

Photo exhibit shows St. Louisans' work with refugees

BY SARAH BRYAN MILLER

sbmiller@post-dispatch.com • 314-340-8249 • Posted: Sunday, October 24, 2010 12:00 am



Eric Greitens went to a refugee camp in Bosnia as an undergraduate in 1994 to work with "unaccompanied children," young refugees who lost a parent during the bloody ethnic cleansing or who had been separated from their families.

When the Duke University student returned from the Balkans, he and some classmates wrote a report on the best ways to work with children in those circumstances.

Instead of focusing on the report, he says, "Everyone wanted to see the photographs I took while working in the refugee camps."

Greitens, a St. Louis native, started using the pictures as an entrée, "to go to churches, to go to synagogues, to go to civic organizations, and tell the stories of the individual people who were survivors of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia."

Everywhere he worked, he did the same thing:

"In every situation, I found it was the photographs that helped me to connect others to the story of what was happening to their fellow human beings overseas."

Some of his best photos, in straightforward black and white, are in an exhibition, "Strength and Compassion," on view through the end of the year at the St. Louis Holocaust Museum and Learning Center.

Greitens, 36, officially lives here, although he estimates that he's on the road "at least 50 to 70 percent of the time."

Photography is just one of Greitens' skills. Helping refugees and the impoverished — from Mexico to India, where he worked in a home for the destitute and dying run by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity — is just one of his priorities.

Greitens, a Rhodes scholar with a doctorate from Oxford, is a senior fellow at the Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri. He enlisted in 2001 and became a Navy SEAL. He went on four tours of duty — in Iraq, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia and Africa — was wounded and received a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star; he's still in the reserves with Special Operations.

Visiting his old comrades after their return from Iraq led to his founding the Mission Continues, which is based in St. Louis and trains wounded veterans to continue to serve and lead in their communities.

This year he was voted one of 30 "All Stars Among Us" by Major League Baseball and has been recognized by People and Outside magazines for his work.

A 1992 graduate of Parkway North ("I'm very proud to be a Viking"), Greitens went to Duke, where he began his international humanitarian work.

The national tour of his exhibition will include 28 photographs. Because space is so tight, the Holocaust Museum can show only 10 — those that focus on children. The museum gets visits from hundreds of school groups each

year, "and we figured that if we had photos of kids having a hard time, that would resonate with the students who come in," museum director Jean Cavender says.

The photographs are eye-catching. Each one measures 4 feet by 3 feet framed; each shows children finding a way through difficult circumstances.

The events of World War II and the Jewish Holocaust shown in the museum are receding in time and passing from living memory. Greitens' photographs 'show that (genocide) is still happening," Cavender says.

The photos show children playing and pensive, in groups and by themselves. A Bosnian girl in a refugee camp draws a picture of a house in chalk; street children in Bolivia run merrily together.

In one of the most arresting, set in a serene Zairian landscape, a Rwandan boy gazes at the camera while a minister, his back to us, prays before leading a service in a camp.

In another, we see a group of infants at eye level: Greitens writes that he walked into an Albanian orphanage to find that "the floor was covered with babies, yet the room was hushed. Many of the children had been ignored for so long that they rarely cried."

Greitens lauds the work of the Holocaust Museum and hopes that his photos will help to preserve memories as the exhibits at the museum do.

"Human beings do have an incredible, often untapped capacity for courage and resilience, even in the most difficult situations," he says.

"In order to really help people effectively, we have to recognize their strengths, so that they can face their challenges with hope. I hope that people will leave the 'Strength and Compassion' exhibit not only inspired by what they've seen, but by what they can do."