

# 01.

## This Work Is My Religion

David A. Sherwood

"This work is my religion." These measured but passionate words burned in Sharon Dolan's mind as she sat alone in her office late one evening. They had been delivered by Lena Sefera, an ethnic Albanian immigrant and one of Sharon's most valued staff members at Helping Hands, the refugee resettlement program she directed.

Sharon knew that no matter what she said or did in their meeting the next morning, Lena's "religion" was going to be shaken.

### Helping Hands Refugee Resettlement Program

Helping Hands was one of several programs under the auspices of Inter-Faith Community Ministries in Rochester, New York, a private, nonprofit social service agency which had begun modestly in 1951 as a cooperative approach to providing basic emergency food and clothing needs. It had evolved to include a major housing rehabilitation program, a VISTA coalition, a community outreach and youth mentoring program, an Older Adult Connection program, a Commission for the Homeless, and the Helping Hands Refugee Resettlement program. A faith-based but widely ecumenical agency, Inter-Faith Community Ministries defined its mission as twofold:

- Building relationships of trust through affirming relationships, accepting all people, and encouraging a deepening of spirituality within the community; and

- Building relationships through action by initiating actions that encourage the creativity and gifts of our members for attaining a just and compassionate society.

Funding came from a wide variety of sources including contributions from cooperating churches, synagogues, and mosques, private contributors, the United Way, grants, and government contracts.

Helping Hands worked with the U.S. State Department's Office of Refugee Resettlement through Catholic Charities and Church World Services to help resettle about 200 refugees in the Rochester area each year. The program did not have much funding to offer incoming refugees—about \$200 per person to assist with finding housing, health care, and jobs—but was able to provide crucial assistance with vital needs by joining its resources with those brokered from other parts of the community. Nevertheless, for most of the refugees arrival in the American "promised land" inevitably fell disappointingly short of their dreams.

Although the Helping Hands caseload included refugees from Sudan, Pakistan, Iran, and West Africa, at the time about 60% of their clients were Eastern European, mostly Serbs and Croatians. However, the troubles in Kosovo were already on Lena Sefera's horizon.

## Lena Sefera

Lena had said "this work is my religion" to Sharon in an intense after-hours conversation 12 months before, in April 1998, when Sharon had found Lena again scouring the Internet on the office computer, downloading information and names from contacts in Kosovo, her native land. Although it would be almost a year before Kosovo would break into American headlines, Lena could be found evening after evening gathering scraps of information about who was the latest person to disappear or to be killed.

"This work" was refugee resettlement, something Lena Sefera discovered through painful experiences. As an ethnic Albanian in Kosovo, she had lost her job as an administrator with the electric power company years before when Serbian dominance grew. After the Peace Corps arrived in Kosovo, her fluency in English, Albanian, and Serbo-Croatian had made her an invaluable translator. She had been forced to become a refugee herself when she became engaged to one of the Peace Corps workers. Both of their passports were confiscated and they were "advised" that they had 24 hours to leave the country. Lena had quickly found her place in Rochester, New York, with her new husband and, soon enough, her new job. She came to Helping Hands first as a client, but soon as a volunteer, and finally as a staff member. Lena was a refugee who had the passion, skills, and personality to speak tenderly to the most fearful refugees about their concerns and to advocate boldly to board members, community supporters, and television cameras about their needs.

Lena filled or assisted with several vital roles at Helping Hands. Her language skills made her almost indispensable in facilitating communication between the agency's caseworkers and the Eastern European refugees, during both the initial flurry of activity when they were being resettled and in the follow-up support activities the agency provided. Lena's contagious passion for social justice and the cause of refugees, her articulate speech, and her charismatic presence made her an effective spokesperson for the agency to the community, to media representatives, and to the many churches and church groups that supported Helping Hands financially. She made it her mission to sensitize and

educate the agency about the troubles in Eastern Europe. "Here, read this," became a familiar refrain. She led in organizing candlelight prayer vigils "for peace."

As an ethnic Albanian, Lena Sefera was Muslim, but most of her religious faith had evaporated in the flames of her life experiences. This faith had been transmuted into her commitment to refugee resettlement and she had developed strongly egalitarian views about social justice.

"It doesn't matter who you are or what your religion is; if you are a refugee I want to help you," Lena had said. "I don't trust any of those religions. In fact, I despise them. This work is my religion."

## A Beautiful Blue Poster and Clouds on the Horizon

Some time earlier, almost as soon as she moved into her office, Lena had put up a beautiful blue poster on the wall. Sharon loved to look at it. It was a travel poster, a large striking photograph of Kosovo taken in better times. The sky was blue, the sun was shining, and the countryside was lovely. It had deep meaning for Lena. It had been her home. And the poster had only one word on it, the name of the province. What could be more appropriate?

Sharon soon learned otherwise. As the number of Serbian refugees grew and was joined by a trickle of ethnic Albanians, caseworkers began relaying to Sharon rumblings of suspicion and discontent about the agency and its staff from the Serbian clients. These caseworkers reported that it was becoming increasingly difficult to convince the Serbians to accept their services. The agency tried to be proactive in dealing with the deep ethnic and religious differences among the clients, attempting to foster communication and understanding through small groups, but got nowhere. They organized a community-league soccer team involving refugees from every ethnic group, which seemed to be a great success for five weeks but quickly unraveled when U.S. and NATO bombs began to fall in Serbia and Kosovo at the end of March 1999.

Some Serbian refugees had even formally complained to their caseworkers, stating that they did not trust Lena Sefera. The caseworkers felt they were caught in the middle, but some expressed their own frustration. One said, "Yeah, the Serbs say

they see her fingerprints all over this program,” and another declared, “I don’t think she’s prejudiced, but I do think she’s a hypocrite sometimes. Here she doesn’t even believe in God and yet she’s out there leading prayer vigils for refugees and peace and she’s going around asking all these churches and synagogues and mosques for money.”

This stunned Sharon, who was shocked that everyone could not see how much Lena cared and how dedicated she was to justice for all.

When Sharon assembled a group of the English-speaking Serbs and asked about the source of their distrust, the Serbs gave each other knowing looks. One spoke for the rest. “Just look at that poster in her office.”

“It’s a beautiful picture from your homeland,” Sharon replied. “It’s not political.”

“Don’t you see how the name is spelled? *Kosova*. That’s the Albanian spelling.” As far as the Serbians were concerned, the case was closed. Lena was obviously biased.

### **What Now?**

When Sharon had tried to share with Lena these growing problems, Lena had become quite offended. “I do everything to be fair. If anything, I work harder for the Serbs. I live for justice and this feels very unjust to me.”

The time when she usually left for home had long since passed, and Sharon still sat in her office, staring at the draft of the memo on her desk that she had just written. She could not decide whether to tear it up or give it to Lena during the meeting Sharon had arranged with her for the next morning.

The memo began, “It has been brought to my attention that your poster is creating tension for some of our clients and staff. Although I understand that the poster is very important to you personally, it is necessary that our agency remove as many barriers to service for our clients as we can . . . .”

Sharon shook her head. “But is it fair? Lena’s whole identity as an Albanian and as a person of justice is at stake. And what will we do if she quits? The Serbians may be suspicious of her, but she is the only one here who can really speak their language. Am I just giving in to their religious and ethnic prejudices? And what will the media say when they hear about this? Or our supporters? And if she stays, how am I going to rebuild the trust among my staff and our clients? No matter what I do, it could really cost a lot. And I do believe her when she says she is fair in her work.”

“Well, I guess the buck stops with me.”