

Uhm. The following interview was conducted with Vanja and can you help me pronounce your last name? Uhm, Ilic for the Star City Treasures AmeriCorps history project. It took place on July 31st at Vanja's home. The interviewer is Trisha. Um. Tell me a little about where you grow, grew up?

**VANJA:** Originally I was born in former Yugoslavia, but there it's pronounced Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. My city is on the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Close to the Adriatic, beautiful sea. Very close, yeah. And city (unintelligible)

**TRISH:** Uhm, tell me about your family?

**VANJA:** Family here?

**TRISH:** Um, family when you grew up and then we'll do family here.

**VANJA:** Yeah, I was raised by mom and dad and I had, at that time I have a sister when war began. She died and uh, suddenly we all had to go apart. I moved to United, first we moved as a refugee to Italy, then to Austria, Austria, Vienna Beach, then we move to Germany where I spend like eight, nine. Eight, nine years of my life. Get married. Have a beautiful daughter. Then, uh, we end up being in United States for the last six years.

**TRISH:** So how old were you when you went to Germany?

**VANJA:** Twenty-one.

**TRISH:** Twenty-one, and that's where you met your husband?

**VANJA:** Yes.

**TRISH:** Okay. Um, tell me about some of your family traditions growing up. Um, is there anything different?

**VANJA:** Oh a, a lot. Family is very close to each other. Like, parents they never go to retirement home even if

you work, if you whatever - you know - challenge you have to face. You know. The only families goes at this retirement place, homes are families without kids. You know. Or family who doesn't have no one to take care of you. You know, then government take care of them. They pay everything for them. Family is very close. Family means everything, especially mom and dad. They give you a lot and once you become family, usually you live with them or close somewhere. You know. Either same city or you know, the rich parents if they build house next to theirs, you know. But very, very close. Your relationship with parents is never like weekends, you know, or something. They live for you and you live for them. You know a lot of different cultures, very different culture you know. I wish, you know, when there would be place in this whole entire world. Something, you know, all the good benefits from the United States, you know, and like tradition and other things from my country.

**TRISH:** Did you have brothers and sisters?

**VANJA:** Yes.

**TRISH:** How many.

**VANJA:** Only one sister and she died. Yeah.

**TRISH:** Only one sister. Oh, okay. Um, are your parents still living?

**VANJA:** My parents are still alive, and that's what, what's killing me every day that I am so far away from them. They don't have any more kids. You know, and uh you have to live the rest of your life thinking that, you know. Especially now, me being older and them getting older, you know, to the age where they can get ill or something. If something happen I am not close, you know. It's very... it's very hard, you know.

**TRISH:** So when you left as a refugee your parents, did they stay?

**VANJA:** My parents didn't want to leave. Especially my father, as a male, he wanted to stay for city, help the city. Help the people, you know. He used to work for... part of him worked for government before, you know, part of his job for the government organization and now he is working for the government. Life is everything, and, and his age, you know, if he move to United States there is nothing we can offer him here. You know, only family, and you know, and us and food, but their social life will be below zero, you know. They will have us but they will not have friends, relative, no one. Which wouldn't be life, you know, in the four walls, you know, between four walls.

**TRISH:** Um, looking back on your childhood, was there, um, foods or, um, different recreations that, you know, like things that you did as a kid that?

**VANJA:** Very, like our daughter's attending YMCA after school program and after that she's playing soccer here, volleyball. All her activities we have to drive her around, take her around. I was only six grade of elementary school; our elementary was first to eight, you know. Like middle school when I start playing guitar and I walk like mile and half, you know, there and a mile and a half back without anyone walking me, you know. Here it takes a lot of, you know; just drive kids around then food. Food is very different and every day we go to high market and we have market every day. You know, fresh vegetables, fresh meat. People never buy more than two three stuff, you know. They usually go everyday, you know, and buy food and people cook. We don't have so many restaurants as you guys but we have fancy restaurants. Maybe, like, East and West coast, you know. If you really want to go outside for some occasion then you really have to be treated and really fancy. Not like, you know, buffets here, you know. Unum.

**TRISH:** Um, tell me about your uhmm education in Bosnia.

**VANJA:** Yeah, I finish, uh, elementary and high school in my city then I; I studied Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Uh, agriculture.

**TRISH:** Oh!

**VANJA:** (Unintelligible) agriculture.

**TRISH:** Uhm, what brought you to the studying agriculture? Did, what did you...?

**VANJA:** Our high school, uh, a little bit different then, you know, your school general education high school. But I heard here also, is high school where you already educate for something. Like in high school I have all general assessments and then I also have uh all agriculture, you know, assessment, like, plus, you know, and when you finish high school, you already have something in your head. You can work as technician somewhere. Like I wouldn't be engineer, you know, with my high school diploma, but I can work in agriculture laboratory or something, as a technician, you know, or assistant.

**TRISH:** Um.

**VANJA:** The reason why I started because I love bi, biology. Uh, it was second opinion. My first was art, you know, and music, but my parents thought at the time - me finishing and being artist is going to be (unintelligible) out on the street without money in the pocket. That's what my father always said, you know.

**TRISH:** This is a funny side note, I'm really not supposed to talk about myself in the interview, but I studied art and now I actually going back to school to study biology. So. (Small laugh)

**VANJA:** Because you cannot survive. Especially back there in my country with art, nothing. If you don't have good major.

**TRISH:** Yeah.

**VANJA:** But, art majors good here, in our country - no it's just art, you know. Plain, you have art diploma what are you - just painter, you know. You can make

money on the street when we have tourists to the city. Otherwise...

**TRISH:** Tell me a little bit about your profession now - you work with the refugee resettlement?

**VANJA:** I work with the refugee resettlement, but even back there in Germany I uh I work for the Red Cross as a part-time and I help many, many, many, many, many Bosnian families translating, you know, taking them to apartments. We even; many people don't realize what we have here in the United States. Like, how blessed we are to have all this program support, you know, and resources of the monies, especially in Lincoln. As a city two hundred fifty thousand people, it's great of the resources, you know, some time people complain, but I wish to all of them to see the rest of world, you know, what they offer for refugees, you know. Even Germany, who was social country, like you have a social system, you know, you have a social building. You go over there and you are responsible to find interpreter and bring with and go and, you know, seek for help, you can but there is no social worker who will go around the city as we provide services here for people. We do pre-arrival, after-arrival and post-arrival section, which takes people, you know, before they arrive sometimes monitor three, four, five months, sometimes six, even year, you know, and then once when they are here we, we, uh, almost weekly basis. Once in the week more, at least, you know. But there's days you see them every single day, you know. After, ah, six months, hundred eighty days, after they arrived. And after five years from their arrival they have rights to come to our office and ask/seek for help, any kind of help.

**TRISH:** Wow, I didn't realize all that we did to... that's amazing. Um, tell me about meeting your husband in Germany. He was also uhmm a Bosnian refugee?

**VANJA:** I knew my husband from, from Sarajevo when I studied. He worked in one Cafe/Bar. We met there before and when we met in Germany. 'Oh, what you doing here?' 'What you doing, when did you arrive?' 'I'm here with

family.' 'Same here.' And that's, we start, just going out as a friends together and it's happen

**TRISH:** Um, and then you were married in Germany?

**VANJA:** We married in Germany and daughter was born year after we married in 1995 and she's eleven years old. She go every summer back to grandparents. She spend three months...

**TRISH:** That's fantastic.

**VANJA:** over vacation. We work very hard to send her, but, you know, it means so much for her and it means so much for me that I am able to, you know, send my child to my parents, you know, because they can not see me every year, but at least they can spend three months together. They love her to death. After my sister died my mom didn't talk three years at all, and she would color with her. She is new person again. Totally new, you know, and they smile, they laugh, you know, they have everything, you know. When they are together you just have to see and I call everyday. It's just amazing, you know. All this fun when they have together.

**TRISH:** Um, how did you decide to come to America from Germany?

**VANJA:** Uh Thanks God, to God and for President Clinton at that time. I wish Hillary won this next year. Hillary Clinton, I would love it because he was one of my favorite presidents, you know. And all these rights and, you know, this stuff what he wants for this poor people, you know, in the United States - social, you know. I am really thankful. Same here, you know, he open a program for marriage, mixed marriage. In Europe mixed marriage mean between two different religions. No one has so many different religions as you guys here, you know. In our country we fight because of religion. We have only Orthodox Catholics and, and Muslims, you know, that's all. Major, you know, that's all. Few Jewish, few, now there is a (unintelligible), more than couple other, you know, uh religions, but never before

heard about anything else. And my parent's marriage was mixed, you know. But usually - what are you - you are what your father is, you know, and according to my father I was Orthodox, you know. But, you know, my faith, but my husband, you know, is a Catholic, but they are Atheists. They don't really go to church or nothing, you know. They don't practice, you know, and we had arrived to apply through that mixed marriage, you know, to come to the United States.

**TRISH:** Interesting, um...

**VANJA:** Many people end up that way here.

**TRISH:** And so, what year did you come to the United States.

**VANJA:** Uh We came late '99.

**TRISH:** Did you come directly to Lincoln?

**VANJA:** Directly to Lincoln, his two brothers they move before us here, and how they move here. Someone didn't have sponsor, didn't have relative, no one, and they, they just end up being in Nebraska. Someone they knew, you know, and they end up being here. We had a chance to go East or West coast, because I have some friends and relatives there, but we compared the time and we found out that Nebraska is the cheapest, especially for beginners, you know. They told us it doesn't matter what education you have, you have to start, restart all over here. Which is very difficult.

**TRISH:** Yeah, it must be frustrating. Um, when you arrived here in Lincoln, um, what does your husband do?

**VANJA:** My, at that time or right now?

**TRISH:** Either.

**VANJA:** At that time when we came here agency find him job at Farmland, Crete, labor work, you know. He didn't complain about the job he was doing as a physical how much. He didn't like the respect, or can I say no

respect, you know. For human rights, and you know. He said he never saw really strong capa, capitalism, you know in the real, than when he was working there, you know. You know. They never call you by name, they always call you like, with fingers, you know. They don't even try to remember your name, and who is usually your supervisor is someone who has, has or maybe eight years of, of elementary school. Whatever person work in that position in manufacturing, and he just couldn't take it physically anymore, you know. He was so bad mood for months, you know, and after nine months we, we start looking for another job. It was very hard because working there, you know. He attend some classes in the evening, but very hard. There wasn't any place to practice his English, you know. And everything you learn, you know, in school is different if you don't have chance to practice somewhere. Working at Farmland, never chance to practice. And then we were lucky to find new job at University of Nebraska, custodial. What he was doing exactly, they uh polish the floors. What his position was and he stayed there for four years. Say good insurance, you know, benefits. And uh he improve his English much, much better. And then two years ago, right now he applied at um, Lincoln Plating Company. He starts working also, not really great job, but he end up being controller, great position, you know. Nice supervisor. Uh he's very happy. First time, but my husband is a professional cook, you know, like four years and then plus two, you know. And it's very depressing; you cannot work something you know. Especially, his specialization was called buffet. Like if you have a special party, decoration and those kind of stuff. For, you know, if it really needed touch of your hand, you know. He's great in that. And it's sad, you know, you have to start, restart all over and then you have a family. I know you can do it, you know, but it's not easy. It's like, like first you have to survive to do it, you know, as my, you know, I'm taking always at least four and a half or eight credits, you know. I'm laughing at myself. I'm going to be ninety years old when I am done with my school, you know here.

**TRISH:** What are you studying now?



**VANJA:** I, I finish two years of uh interior design online and I can take some courses at Southeast Community College to get their, their diploma too, you know. And I'm just taking more classes, you know. I don't know where this taking me, you know, at least I enjoy it, you know. I learn a lot, you know, but I would love to start seeing me, myself doing something with art, because I think that, you know, everybody's born with something, but I think everything I know it's not inside my head. Not just painting, you know, I consider I am more better with the decoration, you know. I, I didn't paint for years, but really. Everything... this doesn't sound right when you talk about yourself, but I really think that I am so talented. You know in everything I have it's inside my hands. Just give me color, material, you know, leave me one room, you know, you know.

**TRISH:** Did your, do you think your creativity came from, um, um?

**VANJA:** My mom is very creative, very, you know. She never learn, but (Pause) never go, you know, extra. She play, she play uh flute, flute, but very, very talented, you know. I remember how she was going around the mountains and, you know, picking the flower. Big, different kind of flower, where you can dry and then later paint them and make beautiful flower arrange, arrangements, you know, beautiful. And I find myself more doing that and that, I just love it, you know.

**TRISH:** Um, (Pause) what was it like to first come to America? Was it a lot different than your moving to Germany or was it...

**VANJA:** Very different. Everything we know about America is East and West coast. Like California, San Francisco, Los Angeles, you know, Miami, New York, all those big cities. And then you end up in Nebraska, middle of Nebraska - flat, you know. I remember the second day we arrive they took us to a place, first building, apartment building. When I saw the apartment building we live, I couldn't believe that America can, you know.

I never saw nothing in the pictures, not any movies, you know, apartment that, that conditions, you know. And it was like, wow, what is this? Either must be very poor or I didn't think that there is something better, you know, at that time. I just thought, this cannot be true, you know. I didn't even realize that we were going to start, you know, below zero here, you know. And things got to the case worker that time, who was my case worker because myself came to the same agency where I'm working now. My caseworker, she told me next day when she find me she said, this is not everything, that's not America and she took me to SouthPointe. She showed me the beautiful stores, you know, and everything else. But I was still amazed when they took us to apply for social security, they ask me. Yeah, I ask the guy is this, I was looking at US Bank, you know, downtown direction. And I said is this the tallest building you guys have here? And proudly he said, almost that's the tallest one, but the capital would be the tallest one, but that's, yeah, that's the one in the downtown area. I said, oh my goodness, you know. He is so proud, you know, but as I said everything we know is, we knew about America is Chicago, you know, Middle West, (unintelligible) or Denver, you know. But never about some small city. As, as much as I hated when I came, you know, not hated as a city because I didn't knew city, you know, I didn't knew people, but I was just frustrated where I end up. I don't think that there is happiest refugee person now, than me who lives in this city. Knowing more Lincoln, finding more American friends, you know, adapting, and every single time travel East/West coast, I am so excited to come back and live in our little town, Lincoln. Because I think they live all the time too fast. I don't know how it would be, you know, life. I am happy to go and visit, but I am so excited to come back.

**TRISH:** (Small chuckle) how does your daughter like it here? How...

**VANJA:** She was little.

**TRISH:** She was little when she came?

**VANJA:** Yeah. What she's comparing now, she comparing always Yugoslavia. Her life in Yugoslavia, Croatia right now and part of the Herzegovina where we're from, and America life. Her age kids, you just give them money and they go to the grocery and buy, you know, she go to high market. She go with kids eleven years old to the downtown in the evening, or bars are open, you know, like Mill, The Mill? In the downtown. And kids are just walking, they can sit by, of course they cannot - they can drink, you know, juice or something, you know. Usually they are attended by adults in evening hours, but throughout the day you can see kids walking on the streets. They play all day long in the street. You can send her to buy - last year I found out you cannot buy any more cigarettes if you are under age eighteen, because eighteen is limit in Europe. Eighteen and no alcohol, but I remember my parents, you know, my parents never smoked, but other people send me, you know, buy cigarettes, you know. I never buy alcohol, but for someone, you know, but that even wasn't problem when we were teenagers and start drinking. You could go to grocery store and buy alcohol. But we don't have so many percent of alcohol people either there. You can buy, but you know, it's different with 15-16 you can go to regular bars, you know. Either open or closed, you know. And kids, they don't need to go to the houses to make house party, you know. There's no, if you don't have so much restriction then you are more open and, you know, want to do something wrong because no one is, you know, behind your back, you know. Like personally I don't think it's right and you have to be twenty-one to get to the bar for instance, that's adult, you know. But that's my personal opinion because I live different, you know, for your guys' maybe you don't, cannot think as I think, you know. You know. You cannot protect some things, what's going to happen, you know. They will always find some way (Pause) to find alcohol or the things you don't want them to do.

**TRISH:** Exactly. Um, (Long pause with background noises) what, what recommendations, and this is probably a very uhmm appropriate question for you, what recommendations would you give to um new refugees or people coming

after you? Any sort of advice that you would have for preparing people for what it's like here?

**VANJA:** Just be very patient. It's the hardest thing to be, but to be patient and to, to listen someone who was once in your shoes, you know. Working as a, with the refugees, you know, and have them here and you feel they don't trust you, you know. The only experience I can give it is my experience. Your experience would be different even be refugee, you know. It depends on your English, your education and everything else. Even if you high educated, you know, and even if you have, you know, English as your first language, you know, you still need to prove yourself. Maybe your first job would not be so bad, but I find sometimes people looking at you like not trusting you, you know. I don't know if you understand what I mean, you know. And then after first month is great, then second month I can feel confusion, then, you know, after three months they hate them self, everybody around them self. And they tell you open what they don't like or something and after four or fifth month they are coming back and telling you - Oh, now I know what you think, you know. I wish we never have to go sometimes through that time, you know. But it's normal reaction. I'm more depressed last two months, then I've ever been since when I came here. I don't know if it's the stress, you know. I really don't see that, you know. I think that everybody work a lot. I look at my colleagues and everyone is so busy, you know, hardly anyone, you know, since we have psychologists in the building, you know, they work sometimes at eight, nine you know.

**TRISH:** That's really long hours.

**VANJA:** Is this going to be public, all this when we talk. Or are you going to rewrite?

**TRISH:** I, I write it, but I can, I can um restrict parts of it about your work if you'd like.

**VANJA:** No, no, no I' just, you know, asking you. Yeah it's um, work is fine. Because really we uh...

**TRISH:** Stop it.

<Personal Details>

**TRISH:** Recording again, um tell me about citizenship. Are...

**VANJA:** Yeah, five years after you came, have arrived you can apply, four years and nine months. We got our citizenship already.

**TRISH:** Um, how did you find the process? Was it?

**VANJA:** For the citizenship?

**TRISH:** Yeah.

**VANJA:** I work there. (Small chuckle)

**TRISH:** Oh so you work there.

**VANJA:** I work with the refugees and when, when you arrive you have refugee orientation, you know,

**TRISH:** Oh, okay.

**VANJA:** they told, they told you, you know.

**TRISH:** I'm sorry guess I don't know anything about the process.

**VANJA:** When refugees arrive to the United States we gave them, you know, as an agency we give them orientation and we tell them everything, what's going to happen. After year you have right to apply for green card, and after five, four or five months, you know, four years and nine months, for the citizenship. And I-94 refugee visa is the best one you come to United States. You can, you have a right to stay as long as you want, you know, and work as much as you can.

**TRISH:** So there's other uh types of visas where you only come for a certain period of time?

**VANJA:** Exactly, work visa, tourist visa, student visa but you have restrictions. With I-94 refugee visa you can stay and work. That's the best one, but it's sad one, you know, because that's the only kind of visa you are forced to come somewhere, either United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, you know. But, all other kind of visa you choose to come, because refugee they don't have rights, you know. They are in a situation to leave the country, you know.

**TRISH:** Um, what do you want your children to learn and remember from Bosnia Herzegovina?

**VANJA:** Everything, everything. I want her to keep her language, and I, that's what I'm going to leave in her to teach her child. Language and culture.

**TRISH:** And so do you...?

**VANJA:** We speak our language, yeah she speak three languages since she was born in Germany yeah. And uh I learn Russian in school and we resettle so many Russian family, you know, I can communicate with them too. (Pause) Germany, English is my fourth language and that's why we send her every summer for three months there.

**TRISH:** Just to keep the heritage.

**VANJA:** um-hum

**TRISH:** And you were raised Orthodox?

**VANJA:** We raised her, okay, very interesting. My mom is Catholic, my father is Orthodox. My father was atheist, you know; never attend church you know, very openly. But mom's family was very religious. The place where she was born, where she's from, there's only Catholic, you know. Village size maybe Seward, Seward, and uh they raised really Catholic, you know. Catholic here and Catholic back there are very different. And we raised her to believe in there is someone more, with more power than she has, and she needs to respect, you know, not really straight, straight, straight, you

know. We go, we attend church, we can go to any church because been here and learn all these denomination, you know. God is one, you know. You know, and I don't mind what church you go to - whatever, I feel comfortable with.

**TRISH:** Are there any um traditions related to...

**VANJA:** Easter...

**TRISH:** either religious...

**VANJA:** Christmas is the biggest one, but it's not about the presents. We don't buy presents. It's about spirit. Spirit, like the month, you know, four weeks before Christmas is something special, you know. Preparing, cleaning house, you know, and all that stuff. Yeah. And usually, since my parents, you know, they live in big city. In the city, it's different there, you know. You know, you lose the part, like attending weekly church and everything; they never force us - my mom as a kid. And, you know, back there, you know, we always go for Christmas and for Easter in grandma's home and my grandma had eight kids. And each child was married and they had like, at least two or five, you know. And then we end up there for Christmas, 56 people. It was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. I have beautiful memories, you know. Having family together, and I miss that a lot.

**TRISH:** Um, anything else that you want to mention about, um, the heritage, the culture, traditions, or anything like that?

**VANJA:** But there is a lot, you know. I don't, I don't, I don't know, I don't really know what you mean particularly, you know. A lot of family really. Family is tight. Very tight, like, you know, parents. Friend of mine, American here, she call her mom, she send her mom - mom, thank you, the card, thank you for beautiful weekend. Like, it's nice, you know, but I've never thanked my mom for a beautiful weekend because that's normal. I go back to my mom and I visit her and I hug her all the time and even over the phone I kiss her

million. Send her million kisses all the time. I mean it's a different. I'm finding myself now not be anymore as a Bosnian, but not be adopted here, too. Like between and I'm constantly judging what's wrong in my country, what I would like to have here, you know. The, the things I was raised with, what I don't like, you know. Because, of course you will like all these beautiful life here, you know, and all this beautiful things you can afford. I don't think that there is more as United States, you know. I personally don't think, like, you can survive even if you make thousand dollars, two salary thousand you can really afford. A lot of refugees, you know, two thousand dollars, you just have to walk in their apartment and see what they have, you know. Because they know how to save money, better than maybe American, because you, you never been in situation when you have to be very careful. Very soon they have beautiful furniture, very soon they have nice cars, you know. You are just amazed with two thousand dollars, what they are doing. Especially, you know, after year's people are making more salary and what else you can afford, you know. It's different style of life, there, you know, totally. But as I said, if they ever make one perfect country, I would like to have eighty percent from here and twenty percent - love, social stuff from my country. Because I don't know my first neighbors, that's very sad. You just now say hi and bye, you know. (Background noise) You know, it's sad, you know, that we don't socialize. In our country, my neighborhood, people are born there and they die, they never move, you know. And like, your child is playing in the street and you know every single child, who she's playing with, you know. Here you never know where she is gonna to end up, you know, what's gonna to happen to her or those kind of stuff, you know.

**TRISH:** (Laugh) Well, I think the pup is thinking that the interview is over.

**VANJA:** He is just leaving. He needs, you know, he needs my attention.



**TRISH:** That's no problem. Well, I think that was a really good way to end the interview on bringing the two cultures together.