

# Heart & Hand Fund

## Letter from Marta

Between visits to grantees in Croatia and Serbia this fall, I squeezed in a four-day car trip through southern Albania. My traveling companions and I generated good-natured teasing from border guards who checked our passports. They don't often come across a Serb, Kosovar, and American on holiday together. "A-ha," they would say, "negotiations must be going on, so don't leave home without your American," and burst into laughter.

We drove along the southern coast to Butrint, a spectacular UNESCO World Heritage site near the Greek border. Archeologists have traced settlements there as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The ancient Greek and Roman ruins are still impressive, even though vandals stole the original marble over the centuries. (A curious side note: Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev visited the site in 1959 and suggested to the then dictator Enver Hoxa that he turn the site into a submarine base!)

As bad as the economy is in our country, it's even worse in the Balkans. Consider these unemployment statistics: Serbia 20%, Bosnia 43%, and Croatia 18%. NGOs in the Balkans are struggling to stay afloat. Three Heart & Hand grantees have had to close their doors or consider radical reorganizations to reduce costs. The relentless efforts to raise money



Serbian, Kosovar and American activists "negotiate" in Albania.

intensify the stress of activists' work. The toll is even higher for queer organizers routinely threatened by hateful homophobes.

An incident that happened in Jordan where I was attending a board meeting of Urgent Action Fund reminded me of why I keep funding women's groups in the Balkans and also ask you to join me. A young Serbian and I were eager to meet a respected Jordanian-Palestinian activist. At the last minute, she sent a text message saying that she wouldn't join us for dinner because she couldn't be seen publicly sitting at a table with an Israeli.

My Serbian friend's disappointment was quickly overshadowed by her frustration at peace making in the Middle East. "What if my Kosovar friends were afraid to speak to me, a Serb, or the women in Srebrenica, Bosnia banned Serbian Women in Black from attending their memorial celebrations? Where would we be?"

It is the bravery of the women in the Balkans that I find so compelling. That they continue to put their bodies and reputations at risk crossing borders to talk and listen to one another no matter how painful the conversations is a rarity these days. The women of the Balkans are models for the world and deserve our continued support. I know we are all struggling with our finances these days, but the work that these women accomplish is not only brave and dangerous but setting new models out in the world. Let us all do what we can to support them. Thank you.

---Marta

**100% of every contribution goes directly to fund the work of activists.**

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**To Donate Online:**

<http://www.peacedevelopmentfund.org/page/donations>

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[http://kerrylobel.typepad.com/heart\\_and\\_hand\\_fund/](http://kerrylobel.typepad.com/heart_and_hand_fund/)



Autonomous Women's Center  
Staff, Belgrade, Serbia



Sandra, staff member of NLO, in Novi Sad, Serbia: her tattoo is the title of the famous painting by Frida Kahlo ... "Tree of Hope, Remain Strong" ... Sandra identifies with Frida and this painting as she is disabled, lives in pain, has survived several surgeries and needs more. She has no health insurance.

### Court of Women for the Balkans Scheduled for 2012

Courts of Women are symbolic trials that address women's experiences of violence and poverty around the world. Thirty-five Courts of Women have been held in different countries since 1995. Now plans are underway for the thirty-sixth: a public hearing on women victims of violence during the Balkans war.

The Courts were conceived as a new political space where women--victims, survivors, and resisters--give testimony before a jury of women and men. While they have no legal authority, the Courts provide a powerful forum for human rights education by interweaving personal testimonies with political analyses.

A planning meeting occurred in Sarajevo in October with activists attending from Serbia and Croatia and one Kosovar on Skype as she is not allowed into Bosnia. Women also attended from India, Cambodia, South Africa, Iraq and Mexico and inspired all with their past experiences with the courts. The next planning meeting is scheduled for December in Pristina, Kosova. There is no funding in place for these planning sessions and activists are paying their own expenses for now.

Sarajevo has been mentioned as a possible site for the 2012 conference, but Bosnia's ban on allowing Kosovars to enter the country should disqualify it. My guess is that it will be held in a more neutral country like Montenegro. This is an exciting step forward for the region and feminism. I plan on attending; perhaps some of you will want to join me.

### Community Building in Novi Sad

Heart & Hand has been funding Novi Sad Lesbian Organization (NLO) for the past three years, but this was my first visit to their headquarters in Novi Sad, Serbia. The town feels like a rural town but it's actually Serbia's second largest city.

In addition to its private office, NLO shares a large space in a house bought by a German organization. The house has a big kitchen and nightclub, which allows NLO to run programs that build good will between lesbians and the larger community. Three times a month it offers

reasonably priced (under \$2) vegetarian meals to the general public, serving typically 60-70 dinners each night. NLO also offers a poetry workshop and a free photography workshop taught by a highly regarded lesbian photographer. One of its most popular classes, Renovating Your Closet, invites textile designers to teach women how to dress well on less money by remodeling their clothes. For lesbians, NLO offers workshops on relationships, a topic that surfaced again and again in lesbian counseling sessions.

### Autonomous Women's Center in Zagreb

Besides running its excellent counseling service, the Autonomous Women's Center is justifiably proud of its long-running SOS Hotline Training Program. Widely regarded as the best training program on issues of violence against women and the invasiveness of the patriarchy, it consists of 80 hours of intensive training over eight weeks--and that's just to train volunteers. The training is so highly regarded that some NGOs enroll new staff members, even though they are not planning to work as hotline volunteers.

I just learned about the Autonomous Women's Center's Listserv on this visit, although it has been running for seven years and connects more than 700 women in the Balkans. What's amazing is that it's an all-volunteer operation with no one at the helm, and yet it works. Women share stories about their work and lives, post petitions, announcements, and news clips, and support one another in chat sessions.

After 20 years of nonstop activism, Lepa Mladjenovic is finally taking some time off. The co-founder and counseling coordinator of the Autonomous Women's Center in Belgrade will not stay idle for long. She's already developed ideas for two publications. Lepa was the sole public lesbian in Serbia in the early 90s--a brave and lonely position to take in a rigidly homophobic country. Undaunted by the hostility directed at her, Lepa never stopped standing up for gay rights. One small way I can show my appreciation for her work is by helping her get unfettered writing time at retreats for women writers and activists in this country.

## Violence at Gay Pride Parade in Belgrade

Everybody was talking about the upcoming Gay Pride Parade in Belgrade while I was in Croatia and Serbia. It had been almost a decade since the last attempt at a gay parade ended in violence, with the police joining the hooligans in attacking the marchers. (Last year an attempt to stage the parade was abandoned when the government could not offer protection.) Some of my friends speculated that the turnout would be low because of feminists' criticisms of the way the gay leaders dismissed women's input and the fear of violence. As it turned out, about 1500 marchers showed up, guarded by a police force of 5,000. Clearly the government, eager to join the European Union, didn't want a repeat of the last parade disaster. This time the injured were mostly the police, attacked by about 6,000 masked and hooded nationalist rioters chanting, "Death to homosexuals."

To guarantee the safety of the marchers after the parade, police offered rides to safe locations in windowless police vans that usually transport criminals.

Here's a description of the experience from a Croatian participant:

*"It was quite chaotic, policemen were in panic, many of their colleagues were injured...Police took my group to the police station Stari grad, that was nearest the street we were going. It was like 2 minutes away, but when we came to the police station, hooligans were still around in the streets, and we had to wait for 2 hours until situation would calm down. During our 2 hours in police station we were on 6th floor, because on the first floor they kept arrested hooligans. We watched TV news in police room, and in spite the policeman told us not to, we took photos of the posters on the wall: Milosevic, chetnic leader from World War II - Draza Mihajlovic, General Mladic that police is supposed to arrest and take to the Hague*

*tribunal, Patriarch Pavle etc...Obviously the same guys that the hooligans adore are policemen's idols too. There were some parts of police uniforms around and we tried police caps when the one in charge to guard us turned his back."*

Although 140 people were injured and vandals broke store windows in the three-block area where the parade was held, some saw the parade as a sign of the government's progress in embracing democratic values and the rule of law. As evidence that Serbia still has a long way to go, a group of priests descended on the area after the parade, swinging incense balls "to cleanse the streets polluted by the presence of homosexuals."

Homophobia is still rampant in Serbia, but my friends say that the violence has less to do with homophobia and more to do with nationalist forces wanting to take back the government. These people don't want to join the E. U. and they vow to never recognize Kosovo's independence.

In a related incident, two young ultranationalist thugs broke into the Women in Black's headquarters at 1:30 a.m. shouting "Where are the faggots?" and attacking sleeping men and women activists with hammers. Three were injured. The attackers seemed intent on punishing Women in Black's support of gay rights and, in particular, the Gay Pride Parade, scheduled to take place later that day.



Heart & Hand grantees in front of Belgrade, Serbia Pride Parade. The banner reads, "Together We Can."



Bogus poster in downtown Belgrade supposedly published by the Ministry of Public Health says "Ban the Parade."



Sanja and Nela, Croatian activists, playing around in the police station

Heart & Hand Fund  
Grantees

Autonomous Women's Center  
Belgrade, Serbia  
<http://www.womengo.org.yu>

Center for Women War Victims  
Zagreb, Croatia  
<http://www.czzzr.hr/>  
<http://www.women-war-memory.org/>  
<http://www.petra-nvo.net/>

Centre for Women's Studies  
Zagreb, Croatia  
<http://www.zenstud.hr/>

CURE  
Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina  
[www.fondacijacure.org](http://www.fondacijacure.org)

Donji Lapac Women's Group  
Donji Lapac, Croatia  
[zenska.grupa.donji.lapac@gs.t-com.hr](mailto:zenska.grupa.donji.lapac@gs.t-com.hr)

KONTRA  
Zagreb, Croatia  
<http://www.kontra.hr/>

Labris  
Belgrade, Serbia  
[www.labris.org.rs/en/](http://www.labris.org.rs/en/)

NLO  
Novi Sad, Serbia

Seka House  
Island of Brac, Croatia

Women in Black  
Belgrade, Serbia  
<http://www.wib-zeneucrom/belgrade.org>

Women's Group Brod  
Slavonski Brod, Croatia  
[www.udruga-brod.hr](http://www.udruga-brod.hr)

Women's Room  
Zagreb, Croatia  
[www.zenskasoba.hr](http://www.zenskasoba.hr)

Zene Zenama  
Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina  
[www.zenezenama.org](http://www.zenezenama.org)

Two additional grants were made to individual activists to respond to community needs as they arise.

## Centre for Women's Studies in Zagreb

The Centre's annual postgraduate women's studies conference continues to attract dynamic women from around the world. Last year 35 women from Australia, Brazil, Iran, Europe and the U.S. attended the conference on "Challenges for Old/New Economic Inequalities." Genevieve Vaughan, a long-time feminist and author of *Forgiving, a Feminist Criticism of Exchange*, was invited to give the keynote address.

I am honored to be invited to speak at the Centre's 2011 conference on "Feminism in a Transnational Perspective: Women's Self-Authoring in Words and Action." The annual conference is held in a breathtakingly beautiful spot: a university in Dubrovnik set on a hill overlooking the Adriatic Sea.

## Cure Foundation's Fifth Pitchwise Festival

Once again Cure, joined by 13 partner organizations, assembled a jam-packed schedule of films, exhibitions, performances, book promotions, workshops, concerts and parties at its 2010 Pitchwise Festival of Women Arts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This year's focus on global feminist movements was highlighted in a display of profiles of 50 "Sheroes" from around the world who inspired new generations of human rights defenders. After the festival, Cure took a mobile exhibition of Sheroes around the country.

Artists from 10 countries participated in the festival, many of them tying their artwork and performances to two other dominant themes: women's physical and emotional wellness and the importance of women's engagement in public and political life. This is an election year in Bosnia and Herzegovina participants were encouraged to join in a debate on "101 Reasons to Vote for Women," an effort to increase the representation of women in elected offices. Cure continued the "Vote for Women" campaign across the country, involving thousands of women through workshops

## Kontra Files Suits Under New Anti-Discrimination Law

Kontra, an organization in Zagreb that fights discrimination against lesbians, filed the first civil and criminal law suits under Croatia's new Anti-Discrimination Law--a law that Kontra helped create. The case involves a 13-year old girl attending a Catholic school who dared to disagree with her teacher's characterization of homosexuality as a disease. When the girl's mother, joined by another mother, complained, the school principal physically threatened them.

The two public hearings on the case were shams. The first judge allowed the audience to shout at the mothers, and the second chastised the mother for not raising her daughter according to Catholic precepts. Kontra intervened to stop the hearings, demanding a new hearing with a judge knowledgeable about the new law.

Kontra is using this case to make an argument for trying anti-discrimination cases outside of Croatia. The country is eager to join the European Union, and anti-discrimination cases like this one reflect poorly on the status of human rights in Croatia. If Kontra succeeds in moving the case to a European court, it will set a precedent for Croatia and all of Europe. Kontra is struggling to raise funds to keep the case moving forward.



50 "Sheroes" from around the world at Fifth Annual Pitchwise Festival