

## Bridging Divides in Kosovo with Rock Music

by Lea Suter

Mitrovica, Kosovo, is socially and physically divided, with a bridge separating Kosovo-Serbian north and Kosovo-Albanian south. It's dangerous for Kosovar-Serbian and Kosovo-Albanian youth to meet openly, but a group of students have found a clever way to work together.

Musicians without Borders created The Mitrovica Rock School to bring hostile groups together, and students initially traveled to the neighboring country of Macedonia to play in bands together.

Program manager Wendy Hassler-Forest said the initiative is about shifting people's focus.

"The whole point of the project is to take the emphasis off ethnic identity and say 'You are Dan, and you play the drums, and you like metal. You are not a Serb - I mean, sure, you're also a Serb, but this is not your one defining part of your identity, you have all these other things that make you who you are, so let's focus on those,'" Ms Hassler-Forest told our partners at PeacePrints.

Project Coordinator Emir Hasani said band members can't help but form bonds.

"To be a band means to be a friend," Mr Hasani said. "I mean, when you create something with somebody, it's normal that it ties you to the person, you have something that you created together."

Now music school branches have been set up on each side of the bridge, with 113 students playing in 10 inter-ethnic bands, led by 16 local teachers, and bringing bands like Proximity Mine to local stages.

Peacebuilding and rock music are not a typical combination and the bands attract all types, but organizers warn that they don't want to over-politicize the schools.

"Once you start doing these things that are all about reconciliation, and dialogue or making a political statement like singing on the bridge, you're again saying 'Oh look, how special, we've got the Serbs and Albanians together, you're not Dan on the guitar - no, you're a Serb now again,'" said Ms Hassler-Forest. "So you're undermining the whole thing that you're doing here, which is by investing in people's personal development and giving them meaning outside of this crazy political situation, you're treating them like normal human beings, who can associate with other normal human beings, and that's why it works."