

## Mine changes Bosnian Serb's life, leads him to Asheville

He was an 18-year-old kid, walking with friends down a Sarajevo street to see a display of old airplanes at the airport.

The date was April 16, 1996, three months after peace had come. The war that for 44 months had ripped apart the former Yugoslavia was over – but not the danger.

“I step from the concrete onto a brick,” Dejan Babalj recalled. “Below the brick was a mine. That was that.”

It felt like he had stepped in a deep hole until he saw his left leg.

“My shoe was going to one side, my leg to the other side,” Babalj, now 23, said. “I step on the mine with my heel. My heel was destroyed. I thought my life was over.”

The agony – both physical and emotional – was so intense that Babalj clutched his hair in his hand and repeatedly slammed his head against the concrete. His friends, who like him had lived through years of bitter fighting, thought another attack had begun and momentarily fled. They didn’t realize their friend had stepped on one of the two million mines lurking in the former Yugoslavia.

When his friends returned, one of them used a piece of wire as a tourniquet on Babalj’s leg. No ambulances were available, but his friends found someone to drive him the five miles to the hospital, his nearly severed left foot painfully dangling and bouncing the whole way.

Doctors amputated the foot, and Babalj spent 15 days in the hospital. Within three months, he would have a prosthetic foot and begin walking again.

Babalj’s life journey was altered forever that spring day, leading him on a path that eventually brought the Bosnian Serb youth to Asheville. For the past five months, Babalj has been working as an apprentice at Asheville Orthotic Prosthetic Center Inc., learning how to create and shape highly advanced artificial limbs.

A cheerful man with luminous blue eyes and a quick smile, Babalj carries little if any bitterness about his misfortune, even though he had to give up his passions of basketball and soccer.

“I accept when I lose my leg I need to continue with my life,” he said.



**Debbie Chase-Jennings** STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
Dejan Babalj works Thursday on his own prosthesis, a gift from Asheville Orthotic Prosthetic Center, where Babalj is spending a six-month apprenticeship to hone his skills. Now 23, Babalj lost his left foot in 1996 when he stepped on a land mine in the streets of his native Sarajevo.

Andrew Adkisson, executive vice president at Asheville Orthotic Prosthetic Center, says working with Babalj has opened his eyes to the horror of war and the resilience of the human spirit. Babalj talks matter-of-factly about the mounds of protective sandbags necessary at his high school, about a 13-year-old friend who lost several toes and both arms in another of the ubiquitous land mine explosions that plague his homeland. The friend had gone to pick cherries.

“Just hearing some of these stories about what he’s had to live through, it blows me away,” Adkisson said. “It amazes me how happy he is.”

After losing his foot Babalj met an American colonel, Gregg Pulley, who was heading up de-mining operations. Babalj had studied prosthetics, and the colonel saw an opportunity to capitalize on that by sending him to Asheville for further training.

Securing a visa was no easy trick, though. Babalj is Serbian, the ethnic group often portrayed as the aggressors in the Balkans conflict, which involved vicious fighting between Serbs, Muslims and Croats. American and other countries are still seeking some Serbian leaders for alleged war crimes.

To say the least, relations between the United States and Serbia have been tense. Although Babalj lives in Bosnia, it was still difficult to arrange the six-month work visa that brought him to Asheville.

Officials from the U.S. State Department will visit today and Friday with Babalj and his co-workers here in Asheville. His stay here in many ways is a display of goodwill.

In fact, the State Department is paying for Babalj’s housing in Asheville during his apprenticeship, which is unpaid because of federal regulations.

Babalj wants to return home in a month for about 90 days, and then come back to Asheville for a more intensive 18-month apprenticeship.

While Babalj misses his parents, younger sister, and his girlfriend, he laments the fact that his homeland remains largely in economic shambles. There are some jobs in Muslim areas of Sarajevo, but he can’t get a job there because he is Serbian.

In all likelihood, he won’t have anywhere to ply his much-needed trade in Sarajevo, and the prospects aren’t bright.

His friends can’t get jobs. His father has no job and his mother works as a cleaning woman. They get by on \$260 a month.

“I don’t think there can be normal life in Bosnia for the next 10-20 years,” he said. “I would like to stay here and do this job to help people.”

- **Citizen Times**, by John Boyle-columnist