

**Interview with Selma Selman - Get the Heck to School!**



**SELMA SELMAN**

**Marš u školu!**

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"When I come back from America, all of the girls in the neighborhood begin to boast about their good grades and English language skills, and when adults ask them what they want to be when they grow up, they say 'Selma!,'" recalls Selma Selman, a 26-year-old artist from Bihać who, while completing her master's degree at the University of Syracuse, NY, already started applying to PhD programs. Selma's extraordinary career and academic success has earned her the status of a celebrity in her community.

For several years, Selma has dreamed of starting a foundation for her neighborhood Roma children, particularly girls, and providing them with financial and other support to complete elementary school and to continue their education. With this, she hopes to empower them to escape the tradition of early marriage and a renewed cycle of poverty and hopelessness.

This year, the opportunity to realize this dream finally surfaced when BHeart, the Bosnian-Herzegovinian women's diaspora organization based in Washington, DC ([BHeartFoundation.org](http://BHeartFoundation.org)), decided to implement a one-year pilot project – inspired and supported by Selma – aimed at assisting nearly 40 children, with a special focus on girls, from the Roma settlement of Ružica in Bihać. According to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina, only 15 percent of Roma children finish elementary school, and the situation is even worse for girls, who usually drop out after the third or fourth grade.

### **Meaning of Life**

The fundraising event for the project, which Selma decisively and humorously named "Get the Heck to School!" (Marš u školu!) will take place on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December at the Washington, D.C. home of painter Karin Lithell and Göran Lithell, Deputy Chief of Mission at the Swedish Embassy in the U.S. All proceeds generated from the sale of Selma's works will go toward the one-year assistance program for the education of Roma youth, which will include school lunch, English and computer lessons, awards for the successful completion of their school semester as well as special projects such as trips and workshops.

Regardless of her young age and continuing education, Selma has an extremely strong, almost obsessive need to contribute to her community and to help those with childhoods similar to her own. "If I were to wait another ten years to start, until my life is together, then these children would lose their chance. If I begin now, I believe that some children will succeed. These children are not a burden to me; they are the meaning of life. I'm giving only a little bit so that they can later be able to do a lot for themselves and so that this idea can take root," says Selma.

Since being named the best young artist in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014, Selma's career has steadily risen. Her performances and exhibitions – both individual and group – have been attended by audiences across Europe as well as New York and several other cities on the east coast of the U.S. Selma was recently named recipient of the 2017 Young European Artist Trieste Contemporanea Award as the best young European artist from the region of Central Eastern Europe.

It could be easily assumed that Selma's accomplishments were due to her incredible talent and abilities, but Selma disagrees, instead believing that other children could have the same opportunity and success if they were to receive support similar to the kind she received. "I think it is most important that children are encouraged to accept themselves as they are and to work toward their goals. I've always done that and my every letdown later turned into success."

Selma's first childhood memories are associated with the post-war period in BiH, where the Roma population, which was always marginalized and vulnerable, lived in extremely difficult conditions. Imprinted in her memory is the image of little Selma screaming at soldiers in passing tanks and asking them for white bread, since her family could not afford it and her mother was always cooking corn. "They gave me Coca Cola, which I drank for the first time in my life, and that was an indescribable feeling!"

Her family, like other Roma families, supported themselves by gathering the scrap metal. Unable to pay their bills, they lived without electricity for about ten years. But Selma never used this as an excuse for not completing her schoolwork.

With a partial need to forget and polish her past, Selma recalls the discrimination that Roma children, like her, constantly endured throughout their schooling. "Elementary school was hell. I didn't have a single friend in the first or second grade. When kids gathered to say goodbye, they would all kiss one another, but they'd always skip me. Of course, I was the Gypsy sitting and smelling in the back row. I quickly realized that if I studied and did well in school, perhaps someone would copy my work, and I could at least get some friends that way. And that's the way it was. During art class, everyone gathered around me and asked me to draw for them. I went from the smelly to the popular girl. I began to charge 30 cents for each picture and earned enough for lunch. Later, no one could stop me. I had a goal, even if they all believed that I would marry at 15."

**Marriage Proposal Rejections**

Selma's mother Naza (Abdulahi) married at the age of 13, gave birth to her first child at 14, and immediately began cooking for the 20 people in her family. Regardless of her illiteracy, she was a progressive mother for Selma. She always supported and believed in Selma, despite the patriarchal environment in which women's thoughts and desires are of little value. "Don't be like me" - a phrase Selma heard many times from her mother.

"I was very lucky - I was the youngest in my family, I saw my mother and sisters [Selma's sisters married at 15 and 17 years of age], and so their experiences influenced me when growing up." Throughout her teenage years, Selma had suitors at her door asking to marry. Behind each "no" stood her pride and her power, which can be largely attributed to her regular attendance and success in school. "Unfortunately, the young Roma women who do not have the opportunity to go to school are those who become the victims of these customs: if they are sitting at home, they are wasting money and deemed useless; if



they do not marry, then they are a shame for their families. It was important for me to have somebody next to me telling me I was good at something and that I am worthy," says Selma. "Similarly, we need to do the same with these children now: we need to open their eyes, give them our attention, and empower them with our encouragement and affirmations."

In addition to her mother – with whom Selma has always had a special relationship and whom she calls her angel – there were others in Selma's life who also believed in her success. Dragica Biuković, the head of a local NGO, Alfa, in addition to her support, was also the first person to buy Selma's work when Selma was only 17 years old. There was also her art teacher Mirza Ibrahimpašić as well as Hatemina Kurbegović, who took Selma into her home when she enrolled in university in Banja Luka. Her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Banja Luka were made possible by the Soros Program for Roma from Budapest and a scholarship from the Bosana Foundation, which found mentors for Selma. Her mentor, who wishes to remain anonymous, turned Selma's life into a movie when she took Selma to visit art museums in Paris, Rome, and Barcelona.

After being named the best young artist in BiH in 2014, Selma received a full scholarship for a master's degree in the United States. "If I had stayed in Europe, my identity would have centered on being a Roma artist. But here, being Roma is not that important. People look at me through my work. Here I am one of many fighting for their place and ambitions to realize their American Dream."

After BHeart launches the "Get the Heck to School!" project in December, Selma will head to India, where she will do research focusing on girls who are also at risk of becoming victims of child marriage. Then, come the doctoral program applications, art exhibitions and performances – which Selma is especially fond of – and, all the while, maintaining constant contact with children and family in Ružica.

At the end, Selma asserted "I don't think I am marriage material. I want to dedicate my life to fighting for human rights and improving the situation, not only for Roma, but also for others."