

LILIES OF HOPE

GALA

A NIGHT OF
FUNDRAISING
&
NETWORKING

RAISING
FUNDS FOR
SNAGOVO
ELEMENTARY

PARTY OF THE YEAR

NOVEMBER
2024



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A NIGHT OF GIVING *Back*



A Long Lasting Impact for Snagovo, Zvornik

On November 16th, 2024, Lilies of Hope held our inaugural charity gala, dedicated to making a difference for the students of Snagovo Elementary School in Zvornik, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This year, our focus was on building a playground for the school, a project close to our hearts.

The night was a beautiful celebration, attended by 180 guests who shared our passion for this cause. We were thrilled to have the incredible Merak Soul Band playing soulful Bosnian music, setting a warm and festive atmosphere. Our guests indulged in delicious hors d'oeuvres and enjoyed the unique experience of watching a live cigar roller at work.

Arijana Ramic, our very own Bosnian comedian, did an incredible job as the emcee, keeping everyone laughing and entertained throughout the night.

We are happy to share that our recent charity event was a resounding success! Thanks to the unwavering support of our attendees, sponsors, vendors, and donors, we have met our fundraising goal to build a brand-new playground for Snagovo Elementary.

This playground is more than just a place for children to play—it is a powerful statement from the Bosnian diasporic community. When other avenues fail, we come together to make a difference. It symbolizes our collective commitment to giving back and being a beacon of hope for small, often forgotten communities.

Thanks to your support, we can now begin to work with contractors and plan for the next steps of this project.

From the bottom of our hearts, thank you for being a part of this mission. Together, we are proving that no community is too small to deserve hope and opportunity.



Current state of the playground



Future vision of the playground

Small Steps, Big Impact

A WORD FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

Giving back to Bosnia is not just about helping those in need; it's about honoring our roots and building bridges between our homeland and the Bosnian immigrant community in the USA.

Contributor

Ademir Smajlovic, President



As the leadership team of Lilies of Hope, we are overwhelmed with gratitude for the incredible support shown during our recent gala. Thanks to your generosity, we have successfully secured the funding needed to build a new playground for Snagovo Elementary. This project represents so much—it's a promise to the community of Snagovo that they are seen, valued, and not forgotten.

Our mission at Lilies of Hope is to shine a light on underprivileged and overlooked communities. Snagovo, a small and underfunded town, has endured years of neglect. By coming together to build this playground, we are bringing joy, hope, and a renewed sense of possibility to the children and families in this community.

This gala has shown us the extraordinary potential of our community when we unite for a cause. Inspired by this success, we are excited to announce that



we plan to make this an annual event. Each year, we will take on new projects aimed at uplifting communities in need, ensuring that our mission extends far beyond Snagovo.

We are eager to begin the next steps of this journey by working with contractors and moving forward with the construction process. As the project progresses, we will share regular updates through our social media channels to keep you informed every step of the way.

Thank you for being a part of this important work. Together, we can continue to bring hope and opportunity to those who need it most.

With gratitude,

Ademir Smajlovic
President, Lilies of Hope

Enes Avdic
Vice President, Lilies of Hope



Team Work

The Team Behind the Event

Working hard, having fun, and making a difference for a cause we deeply believe in. Along the way, there may be disagreements and long meetings, but above all, there's unwavering dedication and passion for giving back to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina..

Ilda Hasanovic
Amela Smajlovic
Ademir Smajlovic
Enes Avdic
Emir Hadziahmetovic
Jasar Zvizdic
Midhad Jakupovic (not pictured)
Muhammed Karic
Semir Delic



Planning this gala was a true labor of love—proof that with hard work, late nights, and a shared vision, anything is possible.

Behind the Scenes of the Lilies of Hope Gala: A Night to Remember

Organizing the Lilies of Hope gala was no small task—it was nearly a year in the making. From the moment we committed to hosting this event, the planning process became a labor of love.

There were venues to scout, valet service providers to negotiate with, sponsorships to secure, a band to select, and audio-visual needs to coordinate. Not to mention catering, décor, and the countless other details that bring an event like this to life.

One of the biggest challenges we faced was striking the perfect balance between creating an enjoyable evening for our guests and ensuring it was a successful night of fundraising. This required months of brainstorming, strategizing, and fine-tuning every element of the program to keep the energy high while staying true to our mission.

Late-night team meetings became a routine occurrence for the Lilies of Hope planning committee. There were moments of stress, problem-solving, and racing against the clock, but through it all, we stayed motivated by our shared vision: to bring hope and joy to Snagovo Elementary through a new playground. In the end, it was all worth it.

The gala surpassed our expectations, not only as a wonderful evening filled with laughter and connection but also as a pivotal moment for our community. We are filled with happiness that we reached our fundraising goal and knowing that this project will soon become a reality fills us with gratitude and pride. We hope everyone had a great time!

THANK YOU SPONSORS, SILENT AUCTION DONORS & VOLUNTEERS



We extend our deepest gratitude to our incredible sponsors—IMS, First Eagle Bank, Analytica, Fifth Third Bank, RFS, Chicago Vein Institute, Arsenal Group, Edis Beslagic, and the Center of Gynecology and Cosmetics. Your generosity and support have been instrumental in making this event a success and bringing our mission to life. Together, you have helped us create lasting change and give back to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thank you for being a vital part of the Lilies of Hope family!

Big thank you to our wonderful volunteers —Leila Pekmez, Lejla Gutosic, Belma Gredelj, Mirza Daudbasic, and Hilda Omeragic—whose hard work and dedication made the evening run seamlessly. Your support was key in making this event successful.

“Our sponsors are the heart of Lilies of Hope—without their generosity and support, our mission to make a difference would simply not be possible..”

Emir Hadziahmetovic

Lilies of Hope Board Director

This event wouldn't have been successful without all the incredible people who donated items to our silent auction, making it a truly memorable part of the evening. Thank you to Fulcrum Spa - Brittony Croasdell for the spa package, Amela Smajlovic & Ilda Hasanovic for the taste of Bosnia basket, Mirza Prses for the FK Zeljo jersey, Armin Mehic for the Edin Dzeko jersey, Sanja Bajgoric and Robert Younger (Parker Hospitality Group) for the Chicago staycation, Jason Whiteside and Nezim Alagic for the Bosnia trip package, Emira Hadziahmetovic for the Bosnia book collection, Ishmet Ramushi for the Scrooge McDuck painting, Stephanie Rodriguez for the Joker in Mostar art piece, Ajlena Nanic for the black turtleneck, Kristina and Connor Murphy for the hockey stick, Mario Lekovic (Mana Limited) for the custom car wrap, Mirela Ibrahimovic for the coffee paintings, and Damir Ara for the Bosnia illustration.

Your generosity and creativity played a vital role in the success of the gala and our mission to give back to the community. Thank you for your incredible support and for helping us make a difference!

BECOME A LILY OF HOPE

SIGN UP FOR MONTHLY DONATIONS

**EVERY MONTHLY
DONATION HELPS
SOMEONE IN NEED!
NO MATTER THE AMOUNT
YOU COMMIT TO.**

**NO MATTER
THE
AMOUNT!**



LILIES OF HOPE

BE A BEACON OF HOPE TO THE
PEOPLE OF BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

[LILIESOFHOPE.ORG/DONATE](https://liliesofhope.org/donate)



The Rise of *a Bosnian* Comedian



From Seattle to comedy clubs in Los Angeles

What inspired you to pursue a career in comedy, and how did your experiences growing up in a Bosnian immigrant family influence your comedic voice?

I can remember wanting to perform in some capacity my whole life but I didn't quite know which avenue. I showed interest in singing, dancing, and acting, but nothing quite stuck to me like comedy. I loved being funny and making people laugh but it wasn't until the end of high school that I was able to try something comedic, which was hosting and writing sketches for my high school talent show. Then, when I went to college I felt I had to be practical.

Long story short, I was deeply miserable in college and nothing I pursued felt right. In that time, however, I became obsessed with standup comedy and it was the only thing I listened to. I promised myself when I turned 21 I would try it and when I did I never looked back.

In terms of how my family influenced my voice, it took me a while to figure out how to write about my upbringing and still have it feel both honest and comedic because being Bosnian can be tinged with some darkness. I found my way in was to write about the general immigrant experience and work from there. I lean towards dark and high-energy storytelling, which I find to be very Balkanic of me.

Moving from your hometown to performing at the Comedy Store in LA is quite a leap! Can you share some of the challenges and highlights you encountered during that transition?

If I'm being honest, moving to LA immediately felt right to me. Something just clicked when I moved here from Seattle. I felt refreshed and found a new inspiration. The only real challenges are being away from my family and the mental hurdle of committing to a non-traditional and creative career. It's full of ups and downs and it's easy to feel behind in life when pursuing a path that can take decades to see any reward from.

If you could have dinner with any comedian, dead or alive, who would it be and what would you want to ask them?

There are so many comics I'd love to sit down but I actually got to talk to one of my favorite comics, Beth Stelling, on my podcast. She was incredibly kind and honest and it was cool to meet a hero and have them leave up to how they are in your head.

What are your goals for the future in comedy? Is there a specific project or type of show you dream of creating?

I have so many comedy goals but I've always said that if I can pay my rent doing comedy I'll be happy. Standup comedy will always be my bread and butter but my main goal is simply to make cool things with my friends and I hope that one day that will also look like a TV/sketch show or producing projects.



It was truly heartwarming to see so many familiar faces gathered in one room once again. The atmosphere was filled with warmth and nostalgia as old friends reconnected, shared stories, and rallied around a good cause together. One guest even remarked that it felt like a high school reunion, as everyone reminisced about the past while embracing the joy of the present moment. From gatherings at Piccolo to giving back at galas, the sense of community was undeniable.

Silent Auction & Loud Laughs



Meet Jason Whiteside, a businessman who has Bosnia in his heart.

Bridging Worlds: How an American Entrepreneur Found Success in Bosnia While Empowering Communities and Changing Lives



**ILDA
HASANOVIC**
CONTRIBUTOR



Building Opportunities in Bosnia & Herzegovina: A Vision for Growth and Giving Back

In 2017, what began as a small test pilot for an overseas office in Bosnia has flourished into a thriving operation. Starting with just four employees, the business now boasts a team of over 100 people, and a second office in Živinice has recently added 50 more positions. This remarkable growth reflects not only the success of the venture but also the deep connection its founder, Jason Whiteside, has developed with the region.

Why Bosnia?

For Jason, it's the people that make Bosnia so special. "I've had the privilege of watching my employees grow—getting married, having children, and building their lives over the past seven years. Bosnians are hospitable, hardworking, and content, even when they have less compared to life in America," he explains.

His company specializes in medical operations, specifically Revenue Cycle Management, which relies heavily on the talent and dedication of the Bosnia-based team. "The engine that runs IMS is built on the Bosnia office. Their hard work and intelligence allow us to stay on the cutting edge of technology and adapt to the ever-changing landscape of the industry," Jason says.

Overcoming Challenges

Operating a business in Bosnia is not without its challenges. Power and internet outages remain a persistent issue, cutting into productivity. To combat this, the company is investing in a massive generator for their new five-story building currently under construction. This new space will accommodate over 200 employees and provide a foundation for continued growth.

A Commitment to Community

Giving back is an integral part of Jason's mission. Since 2018, the company has donated approximately 500 Euros per month to the local community, supporting food, clothing, and monetary needs. "It's important to give back to the community that has gifted me so many talented people and helped the company grow," Jason shares.

Partnering with Lilies of Hope was a natural extension of this philosophy. "What sets Lilies of Hope apart is their commitment to ensuring every donation is maximized. They don't waste funds on salaries or overhead, and they carefully screen candidates to prevent fraud. This partnership allows us to make a meaningful impact where it's needed most," Jason explains.

Looking Ahead

Jason has big plans for the future. Beyond expanding his current operations, he's exploring other businesses that could thrive in Bosnia's central European location, which offers strategic access to both European and Asian markets. For entrepreneurs considering starting a business in Bosnia, Jason has simple but powerful advice: "The opportunities are extensive, and the people are hardworking and intelligent. With the right approach, you can truly make a difference here."

Jason's journey in Bosnia is a testament to the power of vision, persistence, and community. Through his business and his partnership with Lilies of Hope, he's proving that investing in people and places can create lasting change.

Meet the 2024 Lily Award Recipients

The Lily Award is an honorable recognition presented by the Lilies of Hope board, celebrating individuals who have made significant contributions to the community. Recipients are chosen for their dedication and impactful involvement, particularly in enhancing the lives of Bosnian Americans here and supporting those in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The award symbolizes hope, resilience, and the spirit of giving back, honoring those who inspire positive change within their communities.



Semir Delic

This year, we were proud to present the first-ever Lily Award to Semir Delic, a shining example of dedication and service to the Bosnian-American community. Semir's tireless involvement in numerous organizations, including Lilies of Hope, JaBih, BECCA, and the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Genocide Foundation, showcases his unwavering commitment to preserving our culture, supporting those in need, and strengthening our community.



Alen Malkoc & Amer Grozdanic

We are proud to honor Alen Malkoc and Amer Grozdanic, founders of Praella, for their unwavering commitment to their roots and community.

As Bosnian refugees, they built Praella not just as a software company but as a testament to Bosnia's potential. From a small team, they've grown to 150 talented individuals working in Sarajevo's historic Sipad Building.

Beyond their business success, Alen and Amer are dedicated supporters of Bosnian events and causes, both in Sarajevo and Chicago, embodying the spirit of giving back while forging ahead.



Jason Whiteside

Through his vision and unwavering commitment, Jason Whiteside has made a remarkable impact in Bosnia by opening an office in Živinice. What started as a small venture has grown into a thriving operation, now employing over 120 people and continuing to expand. His dedication to creating new opportunities and jobs in the region is a testament to his passion for making a positive difference.

BEST DRESSED AWARD

THE EFFORTLESSLY STUNNING ELIZABETH JIA

“——

“It's a mix of Western and Chinese styles, like the embroidery. I always try to wear something that embraces Chinese culture, and when I wore it back in 2017, I realized it also matched the colors of the Bosnian flag perfectly!”

-Elizabeth



2024

Merak Soul Band

BACKSTAGE PASS



Merak Soul Band: Bringing the Heart and Soul of the Balkans to Every Stage

The vibrant sounds of the Balkans have found their home in Merak Soul Band, a group that has been captivating audiences since their official formation in the summer of 2018. Based in Detroit, this talented collective brings a rich tapestry of musical traditions, weaving together the nostalgic tones of Bosnian sevdah with pop rock, Macedonian ethno songs, and even Gypsy melodies.

At the heart of the band is lead vocalist Adisa Selmanovic, whose passion for music and love for her bandmates shines through in every performance. Alongside Adisa are Haris Kajtazovic (lead male vocalist/guitar), Nermin Selmanovic (lead guitar), Edis Kapic (keys), Mirza Sorguc (accordion), James Simonson (bass), and Rob Avsharian (drums). Together, they create an unforgettable blend of sounds that transcends borders and languages, offering a true celebration of the Balkan spirit.

“Music That Feeds the Soul”

When asked about her favorite part of being in Merak Soul, Adisa explains:

"My favorite thing, aside from the friendships, rehearsals, and laughs with the band members, is the selection of songs we perform. I love the flavorful mixture of diverse music from the Balkan region—everything from Bosnian sevdah and pop rock to Macedonian ethno and Gypsy songs. Singing in different languages is another joy, as it constantly challenges me and pushes me to always be at my best."

This dedication to their craft is evident in the way Merak Soul connects with their audience, transporting listeners through a journey of cultural richness and heartfelt emotion.

Looking Ahead: Original Music on the Horizon

Merak Soul is more than a cover band; they are artists in their own right. The band is currently recording original songs, with plans to release their debut album in 2025. For Adisa, being part of this creative process has been nothing short of inspiring. "It's been an awesome experience to contribute to something that feels so personal and meaningful," she says.

A Favorite Band of Her Own

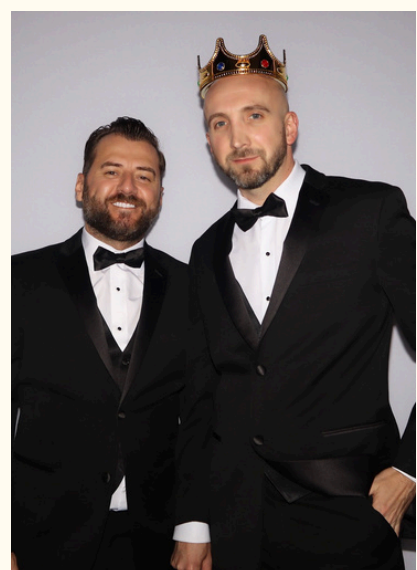
When it comes to personal inspiration, Adisa cheekily admits, "Merak Soul is my favorite band, and watching my husband play guitar is always a joy. Haha!" Her lightheartedness reflects the warm, close-knit dynamic that defines the band—a group of talented musicians who genuinely enjoy what they do and who they do it with.

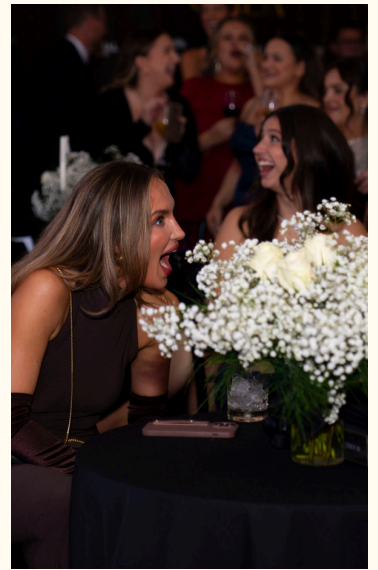
Merak Soul: Bringing Communities Together

With their roots deeply embedded in the Balkan culture and their eyes set on the future, Merak Soul Band continues to bring people together through music. Whether they're performing at festivals, private events, or galas like the Lilies of Hope Charity Gala in Chicago, their energy and passion resonate with every audience they meet.

As their name suggests—"Merak," meaning a feeling of joy and fulfillment—Merak Soul Band delivers not just music, but an experience that feeds the soul. And as they gear up for their next chapter, including their highly anticipated album, it's clear that their journey is only just beginning.

For more on Merak Soul Band, visit their website: www.meraksoul.com.







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of the event photos!**



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GALA 25'

STAY TUNED

