Jamestown soldier teaching students in Kosovo

GJILAN/GNJILANE, Kosovo — Children learn a lot from their peers and families, but teachers can make a difference on impressionable young minds.

They play a unique role in any society by teaching future leaders to learn about themselves and other cultures.

Spc. Abby A. Tews, of Jamestown, a soldier with Multi-National Task Force-East, 231 Maneuver Task Force, is new to the teaching world, and has an opportunity, through a Kosovo adopt-a-school program, to exercise her skills.

“I just graduated from Valley City (N.D.) State in May. I got my degree in elementary education and early childhood development,” Tews said.

She’s primarily worked with elementary-aged students, but she is teaching ninth-grade English at Musa Zajmi School here, once a week.

“I did my student-teaching, for elementary education, in a first grade (classroom) and my early childhood development I did in a kindergarten (classroom),” she said.

Over the years, soldiers have left their mark in many ways, from painting walls and helping clean up neighborhoods to donating school supplies around Kosovo. Now, KFOR soldiers are shaping young minds as much as the school buildings that hold them or the landscape around them.

A tradition started at Musa Zajmi during previous rotations has Tews, a supply specialist, helping Mejreme Berisha, an English teacher who has worked with soldiers for the last three years to better herself and her students.
“I was worried there would not be a soldier who would be interested, but there were always soldiers that were interested,” Berisha said. “This still continues and I am very happy.”

Her professional relationship with soldiers has helped her become a better teacher.

“I attended a seminar on Camp Bondsteel, where I learned classroom management skills. I learned a lot from the soldiers,” Berisha said.

She has taught at Musa Zajmi since 1994, although her ambitions were not always to be a teacher.

“In high school I wanted to be an artist, I wanted to become a student at the art institute, but I could not. So, I thought I will study English and all the doors will be opened,” she said.

Berisha said when U.S. soldiers first came to her school in 2001, she was shy and didn’t take advantage of learning from and working with them. In 2007, when soldiers came to the school, she became more involved and started to build a relationship which resulted in her and the soldiers not only becoming colleagues, but friends.

“I am really happy that I am a teacher at Musa Zajmi. I feel privileged to work with American soldiers,” she added.

Berisha knows, from a trip she took to Great Britain, the impact of visiting a country firsthand to see differences in teaching styles. She spent about two weeks there and learned a lot about methods of teaching English to children.

Her goal is to visit the United States to observe the classrooms of various schools to incorporate ideas into her lesson plans for her students here.

For now, American teachers in the form of MNTF-E soldiers are coming to her, and she has seen an improvement in her teaching style and students’ learning. Berisha said students have had a chance to improve their English communicating with native-speakers.

Tews and Berisha coordinate and go over lesson plans via e-mail.

“I enjoy it and I think so far it has been a great experience,” Tews said.

She is joined in the classroom by Capt. Brock Larson, of Fort Ransom, N.D., a fellow member of 231 MTF.

Tews prefers teaching younger students, but she said the experience that she is gaining in a foreign environment will provide a richer experience for her to share with American students after her return to the U.S.

“It is interesting to experience firsthand in the classroom different behaviors and learning styles, but doing this will make me a better teacher,” Tews said.

Brig. Gen. Al Dohrmann, Bismarck, commander of MNTF-E, said Tews personifies the term “Napoleon’s Corporal” or “Strategic Corporal,” a soldier who understands the total picture of the command’s military objectives and uses that understanding to promote effective results at the most basic levels of the military organization.

“We want all of our soldiers to be aware of how they can make a difference by teaching the people of Kosovo ways they can make their futures brighter,” Dohrmann said. “Soldiers, such as Spc. Tews, are doing just that,
by using her knowledge and professionalism as a soldier and a teacher to enrich the skills of a peer and to make a difference in the lives of young people here.”

The soldiers of MNTF-E are just beginning their deployment in Kosovo, but Tews intends to continue spending a day out of every week visiting Berisha’s classrooms to teach and to learn.

Tews does not yet have a teaching job to return to after her deployment.

“I plan to start looking for a teaching job towards the end of the deployment, for now I will focus on my mission here,” Tews said.