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Moving Forward: Chess Coach's Journey to UTD

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Featured in *The Mercury* on August 22, 2011

In the midst of war-torn Yugoslavia Rade Milovanovic was faced with a decision: leave his parents, well-established law career and home behind, or try to save his daughter.

Marina, Milovanovic's teenage daughter, was waging her own war with Friedreich's ataxia: a rare disorder that can cause the body to breakdown while the mind stays intact.

The United States offered not only safety from the war but the necessary disability services and health care that couldn't be found in Yugoslavia.

"(My wife and I) noticed (problems) when Marina was six. She was very healthy, then suddenly something (changed)," Milovanovic said. "So we decided we were going to the United States. It didn't matter (what we did) as long as we helped her."

Although he knew he would no longer be able to practice law in the States, Milovanovic said it didn't matter.



Rade Milovanovic

And though he had formerly been on track to move from his International chess master title to grand master, he said it didn't matter.

He and his family filed for refugee status and were able to live anywhere in the States, but they had to start over from scratch. The family asked to live somewhere with warm weather to aid their daughter's health problems, and Dallas was where they were placed.

Milovanovic remembers arriving near the end of the summer in the middle of the day, and he could barely believe a place could get that hot.

Once the family got into Dallas, Milovanovic gave chess lessons when he could while his wife worked at Target. They did whatever they could to make ends meet while still seeking health care for Marina.

"I didn't care what I was going to do, I only (cared to) help my daughter. So it was the decision that we made and I (don't) regret it," Milovanovic said. "I think if you're a parent you have to do everything to help your kids — (no) matter what."

Shortly after the family got their bearings in Dallas, Milovanovic began searching for a local chess circuit. One day he was told about a tournament, and by coincidence he ended up at an



UT Dallas team members GM Alejandro Ramirez, IM Jacek Stopa, IM John Bartholomew and Coach IM Rade Milovanovic

individual match that took place at the same time and same hotel UTD's chess team was playing.

That was the day Milovanovic made his first connection with UTD. About a year later he was hired as the team coach. Since that time UTD's chess team has become one of the best in the nation.

In the time he has been coach, the team has travelled across the world for competitions, winning titles in statewide, national and international competitions.

Milovanovic said he never imagined turning his hobby into a profession, but he is pleased with the way it worked out.

Everything seemed to be going well for the Milovanovics until Marina passed away at the age of 28. Two years later, the loss still hurts Milovanovic deeply. When he talks about Marina, his stern exterior fades away and a softer side emerges.

“This is the main reason we decided to come to (America), because here medicine is very good. She was happy when she was alive,” he said. “I am still emotional. I try to overcome (it). She was happy and she lived because (we came here).”

Teaching chess is still a passion for Milovanovic, which shows through his team’s winning record and respect for him.

“You want to win for him. You definitely want to do your best for your school and for Rade,” said Tyler Hughes, two-year chess team member.

Hughes describes Milovanovic as gruff, yet warm, and says the team benefits from his openness to new ideas and even appreciates his quirks.

“If you tell him about (one) thing it usually reminds him of something else,” Hughes said. “He tells a lot of stories.”

Hughes is a molecular biology senior and a self-acclaimed perfectionist. While in school his perfectionism serves him well, but in chess he has “time trouble,” meaning he doesn’t manage the clock well in a chess match, which can often lead to running out of time and result in losses.

“I remember talking to Rade about (time trouble) and he told me perfection is good in academics, but on the chessboard you have to be practical,” Hughes remembered with a smile. “I had a great tournament after that.”

Through all the good and the bad, Milovanovic says he’s happy. His career has seen little but success and his other daughter, Kristina, received her master’s degree from UTD in 2009 and this July she married the roommate of a former chess player.

“This UTD stuff (just happened), but you know, you have to try to do (your) best, to put a lot of love (into everything), to say ‘OK, I did everything I could, I do not regret anything,’” Milovanovic said. “I am very thankful to this country for everything.