

A spotlight on a National Delegate

Jasminka Despot Lucanin doing humanitarian work

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Dr. Jasminka Despot Lucanin is a National Delegate for Croatia. She completed her master's degree and PhD in Psychology at the University of Zagreb. Jasminka has advanced in her academic career at the University of Zagreb, where she is now a full professor at the Department of Psychology, Centre for Croatian Studies, serving currently as Head of the Department. Throughout her teaching career she has taught undergraduate and graduate courses in: Lifespan Developmental Psychology, Health Psychology, Psychology of Communication, Psychology of Aging, and Counselling Older Persons.

Jasminka's main research interest is the psychology of ageing - biological, psychological and social factors and correlates of health and survival in old age. She has published 30 scientific and 30 professional articles, co-authored and co-edited 4 textbooks and 11 book chapters, and has presented at 23 international and national conferences. She was the principal investigator of two research projects and a co-investigator in 3 other research projects. She is a member of the Editorial Board of the *The Journal of Gerontopsychology and Geriatric Psychiatry*, Hogrefe.

Jasminka was drawn into humanitarian work during the ex-Yugoslavia dissolution wars in 1991-95. Events were engulfing, even for someone not directly involved in hostile activities. There were massive movements of populations from war-afflicted areas to Zagreb and to other countries in Europe. Once shelter and medical assistance were provided, the need

to address the stress and trauma that people experienced emerged as a significant issue. Jasminka was 35 years old at the time, with two young children, a spouse stationed outside of Zagreb, hosting her refugee mother-in-law, and working as a professor in a nursing school. She and other professionals were first approached to advise government agencies on the appropriate psycho-social assistance for refugees, but they quickly realized it would be more effective to work directly with the afflicted people. Jasminka was part of a team who set up an NGO named "Dobrobit" ("Well-Being") that operated as: a counselling centre for individuals, a training centre for professionals, a knowledge-generating hub and an advisory body to government agencies. Jasminka worked shifts counselling women, separated families, and older adults.

'Dobrobit' received foreign assistance in funding, training, and program development. For example, it published clinical guidelines adapted to Croatian circumstances, and structured workshops on grieving, on burn-out among professionals (soldiers, police personnel, nurses) and on returning home. Even returning home needed preparation for adults, as the home they were coming back to had changed, or they were not necessarily returning to their own previous home.

'Dobrobit' was a place of hectic professional activity, warm and supporting relationships among its staff, and a laboratory for translating scientific knowledge into services for people in need. Jasminka's knowledge and skills in the domains of health psychology - stress, coping,

communication skills, and ageing - helped forge up-to-date, flexible and responsive services.

Jasminka's relentless commitment to helping older adults continued after the war had ended - through 'Dobrobit' - in providing free services to the poor senior citizens in Zagreb, with the purpose of preserving or improving their independence in the activities of daily living, their dignity, control and self-fulfilment. The program relies on a network of student volunteers, supervised by psychologists and other health professionals; the students gain much-needed skills and experience, and at the same time they are exposed and trained on the needs and challenges facing older people.

Jasminka currently lives in Zagreb, with her husband (a psychologist), and her daughter (also - a psychology student). Her son (the only non-psychologist in the family) is a computer sciences PhD student who lives and works in Vienna.

Health psychology in Croatia is well represented in the higher education system, in research activities and to a somewhat lesser extent in practice. Courses in health psychology are taught to students of psychology at the graduate, postgraduate and doctoral levels, though there are still no separate postgraduate programs in health psychology. The pressing challenge for health psychology in Croatia is to create employment for young professionals. Although the role of health psychologists is well recognized, there are constant issues of differentiation from clinical psychologists, in terms of positions and acknowledgment as a separate field of expertise. Another challenge is plainly jobs, particularly for young colleagues just starting their careers.



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