



Bosnian refugee finds satisfying career as Denver Zoo's Public Service Manager

The years 1993 and 2007 are important dates to Samir Hodzic, Public Service Manager for K-M Concessions at the Denver Zoo. The first date is when he first arrived in America as a refugee from war-torn Bosnia. The second date is when Samir became a United States citizen.

Samir's story begins in Prijedor, the third largest town and municipality in Bosnia, where he

was born and lived until civil war erupted in April of 1992.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is located in southeastern Europe just across the Adriatic Sea from Italy.

It is bordered to the north by Croatia and to the east by Serbia. A former republic of Yugoslavia, the multi-ethnic country



In his words . . .

"I'm always smiling. I never say no. I try to always say nice words to people and always try to help."

endured war from 1992 to 1995 at the hands of Serbian nationalists.

Samir's parents raised five sons along the banks of the Sana and Gomjenica rivers at the foot of the hills of the Kozara mountain. Three of Samir's brothers currently live in the Denver, another still lives in Bosnia in the family house. Samir is the baby of the family and said his brothers spoiled him not only while growing up, but still today. His mother died in 1996, and his father passed away in 2004. Fortunately, he was able to visit his father in Bosnia before he died.

Samir graduated from technical school in Bosnia in 1987 with a degree in electrical mechanics, which trained him to work on large factory motors. He has never used his degree.



While growing up in communist Yugoslavia, Samir and his family didn't celebrate Christmas like most Americans. However, Santa did make a visit on December 26 to good little boys and girls.

He served in the military for one year – it was mandatory – as a guard at a security gate at an area military base.

Then in the 1990s, a civil war and brutal “ethnic cleansing” tore his country apart. Thousands of Bosnians were driven from their homeland or were detained in concentration camps. And Bosnian males never knew when they might be swept up by those intent on eliminating civilians of Bosnian Croat nationality.

The night before Samir was captured, a Serbian friend warned him that he was on the list. Fortunately, this same friend was able to provide some protection for Samir while he was imprisoned for several months. This experience, combined with the time spent in the military, resulted in an anti-military attitude. Samir said, “I don’t like guns. I had a bad experience.”

He experienced much hardship before seeking asylum in America. An international aid agency helped Samir and three of his brothers move to Croatia where they made the decision to come to Denver, Colorado, even though they did not speak English. He arrived with few possessions – basically just a few changes of clothes. He was surprised that the climate with its hot summers and cold,



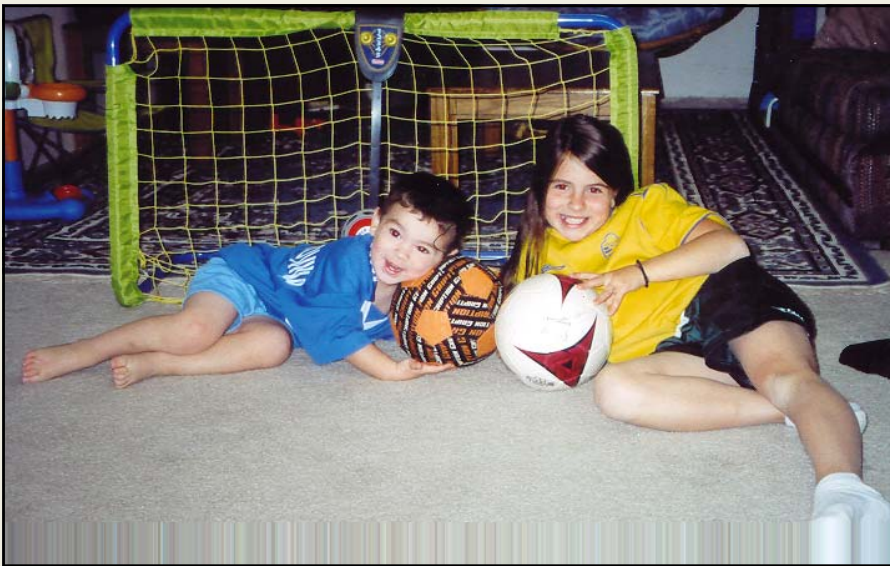
After seeking asylum in America, Samir enjoys a Thanksgiving dinner with some of his sponsors from the Augustana Lutheran Church. This traditional American holiday has become Samir's favorite.

snowy winters is very similar to Bosnia’s climate. The Augustana Lutheran Church sponsored the siblings. Samir was part of the first group of Bosnians that came to the Mile High City. The Hodzic brothers enrolled in English school. They also learned the language from watching TV.

For the first few months, the brothers received assistance from the church, where volunteers helped with the transition by providing a place to live and transportation to English classes as well as helping them find a job. Samir’s first job was with K-M Concessions bussing tables at the 1994 National Western Stock Show. “I was surprised that they would hire us with no English,” said Samir. It was a wise decision as the group proved to be hard workers, resulting in a pay raise for the brothers.



Like many young boys, Samir started playing soccer when he was six years old. In fact, his favorite toy was a soccer ball. This talented player played on various teams. Soccer, along with American football, remains Samir's favorite sports.



Like their father, the Hodzic children enjoy sports. Samir hopes his son plays football, a sport he wished he played. His daughter is a budding soccer star who learns pointers from her dad.



When Samir first moved into his own apartment, he had few possessions. He had a six-inch television, a kid's bed, a box as a table and one chair.

Samir then went to work at a local window company, which manufactured blinds. He continued to work weekends at the Denver Zoo in the restaurant. "I worked every day for five years. I didn't have anything. I worked to buy dishes and furni-

ture and to help other family members," he said.

While working at the window blind company, Samir hired his wife. But he quickly explained he didn't show favoritism to her. "I gave her the biggest blinds to make. I didn't spoil her even though she got mad at me," he said.

After several years, Samir left that company to go to work for K-M Concessions full-time. His wife continued working at the blind company, but transferred to an office position. Today, she works for a medical lab where IV tubes are manufactured.

The Hodzic family

Over time, Samir saved money, left his first apartment, got married, bought a home and started a family. He epitomizes the American success story.

He said the smartest thing he ever did was to come to the United States.

In 1996, Samir married Samira. They have two children, daughter, Sanela (10) and son, Arnel (4). Even though Samira is Bosnian, the couple met in Colorado. She grew up in a different city and during the war, her city was bombed, including her house. Like many, Samira and her family also had to leave their homeland in a time of war to forge a new life elsewhere. An estimated 140,000 Bosnians live in the United States.

Not surprising, Samir's most valued possession is his family. He said, "I love my family. I want to do my best for them. I want to give them what I didn't have. They have a basement full of toys. My only toy was a soccer ball, and they have so much more."

When Samir has free time, he spends it with his family. "I try to take the kids away from the city," he said, "The kids love to ski." He, too, recently learned how to ski. He also takes them fishing. "I'm not a good fisherman, I never catch anything," he said.

He likes to play soccer with his daughter. Samir is very proud that she always asks him to show her some ball-handling tricks. "Watching her play makes me so proud," he added. "I'm glad my kids love sports. I hope my son plays football."

Thanksgiving is his favorite holiday as it's family time. They usually celebrate by going to the mountains and staying where they can ski.

He wishes that he could have played American football. "I love football. I wish I grew up here so that I could have played." Laughing, he said, "I think I would be a good running back. It's the perfect position."

Samir's hero is his mother as she raised five boys. "Now that I have two children, I understand 100% why she devoted all her time and energy to her sons," he said.

While Samir and his brothers have adapted to the American ways, his father did not. His father came to live with Samir and his brothers for a couple of years in the Denver area, but returned to Bosnia as he had a hard time adapting to the American culture and language.

In his words ...

"My friends are my family. I've got friends all over the country; I'm still in contact with many of them. I still have friends from when I used to play soccer and friends from the neighborhood where I grew up."



The Hodzics visited the magical world of Disneyland.

Samir's favorites

Samir said he loves steak. "I'm a meat lover. I immigrated to the right state. My little boy is just like me, he loves steaks, too," he said.

Samir doesn't have a favorite book as he doesn't like to read. He spends his time in front of his 50-inch TV. He loves Monday Night Football. He looks forward to coming home from work and watching it. He shared that he went from a six-inch screen to a 50-inch TV; and now owns six TV sets.

His favorite movie is *Be-*

hind Enemy Lines, which is a 2001 thriller war film. The fictional plot is centered on the story of uncovering a massacre in the Bosnian War of 1992-1995 by an American naval aviator.

Samir's favorite color is black or white. When asked why, he replied, "Black because it makes me look skinnier and white looks good with my dark hair."

Samir said he's a Denver sports fan, but loves to watch all sports. "If there's not any sports to watch, I'll watch Jay Leno because he's funny. I like to

In his words . . .

"I get angry at the dishonesty of people. Terrorists make me mad as does any person who makes something bad happen. I question why."

joke, like Jay Leno," he added.

When asked who he would like to have lunch with, Samir replied, "The soccer great, Pele. He was my favorite players when he was little. He was the best! I always tried to be like him and be the best on my team." Pele played professional soccer for more than 20 years and was given the title of Athlete of the Century by the International Olympic Committee.

If he could travel anywhere in the world, Samir said he would like to go to Hawaii. "I hear it's very nice with nice beaches." Also, he said he wants to see more of the United States.

If he could hold any political office, Samir said he would like to be Secretary of State. "I could travel and make people happy. Make Peace. Solve problems while pulling people together," he said.

He describes himself as a

very hard worker. "I'm a quick learner," he added. Samir shared that a Denver Zoo guest survey has named his department the best zoo department nine times. Samir likes to compare himself to Kevin McNicholas, K-M Concessions President. "I started from nothing. KM started from nothing. I respect KM. He helped me. I help others. It's amazing how they do business."

Samir said his is very grateful for the opportunities he has been given in the United States since he arrived as a refugee. "I came here and I had a chance. It wasn't easy. I

had to work two jobs to pay my bills. I had to learn English. I had to work really hard to get someplace, but I had an opportunity here," he said.

He believes in giving others the same. "Others call my department the international one as I give opportunities to other refugees. It's a plus that I'm so patient and can explain things well. When people ask how we communicate, I respond I don't need anybody to talk to, I need someone to work," he said with a smile.



In 2008, the Hodzic family started a new family tradition. They watched the fireworks at the soccer stadium (Dick's Sporting Goods Park) on the Fourth of July. The family plans to repeat this enjoyable celebration for years to come.