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# MIZZOU

## Connecting to Bosnia in CoMo

**MU student expresses love for dance, song and  
Bosnian culture.**



Haris Fazlic plays traditional Bosnian music near Francis Quadrangle. Fazlic won a regional Emmy for his performance with a St. Louis-based traditional Bosnian dance group.

*Story by Caitlin Kerfin*

*Photos by Whitney Hayward*

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**A**s a second-generation refugee, Haris Fazlic's first significant experience with his Bosnian culture began when his family resettled in St. Louis in 1999. His father, Nermin Fazlic, taught him all he knew about Bosnian folk dance when he was 6 years old — lessons that led to an Emmy award.

Fazlic's father was a choreographer for his village's dance troupe in Bosnia before the family fled after Serbian atrocities wiped out much of the population. Haris Fazlic was born as his family sought refuge in Germany, where they spent several years before coming to the U.S.

## **Large Bosnian Population in Missouri**

St. Louis has the largest population of Bosnians outside of Bosnia, and Fazlic's father drew on that cultural support when he organized a dance troupe in 2003 called Bosansko Kolo, translated as Bosnian dance.

Most of the dancers were young, and the group disbanded about four years later after members began leaving for college or got married. Fazlic also took a break from Bosnian dance until Stacy West, the

director of Modern American Dance Company, the professional dance company in residence at the Touhill Performing Arts Center at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, asked him about collaborating for a show in 2011.

“I became interested in the Bosnian community in St. Louis,” West said. She identified the defunct Bosnian dance company and went from there.

West met Fazlic over lunch and was inspired by his stories to make “connection” the theme of her show.

“It made me think how dance, nonverbal communication, could connect us to so many things in the world,” she said. “I realized that Haris and I had very different lives but dance was something that connected us.”

## **Dancers Reflect Cultural Traditions**

Fazlic was asked to serve as an artistic consultant and performer of the 30-minute Bosnian segment named “Still Standing.” It was part of the two-hour show, *Veza*, meaning “connection,” that featured other types of dance revolving around the central theme.

Fazlic also arranged the music for *Veza* called “Sevdah,” which he described as Bosnian blues. He ended up performing in his traditional Bosnian folk dance and played a Bosnian love song.

“Haris has something within him, something undeniable, a love for dance and song and music so intense it is difficult to attribute it to one influence,” his father said in an email from Bosnia that Fazlic translated.

The segment was featured on the Higher Education Channel with interviews of the dancers and clips from the piece. Not long after the performance, Fazlic left St. Louis to pursue a journalism degree at MU.

The college experience, Fazlic said, soon overtook his focus from Bosnian culture. “After the performance, it kind of vanished from my mind,” he said. “I went to college, got college friends and stopped dancing. I forgot about it.”



Fazlic tunes his guitar before playing Bosnian music near Francis Quadrangle. Fazlic, an MU student, is part of a traditional Bosnian dance and music group in St. Louis.

## **Segment Wins Regional Emmy**

That changed in October when the producer of the TV profile told Fazlic the segment had won a regional Emmy in the Historical/Cultural Program Feature Segment category.

“The award ceremony was in Kansas City, and I couldn’t make it because I had a test,” he said.

He eventually got to see the award at a performance of

the Modern American Dance Company. The certificate remains in the dance company's studio and the statue with HEC TV.

“Everything that I do, every action, every conscious action I make is all for the betterment and enhancement of the culture, of my people,” Fazlic said. “So if I win an award, it means nothing to me. But I consider it a benchmark for the advancement of my people.”

As a second-generation Bosnian refugee, Fazlic struggles with keeping his passion for his culture while living the American college lifestyle.

“I guess I really do live two separate lives because in college people know me as a happy-go-lucky, cheerful guy who cares about sports and fantasy football and, you know, girls or whatever,” he said. “But in reality, that means absolutely nothing to me because my real passion, my real devotion, basically everything that I care about is 3,000, 4,000 miles away.”

## **700 Bosnians in Columbia**

About 700 Bosnians live in Columbia, said Senad Music of Refugee and Immigration Services in Columbia. Music came straight to Columbia 16 years ago from Bosnia, like most Bosnian refugees in the city. The community is pretty close, he said, getting together for holidays and special events.

Unlike Fazlic's experience in St. Louis, most of the Bosnian children in Columbia speak fluent Bosnian and English, Music said.

Those marrying outside the culture are more likely to forget their roots, Music said. Education is also playing a part in the success of the next generation of Bosnians in the U.S.

"Younger people are less stereotyped and more accepting," Music said. "Their mind is more open."

St. Louis has pockets of many different types of neighborhoods, and they don't cross over very much, West said.

"I found that all the people I was working with were young immigrants who had come out of this horrible tragedy and were getting opportunities for education," West said. "I feel this is a motivated, driven generation, and they are the ones that are going to change the world."

Fazlic had a book published when he was 17 years old entitled *Memories and Revelries*, a compilation of fictional stories inspired by his Bosnian memories. He hopes to use his journalism degree as a platform to help his people's situation and move back to Austria or Bosnia. He wants to write stories that represent social and political change, cover things that matter and eventually get a government position.

In the meantime, he plays original Bosnian-inspired pieces with friends accompanying. It's the one piece of culture he sometimes expresses during impromptu performances at MU. He sings in a language unknown to most who pass by. They don't know his story. They don't know why he is playing, but Fazlic does.

**Topics:** [Community](#), [Journalism and Communication](#), [Web Exclusives](#)

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