Coffee in Burlington honors victims of violence in Bosnia

By Matt Ryan

Enver Sehovic watched Sunday from the steps of Burlington's City Hall as passers-by poured coffee into hundreds of white, porcelain cups arranged on the brick promenade. His daughter conceived the memorial to honor the 8,000 Muslim men and boys systematically killed 16 years ago in Srebrenica, a city in Sehovic's native Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"When I was reading an article about the project two days ago, I started crying," said Sehovic, 59, of Burlington. "You get your memory back. Especially of those innocent people, those kids, who lost their lives. The pain is so deep, you know."

Today, mourners will attend a funeral for 647 victims of the massacre, whose remains were found in mass graves and identified through DNA analysis.

Aida Sehovic, an artist and 2002 University of Vermont graduate, has organized similar displays throughout Europe, including in the Bosnian cities of Sarajevo and Tuzla.

She calls the memorial "Sto te nema" — which means "Why are you not here!" and "Where are you?" — a tribute to the women who poured coffee while waiting for the men and boys who never returned.

"In our culture, the coffee means a lot to us," Enver Sehovic said. "First time in the morning, what you drink with your wife, your sister, your mother... What you are offering to your guests, it's coffee."

Aida Sehovic, with the help of The Women of Srebrenica, a nongovernmental organization dedicated to the search for bodies missing from the massacre, has collected about 2,000 cups from Bosnian families all over the world. Several people donated cups to the project Sunday.

"I feel really supported and loved by the community," Aida Sehovic said. Sehovic said she hoped Burlington's Bosnian refugees would meet around the project and share stories.

"People are having very intimate conversations with strangers," she said Sunday afternoon.

Many of the Burlingtonians who passed the display Sunday knew Bosnian refugees and of the significance they place on coffee, said Sehovic's cousin, Dzeneta Karabogovic.

"And then there are people who just walk by and are like, 'What is that?"' said Karabogovic, 23, of Burlington.

The ethnically and religiously fueled violence that mainly pitted Orthodox Christian Serbs against Bosnia's Muslims displaced more than 2 million people, or about half the country's population, according to the Bosnian Institute. About 1 million of those displaced have since returned home, according to the organization, a registered charity in the United Kingdom.

In 1992, Aida Sehovic and her family fled to Turkey, and a year later, to Berlin. They moved to Burlington in 1997. Sehovic moved to New York in 2006 to pursue a master of fine arts degree at Hunter College.

"I feel like I'm a world citizen," Sehovic said. Sehovic most recently visited Bosnia three years ago. Political disarray continues to cripple the country, she said.

"It's frustrating," Sehovic said. "The country's still struggling to deal with its past, and recent history."

Contact Matt Ryan at 652-6469 or mryan@burlingtonfreepress.com. Follow Matt on Twitter at www.twitter.com/mattryanhere.