Agim said. "You couldn't say what you thought, because you could be



Makledone Vunigi

jailed, or killed. It's very difficult when you come from a country with a dictator. Communism is sick. It's a disease."

It's somewhat shocking to hear a refugee speak so freely, without a hint of fear.

"Now we're open to talk about it because we meet good people," Agim said, looking at Blackard. "We feel like American citizens, not refugees. We have the same rights. If we have good behavior, we're good citizens."

Although she would like to tell her story, Donja mostly allows her husband to speak for her. She doesn't think her English is good enough to converse intelligibly.

A lawyer back in Kosovo, Donja now teaches part-time in Farmington schools. She's trying to get full-time work.

Because he was a dissident, Agim wasn't allowed to keep his engineering job in Kosovo. He still hasn't found work here.

Depending on others is difficult for the once-independent Vunigi family, but they accept all gifts graciously.

Blackard brought the children a Back Street Boys CD from Harmony House, but the girls already had a copy.

"I'll take it back and get Britney Spears or something else," Blackard assured them.

Blackard has been essential to acclimating the family to American life. She took Agim to an American government class at Oakland Community College and a Farmington Democratic Club meeting.

Another Universalist Unitarian member takes Donja to exercise classes and another bought a flute for their daughter.

"They think of us more than they think of ourselves," Donja said. "They tell us what we need."

"They're our family," Agim said. "If we have an emergency, they're our 911."

Agim studies the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. He visits the library every day. Donja and Agim take English... as a second language classes twice a week because language is a barrier they must overcome to find work.

"If you have a good education, then you can help other people," Agim said. "I need to help my people. I need to take democracy for them."

"He's not just a refugee, he's

an idealist," Blackard said, affectionately touching his shoulder.

"But people need idealists," Agim replied.

Blackard smiled and shook her head.

Agim first protested Communism when he was 16. He dreamed of America, to speak freely and enjoy the benefits of democracy. He became a member of the Democratic League of Kosovo and the National Democratic Party and was editor of the pro-democracy newspaper. His goal: Educate the masses.

"People who are well-educated can't be quiet when they oppose their government," Agim said. "They want more from their government."

He traveled to Switzerland and other countries seeking help for his people and his children.

"If you disagree with the Communist system, they'll take your family," Agim said. "You can't have books from the United States or Europe, because they're against the system."

The Vunigi children weren't allowed to attend Serbian-run schools, so they learned privately.



Agim Vunigi

Now school is the highlight of the children's days, most notably for Qendresa, who has excelled at Beechview Elementary in Farmington Hills.

"I learn the most in English," Qendresa said, with perfect intonation. She also wrote a book titled "My School in America," illustrating her friends and teachers with crayons and creativity.

Her older sisters are more interested in extra-curricular activities. Blela and Vesa were Olympic hopeful karate champions in Kosovo. Those dreams are still alive. They attend karate class three times a week and are close to getting their black belts. Blackard pays their tuition fees, which were cut in half by their instructor.

Seeing how his family has flourished in America, Agim has made some difficult decisions. He wants to bring democracy back to Kosovo, but he also wants his family to have opportunities not available in their homeland.

"I plan to stay here," Agim said. "I see my daughters advance and learn more and more. I plan to go back sometime, but first I must plan for my children."



Family: The Vunigi family poses for a family. From left is Agon, 4; Agim, dad; Makledone, mom; top Vesavunigi, 14; Blela, 13; Qendresa, 10 (seated next to mom).



Kids: Qendresa, 10 and Vesavunigi, 14, (at left) are being amused by their little brother. The girls are acclimating to American life. They and their sister, Blela, 13, who is not pictured here, love school. Qendresa has excelled at Beechview Elementary. Blela and Vesavunigi are interested in extra-curricular activities. In Kosovo, both older girls were Olympic hopefuls in karate.



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