



BUILT BY: *Samra*



A Data Center Reviews original series highlighting the people shaping digital infrastructure.



Women in Infrastructure Series

Stories of leadership, resilience, and impact across digital infrastructure.

The Long Journey to Resilience: Samra Mahmutovic

“Hardships often prepare ordinary people for extraordinary destiny.”

- often attributed to C.S. Lewis

“Hi, I’m Samra!”

Standing outside Sky Waikiki during the Pacific Telecommunications Council conference, I had already met a steady stream of people. Every one of them was experienced, dynamic, intelligent, and personable. Conferences have a way of elevating everyone’s presence. People turn their game

up a notch, presenting the sharpest version of themselves and engaging with an energy they might not bring to more familiar settings.

But not many people simply walk up, smiling, and introduce themselves.

I wasn’t surprised that Samra *did*. It was the way she did it.

Honest. Open. Powerful in a quiet way. There was confidence there... but also something deeper.

Resilience. Presence. A steadiness that didn't need volume.

The longer we spoke, the more I understood what I had sensed in that first moment.

Samra hadn't introduced herself as resilient. She didn't lead with the word refugee. She didn't dramatize her childhood. In fact, she shared none of this until I began asking about her background. And at that point, she didn't withdraw, although she most certainly could have given the circumstances. She didn't cringe and step back as she prepared to tell me her story. She just told her story simply -- almost gently. And the more she told, the more I was amazed by Samra.

Exile in a Small German Town

Between the ages of two and eight, Samra lived in a small town in Germany where, in her memory, everyone knew everyone. The convenience store owner didn't ask questions when she came in; he knew exactly which cigarettes she was there to buy for her

parents. The baker set aside the bread her mother preferred. The butcher weighed out the precise number of pounds she was sent to collect. It felt close-knit, almost intimate -- at least through the eyes of a child.

Her family had arrived as war refugees and settled into a building with a restaurant on the first floor and a few modest rooms above it. Their "apartment" consisted of three small, connected rooms on the second floor. The bathroom was down the hall and held only a toilet. Baths meant her mother heating water on the stove and filling large plastic tubs. It was modest. It was fragile. It was temporary. But it was also routine, familiar, and filled with the quiet rhythms of daily life.

What Samra understood then was the rhythm. What she did not understand was the weight.

For a year and a half, while they lived above that restaurant, her mother had no idea where her father was. She could not reach him. She did not know if he was alive. During that same period, her brother, her sister, her sister's two children, and her brother-in-law were murdered and buried in mass graves. Loss can not be

measured, especially at this magnitude.

But the child in the small town did not see despair; she watched her mother.

“My mom is the lioness,” Samra says.

She remembers watching her mother cry, quietly, and then wipe her tears before leaving for one of her three jobs. At four and five years old, Samra and her siblings were often left alone, with

occasional visits from an aunt or cousin to check on them. Survival required movement. It required work. It required strength.

There were hours when her mother would have Samra sit beside the phone, waiting for someone in Bosnia to transfer a call to an army base, hoping for news of her father. Waiting for confirmation of life.

“I will never forget the day my mom finally reached my dad,” she says. “I didn’t know why she was crying, but now as a mother and wife, I can only imagine the amount of weight that must’ve lifted from her shoulders knowing she wasn’t going to be left alone.”

Only later would Samra understand the scale of what her mother carried in those years: uncertainty, grief, financial pressure, fear, and the possibility of widowhood . All while holding



Kids celebrating a birthday: The room that you see is the room Samra and her family lived in -2 adults, 3 kids.

her children steady in a foreign country.

Looking back, the apartment above the restaurant was not just

modest. It was suspended between hope and loss.

Looking back, I realize how fragile and uncertain that life was,” Samra says. “But as a child, I didn’t know anything different. It was simply home.”

Home, for Samra, meant movement.

A Country Unmade. Surviving War.

It was the Bosnian War, that forced Samra out of her home and into foreign land. The war, fought from 1992 to 1995 following the breakup of Yugoslavia, was one of the most devastating conflicts in Europe since World War II. As Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence, ethnic tensions between Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Serbs, and Croats erupted into violent warfare marked by sieges, ethnic cleansing, and mass displacement. The conflict resulted in an estimated 100,000 deaths and forced more than two million people from their homes, creating one of the largest refugee crises in Europe at the time. The war formally ended with the Dayton Accords in December 1995,

but its human and political consequences continue to shape the region today.

So, for Samra, “home” meant countries that didn’t stick. It no longer meant Sarajevo. It meant refugee camps. It meant temporary housing. It meant learning how to adjust quickly, how to read a room, how to find safety in unfamiliar places, how to build connection before the ground shifted again.

Stability was not assumed. It was something other people seemed to have.

She learned early that nothing was permanent. Not walls, not schools, not communities. And when that’s your starting point, you don’t grow up expecting certainty.

You grow up adaptable.

In early 1998, the letter came.

Their refugee status would be revoked. Germany had determined that the war in Bosnia had officially ended three years earlier. It was time to go back.

Back to what, exactly?

The home they had fled no longer existed. It had been reduced to rubble by bombs. The war might

have been declared over on paper, but there was nothing waiting for them there.



Samra's home site after cessation of hostilities in the Bosnian War.

Desperation does not feel dramatic in the moment. It feels practical.

Her parents made a decision that must have felt equal parts terrifying and necessary. They hired a man who promised new identities and safe passage across the border into Sweden. False papers. A quiet crossing. A second chance.

They made it.

For three months, Sweden held the possibility of permanence. But then one morning, there was a knock at the door. Immigration officers. Instructions were delivered plainly. Pack your belongings. They were deported back to Germany.

When they arrived, it wasn't the small-town familiarity Samra remembered. They were placed in a gated refugee camp for seven weeks, fenced boundaries replacing the illusion of openness she had once known. After that came ten months in a refugee housing facility. Then another transfer. Another year farther north. Movement became routine again. Stability remained just out of reach.

Applications for asylum were denied. Attempts stalled. Hope thinned but did not disappear.

Finally, her mother made another decision, this one different but still daunting. She hired an attorney and began the process of applying for entry into the United States.

If Germany had been survival, and Sweden a brief flicker of possibility, America would become the next horizon.

Not guaranteed. But pursued.

They made it.



Wide shot of Samra's home in Bosnia after the war.

Fascinated by the Unbreakable

Long before there were job titles or industry conferences, there was curiosity.

“Before careers and titles, I was curious about people—their struggles and their resilience,” Samra says. “I wanted to understand how someone who has been through challenging times can keep going without giving up. I found those people fascinating, and that curiosity drew me toward understanding different perspectives.”

It's a remarkable statement when you consider her own story.

A child who moved between countries. A girl who watched her parents navigate uncertainty without collapsing. A young person who experienced displacement, rejection, deportation, and instability, and yet didn't become

hardened by it.

Instead of turning inward, she leaned toward others.

She didn't just survive resilience; she studied it.

Samra pursued degrees in Psychology and Child

Development, not because she saw herself as fragile, but because she was intrigued by strength. She wanted to understand what allows some people to endure, adapt, and grow, even when the foundation beneath them shifts.

There's something powerful in that choice.

Many people who experience instability focus on securing their own safety. Samra was drawn to understanding how to help others build theirs.

She was fascinated by perspective: how two people can live through the same hardship and emerge differently. She wanted to understand the emotional architecture beneath behavior: why some give up, why others persist, why some carry bitterness and others carry empathy.

That pursuit says something profound about her character. Resilience didn't make her self-protective. It made her compassionate. And perhaps most importantly, it made her observant.

The First Taste of “More”

The first time Samra saw a computer, it wasn't in a classroom. It was at her cousin's house, shortly after her family arrived in America.

He had a desktop computer tucked into the corner of a room – nothing extraordinary by most standards. But to her, it felt monumental. He let her sit there for hours playing Spades, clicking cards across the screen, absorbed in a world that felt both controlled and expansive.

“I remember thinking he was the richest person I knew,” she says, smiling at the memory.

It wasn't about the game. It was about what the machine represented.

To a young girl who had known displacement and shared spaces and borrowed stability, that computer symbolized something larger than entertainment. It symbolized access. Access to information. Access to opportunity. Access to a world that felt structured and limitless at the same time.

“To me, that computer represented something bigger than a game. It symbolized opportunity.”

It was the first time she saw technology not as survival, but as possibility.

The second moment came with a Nokia phone.



Family before the war: Samra is the one in the blue dress. The boy next to her and the teenager leaning forward are her aunt's two children, who were murdered and thrown into mass graves.

Her parents purchased cellphone lines, but there wasn't one for each child. There was one phone shared between Samra and her two siblings. They rotated responsibility for it each day, a

small ritual that felt important. Whoever had the phone carried it carefully, aware that it connected them beyond the walls of their apartment.

“For the first time, I could communicate more with friends and feel connected outside the walls of our apartment,” she says.

That small Nokia wasn't sleek or powerful. It didn't carry apps or

endless entertainment. But it carried something she valued deeply: belonging. Technology, for Samra, was never just technical. It was emotional.

It meant mobility without moving. Connection without geography. The ability to reach beyond your immediate

circumstances.

She wasn't dreaming of a career in tech. She was discovering that the world could be bigger than the room she was standing in. And for

a child who had known how quickly rooms could change, that realization mattered.

Crossing the Threshold

Some thresholds you walk toward deliberately. Others arrive unannounced.

Before grief reshaped her life, Samra was already standing at a professional crossroads.



Samra's mother in Germany

She had built a solid career in retail management; and she was

good at it. She understood systems. She understood people. She knew how to take ownership and make operations run smoothly. It was structured. Predictable. Familiar.

She had control. And that's what made leaving so difficult.

"I was comfortable," she says. "I knew what I was doing. But I also knew I didn't want to stay there forever."

The leap into sales in the digital infrastructure industry meant walking away from mastery and into uncertainty. It meant being new again. Asking questions. Sitting in rooms without the authority she had once earned. It meant risking failure in public.

"The hardest challenge was making the leap from retail management into sales," she says. "It meant stepping into the unknown, leaving behind something I was confident in, and betting on myself in a completely new space. It pushed me out of my comfort zone, but it was well worth it."

"I had to bet on myself."

That sentence carries the weight of her upbringing.

“My parents. They have taught me commitment. Watching them never give up, even when no one would have faulted them for doing so, inspired me to be resilient through life’s challenges.”

She had seen resilience modeled long before she needed it for herself. She had watched her parents navigate displacement, rejection, and uncertainty without surrendering to it. They didn’t quit when it would have been understandable to quit.

So, when she faced professional risk, quitting wasn’t an option.

But life had one more threshold waiting.

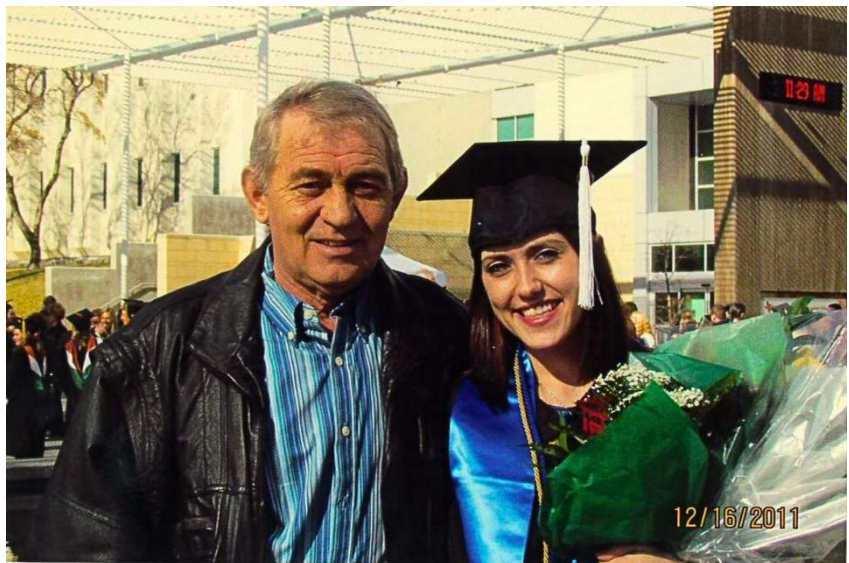
The loss of her father did not come as a professional challenge. It came as something far more personal.

“I thought I knew grief from losing family members in the past,” she says. “But this was a different type of pain.”

There are losses that hurt. And there are losses that alter the structure of your world.

Losing her father was not theoretical grief. It was foundational. The man who had embodied perseverance, who had modeled endurance without complaint, was suddenly gone. The steady presence she had relied on was no longer there.

It would have been easy to retreat. Instead, she carried forward what he had given her. Resilience stopped being something she admired in others. It became something she had to live. The



Samra’s father with Samra at college graduation.

professional leap tested her confidence. The personal loss tested her core. Together, they

formed the crossing. Not just into a new career, but into a deeper version of herself.

Learning to Let Go

There was a time when control felt like safety.

In retail management, Samra could see everything. Every detail moved through her. Every decision passed across her desk. She understood the systems. She managed the variables. She knew what was happening at all times.

Control meant stability. But stepping into a new industry challenged that instinct.

“The hardest part wasn’t learning something new,” she says. “It was unlearning control.”

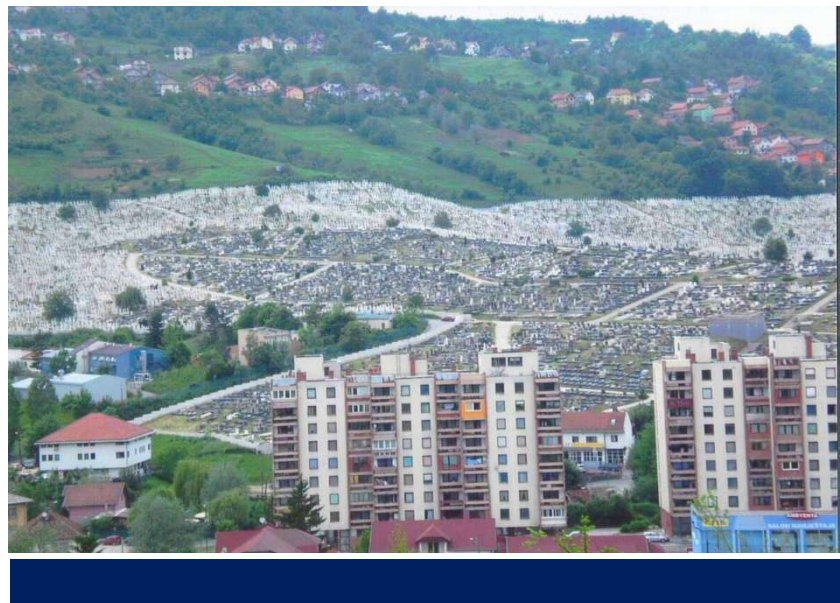
In her new environment, she couldn’t monitor every moving piece. She couldn’t master every variable overnight. She had to trust other people. Rely on collaboration. Accept that she wouldn’t know everything, and

more importantly, accept that she didn’t need to.

“That was a big shift for me. Letting go. Delegating. Believing other people could handle things.”

It sounds simple. It isn’t.

For someone who built stability through vigilance, who learned early to read rooms, anticipate risk, and adjust quickly, releasing



Sarajevo after the war. The same area used by the Winter Olympics in 1984 converted into a huge cemetery to bury war victims.

control is vulnerable. It means trusting that the structure won’t collapse if you loosen your grip. But growth often requires surrendering the habits that once kept you safe. Letting go didn’t weaken her. It refined her.

Over time, that shift changed the way she builds trust.

“I assume everyone is dealing with something I can’t see,” she says.

It’s not a tactic she learned in a seminar. It’s instinct. When you grow up around instability, you understand that behavior often masks something deeper: fear, stress, uncertainty, grief.

Because of her awareness of this simple truth, she doesn’t escalate tension unless she has to. She doesn’t take sharp words personally. She pauses. She listens.

“You don’t know what someone else is carrying. And reacting emotionally usually makes things worse.”

That steadiness has become one of her quiet strengths. She doesn’t dominate rooms; she stabilizes them. Trust, for Samra, isn’t built through control. It’s built through presence.

Today, when she reflects on her life, there’s calmness in her voice.

“As I sit here, I am very content in my life. I enjoy my career, and I

have an amazing family. I’m content with not knowing everything, and I’m comfortable being in the process of learning rather than chasing the next milestone.”

That sentence carries more power than ambition ever could. Success, for her, isn’t title driven. It’s contentment with growth.



Samra’s uncle, mom, Samra, sister, and brother, about a year after arriving in Germany.

Financial stability matters, especially when you didn’t grow up with it. But what she values just as

much is presence. Being there for her children. Attending school events. Not missing the moments that shape a family.

“It gave me stability,” she says of her new career with AirSeal Containment Systems. “But it also allowed me to be actively involved in my family’s life.”

That combination, security and presence, feels sacred to her. Because she knows what it’s like not to have security. And she knows what it took to build it.

She built the stability her parents fought to give her and she carries their resilience forward in the way she now shows up for others.

Built, Not Borrowed

When Samra talks about what anchors her today, she doesn’t start with work. She starts with her family.

“My children and husband,” she says. Children have a way of being incredibly honest, which is humbling because they’re quick to point out when I’m wrong, keeping me grounded and self-aware. My husband is quick to remind me that I am doing fine when I have self-doubt, giving me the

confidence to keep moving forward.”

There’s strength in that admission. The woman who crossed borders. The woman who navigated displacement, deportation, professional reinvention, and personal loss, still experiences doubt. Still recalibrates. Still grows. But she doesn’t carry it alone. She has built a life where support is mutual. Where resilience is shared. And that clarity shows up in the way she works.

“I work to live. I don’t live to work”, she adds.

In a culture obsessed with hustle and visibility, that sentence feels almost rebellious. It isn’t laziness. It’s intention. She believes in growth. In showing up fully. In doing her job well. In contributing to something meaningful. But she refuses to let work replace identity. When you’ve spent your childhood navigating instability, you don’t take ordinary moments for granted. Dinner at the table, homework conversations, a quiet evening; stability is no longer invisible to her, it’s deliberate.

She understands the industry she's part of is growing, that it is foundational, shaping the future in ways most people don't see. And she's proud to contribute.

"I believe I'm part of something important," she says. "But more than that, I've built a life that feels stable. That feels mine."

That's the milestone. Not the title. Not the trajectory. Ownership.

Reaching Beyond Herself

If she could speak directly to women stepping into unfamiliar spaces, she wouldn't deliver a rehearsed speech. She would keep it simple.

"Persistence matters more than perfection."

"You don't need to know everything."



Samra's family with her uncle's wife and kids in front of the refugee housing as they prepare to return to war torn Bosnia, after being told by immigration officials they could no longer stay in Germany.

"Follow up."

"Bet on yourself."

And then, after a pause:

"Don't forget to live your life."

It's not flashy advice. It's durable. It's real. Samra's story isn't loud. It doesn't rely on spectacle. It is built on movement, on loss, on reinvention, on choosing growth when comfort would have been easier and on building stability where none was offered.

Survival shaped her. Resilience strengthened her. Intention defined her.

And today, the steadiness she carries isn't inherited. It's built.

Epilogue: Full Circle

When I think back to that moment outside Sky Waikiki, it feels different now. At the time, it was a simple introduction.

“Hi, I'm Samra.”

A handshake. A conversation. Another connection at a conference full of impressive people. But knowing her story now, truly knowing it, reframes that moment entirely.

The child who once lived in a refugee building above a restaurant in Germany. The family that crossed borders searching for stability. The deportation, the uncertainty, the repeated relocations, the leap into a new country. A new language, a new beginning in America, the decision to study resilience. The loss of her father. The choice to bet on herself professionally.

All of that stood on a sidewalk, 7,700 miles away from her birthplace of Sarajevo. And smiled as she introduced herself to me.

There is something profound about that arc: from war-torn

displacement to the United States; from instability to intention; from survival to leadership; from a shared Nokia phone to shaping conversations in one of the fastest-growing ecosystems in the world.

And yet, when she introduced herself, none of that history was visible. There was no announcement. No resume recitation. No performance. Just presence.

That's what caught me.

Her strength doesn't demand attention. It doesn't posture. It doesn't perform.

It simply shows up.

I am genuinely amazed at what she has overcome. Not just the circumstances, but the quiet decisions along the way. The refusal to quit, the willingness to grow, the courage to leap when comfort would have been easier; and I can't help but feel that the sidewalk outside Sky Waikiki wasn't random.

It was another threshold. Another step in a journey that began long before conferences and industry conversations.

I'm looking forward to working alongside her, to watching her continue to grow in the digital infrastructure ecosystem and to seeing how the resilience that once ensured survival now fuels leadership. Because if her past is any indication, she doesn't just

endure environments. She strengthens them.

And that simple introduction –

“Hi, I'm Samra.”

– may have been the beginning of something much bigger.

About Data Center Reviews

At Data Center Reviews, we maintain an intentionally agnostic perspective within the digital infrastructure ecosystem. Our voice is independent. Our lens is neutral. Our commitment is to the people and ideas shaping this industry, not to any single platform, provider, or narrative.

Our ongoing Built By: series reflects that commitment. Built By profiles are long-form features that explore the human stories behind digital infrastructure: the journeys, challenges, resilience, and character that shape the leaders influencing this ecosystem. These are not corporate spotlights or polished press releases. They are real conversations, grounded in authenticity, designed to reveal the individuals behind the megawatts, fiber routes, and capital stacks.

Within Built By, our Women in Infrastructure features provide a deeper, personal look at the women building, influencing, and strengthening digital infrastructure every day.

Because infrastructure may be technical, but this industry is built by people. #ConnectedByInfrastructure