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The Ambitious Challenge of Adopting a Mine Field

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notes

FROM the FIELD

The Ambitious Challenge of Adopting a Mine Field

by Larry Levine, President, United Nations Association/Monterey Bay



A sign showing that this area is being demined.

Photo c/o UNA/USA / Marijana Prevedar

"For the rest of their lives, whenever reference is made to landmines, our donors will know that when given the choice between doing something and doing nothing at all, they chose to do something."

Dropci is a tiny, devastated, and currently empty community of family farmers in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina, near the border with Croatia. Its people are still refugees from the war, as the land is strewn with landmines, booby traps and unexploded ordnance. Monterey County, Calif., is known as the "Salad Bowl of the World" for its agricultural abundance, the "Golfing Capital of the World," and the site of the spectacular Big Sur coastline. Dropci and Monterey County are worlds apart.

What is the cord that binds these two communities? The Adopt-A-Minefield Campaign, a program coordinated by the United Nations Association of the USA (UNA-USA) to raise funds for landmine clearance and to raise awareness about the global landmine crisis. The UNA Monterey Bay Chapter was among the first groups to consider working with UNA-USA to raise funds to sponsor demining efforts overseas.

When our chapter's Board of Directors first considered this concept in early 1999, there was considerable caution. The chapter had never undertaken a major fund-raising campaign before. It had no staff or consultants, no large mailing list or database, no major sponsors or wealthy members ready to help. At the same time, the Adopt-A-Minefield Campaign encouraged its sponsors to raise funds within four months of undertaking an adoption, so that the mine action centers could plan their demining schedules accordingly. We hated what landmines were doing to people and communities all over the world and we wanted to make a difference, so we accepted the ambitious challenge.

We focused on Bosnia, as our community had some ties to this country and everyone had at least heard of it because of the Bosnian war. From the mine fields available, we chose one in the family farming community of Dropci. We committed ourselves to raise \$33,500 to sponsor a month's work of the three teams of deminers and mine-sniffing dogs needed to turn the community back into a community. Sam and Edie Karas, long-time Monterey community leaders and UNA members, offered to chair the Campaign Committee. Their personalities lent inspiration and credibility to our campaign: Edie had been present at the birth of the United Nations in San Francisco

in 1945, and she and Sam had both served three times as official election supervisors in Bosnia. Retired Gen. Robert Gard, Jr., an internationally known advocate for banning and clearing landmines, agreed to be our Honorary Chair, leading a group that included former White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta, our Congressman Sam Farr, and other respected local residents.

Our community is overwhelmed with fund-raising events, large and small, gala and low-key, so we decided to simply tell the horrendous story of the landmine crisis and ask for help, rather than plan one more series of banquets, film premieres, or rummage sales. Our committee created bulk mailings by hand, from lists they found in their desk drawers. We fought

for every bit of attention we could muster from the local press. We approached religious congregations, women's groups, service clubs, youth groups and businesses.

Our UNA members responded generously, along with many neighbors in our community from many backgrounds and perspectives. Thanks to the efforts of Princess Diana and the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines, we found that many local people had been concerned and upset about landmines for years, but had never before found an avenue to do something about it. One by one, the dollars came in, and we kept plugging away. In the end we received contributions from almost 500 individual donors, plus over 25 community organizations, religious congregations and businesses. Low and behold,

to our surprise and great relief, we reached our target of \$33,500 in early November 1999, two weeks ahead of our four-month goal, faster than any other community based group so far to successfully complete a local Adopt-A-Minefield campaign.

It's winter now in Dropci, but we know that soon after the snows melt, and the frozen Bosnian terrain begins to thaw, the mines will be cleared and the refugees will be able to return to their homes, their farms and the beginning of a new, more normal life. We know that we in Monterey County can never solve the global landmine crisis, but we also know that we can make a difference. For the rest of their lives, whenever reference is made to landmines, our donors will know that when given the choice between doing something and doing nothing at all, they chose to do something. ■



Deminer from NPA probing the ground for landmines.

Photo c/o UNA/USA / Oren Schlein



The work station of a deminer: inch by inch safe lanes are cut.

Photo c/o UNA/USA / Oren Schlein