

## **Supporting AAC in Novi Sad, Serbia Part 1, by Jelena Mazurkovic**

I work as a special education teacher at Milan Petrović Primary and Secondary School in Novi Sad. I am the only member of ISAAC from Serbia. This is my story of how *connections matters* for the benefit of communication among children and the people I work with.

I spent two semesters at Penn State University in State College, Pennsylvania, six years ago as a Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow on a Fulbright Scholarship financed by the US State Department. I was grateful for and fascinated by the lectures of Dr. Janice Light and Dr. Kathryn Drager and learned about a whole new field in rehabilitation of children and others with speech disorders.

When I came back to Serbia I set up a project to spread the idea of importance of AAC interventions with light tech and high tech devices, including assistive technology. I tried to share ideas generously with the support of my principal Mrs. Slavica Markovic and the support of LIFEtool, Austria, throughout Serbia. Some of my colleagues recognized the value of these ideas immediately. Some, unfortunately, were very skeptical. I continued my mission, understanding that people are afraid of change. We created several materials that support communication and AAC to help teachers on an everyday basis in the classroom.

Several years later I was still not satisfied with the results, despite my efforts. Being a member of ISAAC for several years, I contacted the Executive Director, Franklin Smith, in March 2012. He put me in touch with Dorothy Fraser, the senior representative of Central Coast Children's Foundation and a member of ISAAC. Dorothy had already worked on several projects in Eastern Europe and could come to visit us.

It all happened very quickly after that. In fact, by the end of November 2012 we already had a plan in place!

Dorothy visited Novi Sad at the end of October to gain insight into what we were already doing and how she could help. Some events were planned and some happened unexpectedly.

This was our schedule:

**Saturday:** Dorothy's arrival and Conference on Cerebral Palsy.

**Sunday:** Roundtable on the closing day of the Conference

**Monday:** Elementary school visit and reflection

**Tuesday:** Visit to a facility for youth on the autistic spectrum; afternoon lecture on "AAC and the Importance of Ergonomy."

**Wednesday:** Visit to the Secondary Milan Petrović Boarding School

**Thursday:** Lecture for the students of the medical college and a visit to the Children's Hospital

**Friday:** Visit to the Milan Petrović kindergarten, reflection and feedback; afternoon sightseeing

The next day, the weather did not get any better but Dorothy was fortunately able to attend the closing roundtable of the conference organizers, where she introduced herself and learned more about numerous issues related to statistics and social welfare of people with cerebral palsy. More important was the opportunity to meet special education teachers from my workplace, university professors and doctors from the Children's Hospital in Novi Sad. Everybody was eager to cooperate and we immediately set Thursday as the day for a lecture for the medical staff and students, and a visit to the Children's Hospital of Novi Sad.

Our schedule at the Milan Petrović school started on a rainy Monday morning. Dorothy came to classes with us to observe our work and AAC approaches. At noon she gave us feedback on ways how to improve and enrich our AAC routines and methodology. In the afternoon we worked with children again. There was some sun outside but the wind was still blowing around.

On Tuesday morning, after observing classes at the Elementary school she visited the premises of the Milan Petrović School for youth on the autistic spectrum disorder.

Another rainy day.

In the afternoon Dorothy gave an excellent lecture on "AAC and Importance of Ergonomy" in our school, with 120 in attendance. Thirty people were guests from other places in Serbia, who were invited to attend the lecture free of charge.

On Wednesday Dorothy visited the Secondary Milan Petrović Boarding School, where she had an opportunity to talk to professionals and people involved in AT at school. The rain stopped but the clouds had not yet gone away.

Thursday morning was dedicated to students of the Medical University of Novi Sad. As mentioned earlier, we had an appointment later in the afternoon at the Children's Hospital.

Friday was very important to me personally because we visited the pre-schoolers at the Milan Petrović kindergarten where I started my work in the field of AAC. After seeing the children and singing along with them in class, our weekly schedule was coming to a close. Now it was time to finalize our ideas and make plans for how to improve our AAC work in Serbia.

The main goal for the future will be to involve more people actively in AAC approaches. It is important to set up school projects in AAC for all of the staff and to encourage their work by giving them opportunities to be creative. The general idea Dorothy suggested is to hold workshops for professionals and have them create materials in teams, which they can use in the classroom. I really liked this idea very much because AAC can be so inspiring and artful once you start thinking of new ways to provide communication for the children we work with.

Finally in the afternoon the sun came out behind the clouds so I could take Dorothy sightseeing in Novi Sad.

Dear Dorothy and ISAAC, thank you for everything – especially bringing the nice weather to Novi Sad!



*The main square in Novi Sad  
Photograph courtesy of Dorothy Fraser*