

Our Artists

Starting from Scratch

Men for Women

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*Dear girls of
Kosovo,*

It is my pleasure to address you with this letter, as girls are very special to me. Initially because I was first a girl and now a woman and because I have three granddaughters, Lena, Riga and Rita, in whom I see the hope for the future. Furthermore, I think that girls are vital in the development of the society of a country and of the whole world.

*The small steps
you take every
day, lead you
to this dream.*

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I am Blerta Basholli. I was born and raised in Pristina and I am a film director and screenwriter. I was an excellent student when I was in elementary school and high school. Mathematics and physics have been the subjects that I liked the most and for which I had the most expressed interest. However, paradoxically, I ended up as a film-directing student!

I was often asked why I followed this career. I think there were many reasons. First: the movie has been my first love. I have seen almost all the “Western” movies. Second: I think it was a way for me to express myself because I was not open enough, especially when I was younger. Even now, I am not much open, but here I am writing the letter and I am not having a hard time.



I was a student of the high school "Xhevdet Doda" in the capital city. The transition from high school to the Faculty of Arts at the University of Pristina was not easy, although I was one of the best students. After some time in college, after learning some basic things about film directing, we were asked to suggest our own scripts.

I proposed the first idea for the script and it was rejected because I had chosen a serious theme and as the first movie, I had to find something that was more easily handled. He was right. However, for me at that time his rejection came as an attack. It was an unpleasant surprise to be refused.

I was very upset. For two weeks, I could not even talk to anyone. For a moment, I thought I was not good enough for this job and that maybe I should change the direction. The days passed and I had to submit the new idea and since I am very prompt and no delay was allowed, I created something else. The new concept was accepted and gradually I made my first short movie.

This experience taught me a lot, no matter how difficult it seemed to me at first. My job, our job as directors, is to make movies and they are served to an audience that criticizes you without regret. Therefore, when someone gives you a remark, you have to accept it and learn from it. This principle does not only apply to movie, but to every profession we choose to do in life.

Completion of basic studies for film directing found me working for various private productions in Kosovo. I was dealing mostly with commercials and video clips. I really wanted to continue my studies somewhere abroad, but I could not. I was constantly surfing on the internet for universities and my eyes were fixed on a very good film school in Lodz, Poland.

I was desperate to understand that they did not offer scholarships, while for students who did not come from European Union member states the semester fees were astronomical, plus the affordability of living in Poland, which in some nuances differs from the economic standard of Kosovo. I had done researches daily, as a hobby!

Meanwhile, while I was aiming to pursue post-graduate studies outside of Kosovo, my boyfriend Artan Korenica, a photographer by profession, was staying in the United States and I started researching schools in New York.

We had also discussed going to Poland together, but due to the finances in our case, the most convenient was New York, because Artan had already settled there. I asked the people I knew there about some good film school, but in the end, I sat down myself and started researching online. I looked at each school, the professors, the programs, and every other detail. I finally decided to apply to the Tisch School of the Arts in NYU.



By the time I set out for this school, I was visiting New York City at Artan's. Two friends of mine told me that this is a very expensive school and you cannot afford it. It was true; it was a very expensive school. This was the first "encouragement" I received. I did not need this information because I had seen the prices myself because they appeared on the school website.

The second "encouragement" - while researching scholarships and financial aid that school could have for international students I saw at the beginning of the page that these aids are very limited for foreign students.

When I returned to Kosovo from America, I did not inform my parents that I had found a specific school I wanted to go to because I knew they could not support me financially. However, they knew I wanted to go there to study. My mom communicated and tried to get information from one of her friend's children about what scholarship opportunities she had and how they could help me with the application.

Among the first things I did - with nothing guaranteed - was the TOEFL language test at a US-based education center in Pristina. When they asked me for the school code I was planning to apply for, I gave it to them and the girl who worked there said: do you know that NYU has no scholarships for foreigners?

"I said yes, it says on their page, thank you" and I entered the test.

I passed the English test, got all the paperwork ready and left for America to apply to university. When I entered, my legs could not even cross the gate. Me, as a student there? Too nice to be real. I immediately lost faith that I, Blerta from Kosovo, could finish my studies there. I was with Artan and that was why I did not leave, he pushed me to hand the papers over. In America but also in many other countries of the world, there were many private film universities, while in Kosovo we had only one film school in Pristina. I have not had the opportunity to see such a level of infrastructure.

Staying in America seemed to open up opportunities for me and I had a bit of a hard time coping with them. Despite the opportunities I had, I still did not apply to many schools. In New York,

I only liked the program at Tisch, so I applied only there.

To my surprise, I passed the first stage. This was the moment when I realized that this could be possible. Then I passed the second and finally the third and the letter came to me. I had seen dozens of American movies when the main characters took the envelope and read aloud the first line the university had written to them. They usually said: 'we are happy to inform you that ...' those words were enough for them to realize that they had been accepted.

It seemed to me like a dream and that character was now me. When the letter of acceptance arrived, in addition to stating that I had been admitted to the faculty for master studies, there was also a letter stating that I had won the scholarship of the dean of the faculty which completely covered schooling for the first year and if a high grade point average was maintained, the scholarship is to be renewed every year. Here I became skeptical!

At first, I was not sure I understood the letter well, so I sent it to an American friend of mine and he confirmed it to me. Therefore, I went to America and since the school was full time and with the visa I possessed I was not allowed to work more than 20 hours a week I had many financial difficulties.

However, I had a strong support of my boyfriend. He also helped me to get hired by photographer Fadil Berisha. There we started working together and we barely managed to survive during the three years of my studies. However, a great relief came from the fact that my scholarship was renewed every year.

This period was so busy that I can say that we hardly had a free weekend and many days we went out to work in the morning and came home very late working again. But, I would not change any moment because I have learned a lot from all that experience.

This period was exhausting because I had to work hard in school and out of school. One thing I kept repeating to myself, the fact that after all everything is temporary.

The experience in New York and the whole trip there taught me one thing I want to share with you in this letter. In life, you will encounter endless discouraging phrases that tell you that

this and that is not possible for this and that reason. But life proved to me that it is enough to try it. You can never know what will happen if you try it. On the other hand, one thing is for sure, I know what happens if you do not try. Just nothing.

In the United States, I studied in the years 2007-2011.

While I was at the end of my third year, in 2011, we were staying with Artan in our apartment. He used to listen to the news about Kosovo, when Fahrije Hoti appeared on the screen. He was listening to her and invited me to listen to her story as well.

At that time, I was writing a screenplay for Albanians in the time of Yugoslavia and I thought I had found the right theme to make the first movie. However, when I heard Ms. Fahrije how she lost her husband during the war, how she was raising her only two children and how she managed to build an entire cooperative despite the obstacles, I became obsessed with her story and I was convinced that it was the right story for my first movie.



That same year we decided to go and meet Ms. Fahrije and ask her if she would like to make a film about her life. Artan and myself got together with the actress Yllka Gashi and actor Armond Morina and went to meet with her.

I met Yllka Gashi working together on a short movie of mine and we had an extraordinary collaboration. She was the first and only actress I saw in the role of Fahrije Hoti. Yllka agreed and so far, it seemed to me like half of job was done.

When we met Ms. Fahrije, in addition to telling her life story, which was very interesting, what impressed me the most was her stoic character, personality, vision and attitude. Therefore, from that meeting we decided to focus the story on the main character and we took it as an obligation and as a mission to portray this complex and powerful character of hers on the big screen.

A few years after I finished my master studies where I graduated with a short movie, and after working for a while as an assistant director and becoming a mother bringing Noli to life, I decided to start writing the screenplay for Ms. Fahrije. This scenario is the basis of the movie "Hive".

After writing the first draft of the script, I met with several people because I wanted the producer to be a woman, but since we do not have many women producers in Kosovo, I was not lucky in this aspect. Anyway, I was lucky to meet Yll Uka, the film producer.

Every step taken for the realization of this movie was a challenge. We were deprived of funding and without funds, we could not make the movie. Then I gave birth to my second child and being a mother of two small children, makes all things "difficult".

I was a breastfeeding mother and in such a situation, the baby is completely dependent on you. In those days, there were moments when I thought that my career was over, that I would not even be able to make "Hive" or any other film.

Yet again, this was a temporary condition, something that I did not think about then but I do now. It soon came to an end and I returned to work. Moreover, I had the story of a woman whom the war left overwhelmed. She lost her husband - whom she has not yet found - and happened to be alone in a labyrinth in which a way out seemed impossible. She had two children to raise and insufficient food on a table, but many mouths full of prejudices.

Dear girls
of Kosovo,

When she found the strength to recover, what on earth would stop you or me?

When the Women of Krusha e Madhe found the strength to build their future, each of us must find the strength to continue, despite the challenges, obstacles, and prejudices that each of us may encounter in life.

The movie "Hive" brought the success I had never imagined in my life. However, along the way, without noticing it at all I had put small stones in this success. What I want to tell you in this letter is to focus on the small steps. Dream of the 'big picture' but do not look at it all the time because you will think it can never be achieved because it will look huge. The small steps you take every day, lead you to this dream. Focus on taking these steps safely.

*yours,
Blerta Basholli*

*Photos retrieved from official
page of Blerta Basholli
on Facebook*

za | Our artists

Gender inequality throughout human history has left women at a disadvantage. This inequality has not given the space even to art, the most sublime form of expression of emotions and ideas. Throughout the stages of art development in the world, the work of women artists has not been treated the same as that of men. It often happens that women's works of art were presented under the names of men so that the audience can give them the value they deserve. The most expensive work of art ever, is 'Salvador Mundi' by Leonardo Da Vinci for \$ 450.3 million. The woman who holds the record for the most expensive work in the world is Georgia O'Keeffe's Jimson with the painting "White Flower No. 1". Her work was sold for \$ 44.4 million, \$ 400 million less than that of a man. Decades of efforts by feminist artists to overshadow discrimination have triumphed. Women artists have found their way. There are still a few battles left to win the fight against inequality and they are doing it every day with their work. In movie and music, in painting and theater, their names are prominent. Art is of human and as a result, of women and men. As such, it has the power to "kill" gender inequalities like no other means.



Once again with
Aida Baraku

There is a song on YouTube dated on 1997, published by Labia Productions, called "Leze Leze". Below the name of the song of the publisher, among the many comments, one writes: *"very original"*.

The description is for the girl who sings and dances with the melody of her music, Aida Baraku.

There is no doubt that during the year of 1997, Aida Baraku was not only original, but also extraordinary. For the closed Kosovo of that period, she was perhaps even imperceptible. However, the comment *"very original"* left on YouTube was not made in 1997. As seen under the comments, it was left there in February 2022.

From 1997 not only the years, decades have changed, we are even in the next millennium. Regimes, political systems have changed, almost everything, but even after 25 years, Aida Baraku resembles to people just like in '97's, "original".

Aida is a completely atypical artist. At a time when it was difficult to be exposed as an Albanian singer, her artistic exposure was hectic. Now, in an estranged world of showbiz where advertising is sometimes more important than the product, she has found - again - a unique way to preserve her art, not by talking to the camera, but to the paper/letters.

She may have done it for other reasons, but her absence on screens for years and at the same time artistic survival through lyrics and melodic lines, should be the noblest protest anyone could have made to the general fashion of the idea that the shape exceeds the content.

Baraku has been behind the stage, preparing shows and as a producer, but it has been close to 20 years since she has not appeared in front of the cameras.

"It was not a decision, it was a spontaneous move," she says in this super rare interview for Magazine ZA.

"For many years I lived in the focus of events of my profession. Simply, at one point I wanted to deal with creative things that have to do with the backstage."

Away from the camera, but not away from Art.

"I have composed, write texts, worked on TV programs, screenplays, music videos ... I can say that I am quite happy

in this background. Daily contact with the people on stage does not let me feel isolated from that stage."

The decision to leave the stage when you are part of the group that dominates that stage, for many one may seem strange, but for Aida, as she explains came quite normally.

Her whole career has been like that. Others could consider her songs, costumes, lyrics and everything else about her as radical, while for her, it was the naturalness of the artistic character.

Therefore, as a fulfilled human and artist, she does not see herself at all extraordinary, even the opposite.

"I was immature, much more immature than today's teenagers," confesses Aida for ZA, when asked about her teenage years.

"Growing up as the only child in the family, I was much more immature than the friends of my generation who grew up with many brothers and sisters. Surrounded by books, movies and music, at a time when there was no internet and hundreds of TV channels, I lived in an imaginary world where I thought I was much bigger, much more modern and much more rebellious than I really was."

Born - in almost coincidental circumstances - in Belgrade, but her childhood memories are all in Pristina, however, in a much different Pristina.

"I grew up in Pristina when Dardania and Sunny Hill were just fields for livestock grazing ... when Emshir, Veternik and Matiçan were experienced as villages far away from Pristina."

An ordinary city of a small and suburban country like Kosovo.

For this reason, inspiration for art was sought beyond. Aida did not have the internet to easily navigate on it. Then they worked with a completely different system.

"My generation has sought inspiration outside Kosovo, in travel and contacts with foreigners."

Baraku, one of the most substantial songwriters today, has no problem admitting, *"I was a bad student."*

"Much later, when I was writing in magazines or appearing in the media 'acting high-and-mighty', I thought what my professors from the faculty might say: 'But where did she come from now, she did not open her mouth during the lectures!'"

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Music is not dominated by gender; it is dominated by the character and power of that character.

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Few people know, but Aida wanted to study architecture, *"but along the way occurred my love for music and writing, then my love for Armend ... I easily forgot my ambition and the fact that I was admitted to the faculty with the largest possible number of points in math test."*

From an initial passion for composing verses, writing would become her profession. Like much else, she says, without planning it at all, she ended up in journalism.

"Some of my views accidentally came to the desk of the editor of a magazine. I later realized that writing is my strong weapon, a gifted talent for which I was not prepared during the school."

She did not have journalism in mind, but it came to her easily and pleasantly, because "my preparation were the countless books read throughout the childhood and youth."

Times have changed, Aida has not.

She has not yet fully agreed with the *"short and superficial shapes (of writing) promoted by the internet today - portals and social networks"*.

"I still belong to the group of people who love the Guardian's long interviews or the Hollywood Reporter's roundtables".

This love for letters comes since she has an entire life among the letters. As a self-critic implying that she is, she recalls her first texts, but somewhat with tease.

"The first text I wrote was 'Une pa ty/ Without you', the first song of the group 'Rona'. Typical lyrics of a young woman who will show a lot in two verses and still has no clear idea what is expected from the lyrics of a song, there is no identity, measure, feeling for the emotions that need to be conveyed. These are things I learned a lot later, I learned them on the road and during the experience, without having a rigorous guide."

Unlike most of those who nostalgically seek the past, just because they have a stake in it, Aida does the opposite. She values the present.

"I really like Kosovar popular music which is now no different from European music and which has a dominance over folk music - something that has not happened often before. Children are growing up with that music, they love it very much, they accept it as their own ... Just compare it to children who grew up with video tapes of

the '90s! There was not even ten percent of popular music! Armend, Adelina, Beka, maybe even someone else - and that is it for a program! "

Therefore, Aida claims, *"I proffered my hand to those who have turned our audience to the urban world."*

She goes even further, recalling her appearance in 1996, on the Show Fest with the song "Wild", she says *"I do not think there was ever anything better than what we have today."*

"The costumes and appearances of the past were just a tendency to resemble the world; they were rags we tried to sell as creations."

However, it was not a matter of taste, it was a matter of opportunity.

"Today it seems strange when you tell someone that in Pristina there was no private boutique shop, in cosmetic shops there was only a liquid powder - a product of Macedonia! Tailors were very important women at that time", she says for ZA, bursting with laughter.

On the gender aspect within art in Kosovo, Baraku again has an "out of the box" answer. For her, artists have gender, but art does not. Art, according to Aida, stands outside of any definitions that frame it within a group.

"Music is not dominated by gender; it is dominated by the character and power of that character. Whoever possesses the dominant, winning and ruling energy, attached to the natural inclination for this art and business - it maintains dominance in the music scene", she says.

For her, the problem lies elsewhere - in the industry itself, which beyond performance focuses on the look of artists.

"One of the biggest problems is the dictatorship exercised against women by the beauty industry, the music industry and social networks. Whatever we call this phenomenon - bullying, imposition, pressure - women are almost conditioned to look like a model. They pay a lot and suffer a lot to approach the current ideal of beauty imposed by the media. And, when you are conditioned, you have no freedom of choice. Without freedom - there is no happiness."

Aida does not lack this industry, nor does she lack the one in which she was present, because *"human lacks only the things that are taken from him/her by*

force, or only those that he/she cannot have."

"The decisions you make yourself after you have achieved what you want, as well as the decisions you have never regretted - they do not frustrate you."

She has made another decision, to write a book. Unlike the decision to leave the stage and public life, she has not been so loyal to that decision with the book. Probably because she is not just trying to write a book, but she is trying to *"write a good book."*

"I wrote one book long ago, but in the meantime a very active phase came for Armend and me, there was a lot of demand for our songs, I was writing almost two songs a week. This phase lasted several years. When I returned back to the book - I did not like it."

She had attempted again to write a book. However, she had probably set herself high standards for a literary work and was not giving the maximum due to the multitude of works she was doing all the time.

The last train is approaching and Aida is still afraid to get on it, worrying that it may not be the right destination.

"I started another one, I wrote it differently - I still did not like it. Then I went to live in Tirana with TV engagements and the book was left aside for a while. Now I have a lot of persistence from some publishers - they tell me it is the last moment to do what I am most inclined to do. I still hesitate. I have fears and dilemmas."

We did not see Aida singing, but we enjoyed the beauty of her verses through the songs she wrote for others.

In 1996, she wrote the song "Once again/Edhe njëherë" for her husband Armend Rexhepagiqi. This song was not just a hit. It is one of the Albanian songs that every generation knows, it is immortal.

"Once again, oh let me meet you once again", says one of the verses of the song poem. Aida has made her choice, behind the stage. However, Aida, *"once again we will meet you on the stage, because we cannot die without seeing you, once again!"*



za | our artists

Ilire's Drama



Her life started with a drama. With conflict*.

Ilire Vinca was only a few months old when her family left Struga, and moved in the closest city to Macedonia, in Kaçanik. When she was 12 years old, she moved to Pristina, and when she grew up, she was a first generation student of acting at the University of Pristina.

The conflict in her life continues. She studied acting in the parallel education system and played plays with her colleagues in the only theater center in Pristina, which was poor in terms of the conditions it offered, but was a place of love and dreams.

The 52-year-old actress confesses for ZA magazine about her troubled and happy childhood at the same time. Her family left Struga for political issues. Illyria's parents did not have much but managed to create circumstances for their four children to grow up knowing the calmness and harmony.


"I remember that my sleep was often disturbed by my parents' conversations, whom while having a Turkish coffee in front, which if you measure it, can be drunk in 10 minutes, and they have drunk it for at least an hour. Our weekends have been poor but rich in spirit. My parents knew how to organize with less and provide us a lot of pleasure", Ilirja shared her memories for ZA magazine.

Weekends of Vinca family were always plays. Maybe we did not have a full table, but our soul was full. Every Saturday, the song would ring at home; we would dance and perform poetry. This was also the first station from which she started her journey to the world of art.

Illyria's father is a researcher of Albanian folk lyric poetry, her uncle a poet and professor; her aunts are poets, writers and educators. Surrounded by her loved ones, she became "infected" with her love in art.

"This is how the world existed to me. Beyond that, I did not realize that there could be anything else. But when I grew up I saw that there are other professions," she says.

* In dramaturgy, conflict is an element of the play script. The narrative is built around the script and the conflict means the challenge or challenges that the main characters face to achieve its goals. In this case, the conflict is phrased as symbolic and is used as a reference of the effect that the conflict has on the narrative of theatrical performances to describe the life of Ilire Vinca.

A woman with dark hair styled in an updo, wearing a red velvet gown with puffed sleeves and a grey bodice. She is holding a bouquet of white and green flowers. Her eyes are closed, and she has a serene expression. A red curtain is visible at the top of the frame. On the left side, there is a decorative red outline of a speech bubble containing a quote.

Even though it sounded very beautiful to be acquainted with human physiology, emotional chaos attracted me more. It seemed to me that I had more work as a doctor of emotions and doctor of human being, which remains the most undiscovered creature in the universe.



We are instruments as actors. When we go on stage, our body speaks, if we do not speak with words.

In the school performances, the students came and went, participated once and not more. Ilirja was always there because that was all she knew. However, when she finished high school and it was time for her to study, she was in the crossroad of options.

Her mother wanted her to study medicine, while her father encouraged her to pursue art. It was year 1989, when she had to decide which course of life to take. She made a decision and made a balance of the parents' wishes.

She applied and was admitted to the Faculty of Medicine and to the Faculty of Arts in the department of acting, which was opened for the first time in that year. The opening of the acting department at the very moment when she would become a student, Ilirja considers as a sign from the universe. She was very sure about this. She wanted to share the art with others that was coming from her soul because her father had also told her *"if nature has given you a talent, you should give it to other people. It's a sin if you do not use it."*

While in medicine, she studied the physical anatomy of human, in the faculty of art she studied the emotional anatomy of the characters she would play. She attended both disciplines until the third year when the parallel system began in the years 1991-92. She could not run from one neighborhood of Pristina to another to attend lectures and exercises. Therefore, it was time for her to give up from one faculty.

"Even though it sounded very beautiful to be acquainted with human physiology, emotional chaos attracted me more. It seemed to me that I had more work as a doctor of emotions and doctor of human being, which remains the most undiscovered creature in the universe", Ilirja justifies her decision to continue with art.

Ilire's mother was not completely happy with her decision, but *"she was still waking up to make me a breakfast, and every good meal",* says Ilirja.

In 1993, Ilire graduated from the Faculty of Arts after four years of study. For almost three decades, she lived many lives through the characters she played. In the roles she has played, she has found similarities with the character and says, *"I still reveal myself through every role-play"*.

Imagine the first time in front of an audience - it sounds scary. Maybe your legs are shaking, your heart is pounding and your voice is barely coming out. Ilirja felt all this. Even after so many years have passed, she still feels that way. Taking the 100th role with such responsibility is the synonym of dedication.

"Those emotions, that adrenaline, that I do not know whether to call it fear, responsibility, or desire, follow me even now in every work that I create. I also remember when I said to myself after the first performance: Are you aware that this work will follow you during the whole life that you will always appear in front of the public?" Ilire confesses about her first emotions on the stage in the play "Professor I am a true talent", in the role of Roma.

Appearing in front of the public for Ilire is the finale of a long race. As an actress, she undergoes a complex process of preparation. Hours of analysis for the character and months of rehearsals to bring it to life. Her audience witnesses the final product but cannot fully understand the process that took place before enjoying the show. Therefore the moment of coming on stage is crucial; you are no longer in rehearsals and there is no 'once again, because we made a mistake'.

"By analyzing a character in detail, you justify it and do not judge it as in the first person. You ask, why did it have these motives? Why did it do that? Why is it saying this thing? These thoughts, in what body do they stick? We are instruments as actors. When we go on stage, our body speaks, if we do not speak with words," she says.

After finding the answers to these questions after researching and analyzing the material, she creates a map, which she follows to portray the character as if it were real. The knowledge she gathers during this process, gradually passes into her heart. From the heart, the body becomes an instrument and the acting comes organically, without being noticed that she is playing someone else.

The most difficult roles for Ilire, counter-intuitively, are those that share the same attributes and attitudes as her character. She thinks that a human creates defense mechanisms, which help him to overcome problems more easily. As a result, these mechanisms do not allow the individual to analyze the situation and understand what is happening. Therefore, we do not notice the weaknesses or strengths of our personality, while we are facing problems.

"I had a problem when the dramas had similarities with my experience. When I was offered a role that resembled myself, I did not know whom I was. Then I opened the door and saw who I was through the character."

Challenging for Ilire is not only the work on stage but also the involvement in the film industry and the world of theater. Women actors in Kosovo float in a river of difficulties. She recalls how she was confronted with prejudice before she even started her career well,

when she was just in the process of applying to the faculty of acting.

There were more boys applicants than girls. She was told that she would definitely be accepted because there was a deficit of girls and women applying for this position. She has presumed that the place in the acting branch she would take because she would meet the quota, but would not be accepted there because of her skills.

Discrimination and prejudice began in this period and were only stratified over the years.

"Every day I face challenges. So often, that I forgot to notice when this is unequal. Even as long as I thought, it was not inequality. How tragic it is when you think it is normal, and how beautiful it is when you discover that it is not normal," she says.

When this awareness is reached and then takes in action, then Ilire considers that the wheel has just begun to spin. She does not consider herself a strong fighter, but she has done every day a little to change this reality.

"I have contributed with my work and my way of life. When I had to make a decision, I did not compromise."

Prejudice walks its way along with it. She ignored them. She ignored them even when she heard that women actresses are being labeled "immoral". According to her, it is common in Kosovar society that as a female actress, you are imagined naked in the arms of someone - an intimate partner - who is not your legitimate partner. The burden of what we call 'moral' falls superficially on the woman actor, she says.

"How do we know what happens there, while you work overtime", Ilire quotes one of the sexist comments about actresses.

Ilire managed to balance very well the professional and personal life, not being influenced at all by such comments. She is the mother of three grown-up daughters, who have been some of her strongest supporters. To achieve such a friendly relationship with them, during their childhood, Ilire was devoted as mother. Not because she had to, but because she did not want to miss one of life's most precious periods.

"I did not want to enter the fight for equality, understanding the necessity of being close to children. If I had to go and shoot three movies, I would have made only one. If I had to play a few shows, I would choose one a year", talks Ilire about the compromise of motherhood.

Thus, she was settled again at the crossroads of choices, and decided to enjoy the still water, just like the Lake Ohrid near which she was born, and to leave for later the adrenaline of professional experience in the flowing water, like the Black Drini.

For her, the time she would not spend with children would be irreparable. An absence in the lives of her children, she described as a burden that would haunt her for the rest of her life. A few movie shows and roles less would not determine professional success. Therefore, it actually happened. Ilire is one of the artists with heavy artistic baggage with numerous performances and movies.



If she would go back, she would act differently in some situations and react differently to some issues. However, it is important for her to remind herself that she did her best in the conditions in which she lived and in the opportunities that were offered to her.

"I do not know if I would have been capable if I had all the conditions. I do not know how it is. Maybe I would panic; I would say I am not ready. It would have held me back and I probably would not have done anything," she said.

She constantly throws herself into the "fire" of new projects, not only in Kosovo, but also abroad. The comfort zone is not the space where Ilire can flourish. There is not enough light for her.

"It's not that I have a vision of where I see myself after 5 or 10 years. I intend to live longer because in our profession we do not retire. I do not know where I will be, but I cannot wait to meet myself there."

Ilire fulfilled the legacy of her father. She shared her talent with the audience that lined up to follow her on the play. She does not intend to close the theater curtains.

She has played 40 roles in theater and 35 in movies and the number will continue to grow.

Photos retrieved from official page of Ilire Vinca on Facebook



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Anti-patriarchy brush

The leaves had changed the color. It was the end of October 2021 and the warmth of the first days of autumn was gone in time. A golden shade had fallen over Pristina. The city streets were noisy. Typical autumn days in the capital.

In her apartment in the neighborhood of Sunny Hill in Pristina, the painter Zake Prelvukaj was standing by the window.

"I sat here to wait for you and I'm enjoying this view outside," she said, as she swallowed the last sip of the cup of coffee, that had already put on dry layers to let us know that she had been there for quite some time and she went to the kitchen to make some other coffees.

Her room was full of paintings, of course. For us it may have been an unusual environment, but for Zake it was her daily life since she was a child.

"Art was not accidental to me because I grew up with it. I started absorbing it when I was a kid because my brother was already a professional artist while I was little and I still did not paint at that level. Once I entered my brother's atelier, got in a chair and did my first painting, which was a quiet autumn nature," she refers to Magazine ZA.

Zake Prelvukaj, originally from Martinaj of Plava in Montenegro, had moved to Kosovo at a very young age with her family. She was built as Zake in Pristina. However, she has a part of her heart in her hometown.

Her house was a house of artists. There, as Zakja says, were singing, reading and painting.

Surprisingly, art was not the first choice for studies for Zake. Guided by her father, she began studying law, with the idea of profiling herself into something that would potentially provide her with financial security.

"My father told me that art is very dangerous, I will never stop you, you can go to art whenever you want, but first you finish the law", Zake remembers the conversation with her father before she registered in the faculty.

Law could be the ideal field of study for anyone, but not for Zake. Studies in law were not her favorites at all and only 3 years after studying law, she enrolled in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Pristina. In 1990, she graduated in painting.

"I left law and I did not think of anything, I just thought that I should study art, I did not have any obstacles and I had a lot of support", she continues.

Zake had her brother, Musa Prelvukaj, a painter. There were crayons and pencils, art books and drawing blocks everywhere in the house. She was experimenting with her talent. She painted whenever she could and improved her techniques.

"The main culprit why I deal with art is my idol, brother. He was an artist and art professor, and he offered me his library - from where it enabled me to read and understand more about art", Zake confesses.

He even experimented with his artwork. If he was working on a painting and it still stood in his studio, Zake would throw in elements of her own art. In brief, she was the house quarrel.

"I entered my brother's studio and I drew, and I was always the one that had ruined his paintings", Zake says with a laugh.

Zake spent her childhood in the center of Pristina. She often spent her days looking out from the balcony on the seventh-floor apartment that was in front of Grand Hotel. She was always free to act and the family trusted her judgment. She was completely independent, even financially. By the time she was 13, she had started portraying and also designing and sewing clothes herself, thus earning a living for her.

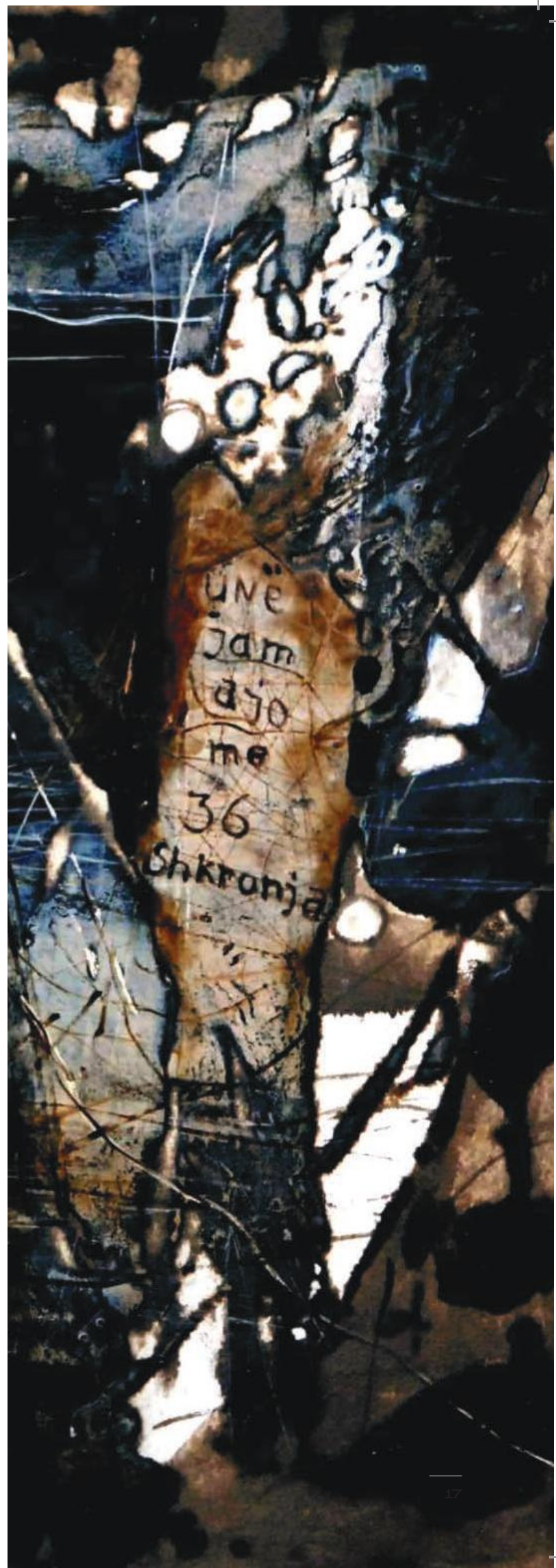
"I sewed for my friends, family, myself - I had all because I earned money myself, I created an economical independence. But I have tailored free of charge as well to those who did not have money", confesses Zake.

Studies in art were the reason why she quit her job as a clothing designer, and from then on, the color and the brush was what kept Zake alive.

Her expressionist art naturally debuted on the art scene in Kosovo. Zake was original and even in art reflected the freedom, which characterized her life. Through the brush she expresses her feelings, presents her perspective on social and cultural phenomena. Her art leaves room for interpretations, and the message varies from performer to performer.

"I can say that the creation of those years was very difficult, very different from those after the war! Which means, it has everything inside them and is still unpublished in any form. I hope it will be published when the time comes, I believe soon", Zake explains.

During the summer of 1997, while she was wandering in her atelier, an idea came to her mind! To use her body instead of the brush. She was dyed naked with color and she thrown down into the fabric. Her body remained painted naked. She called this work *"My body in the brush"*,





We were residents of a period of repression, of violence that we did not have the freedom to walk the streets. But we survived, because we were capable, and we loved life



This work of art was accompanied by noise. The timing was such that her compatriots were in charge of political developments and things were seen more rigidly, until Zake's courage shook the status quo. The mentality of the late 90's did not easily accept an Albanian woman who undresses for the sake of art.

However, Zake says that *"patriarchy has never been a problem for me and my family and the area where I was brought up."*

As the political situation in the country aggravated in the 1990s, Zake and her entire circle were forced to change their way of life, as Serbian military forces endangered them. Even then, she did not stop making art and through it secured a living. Not long after graduating, she began living on her own 40m2 apartment, which she turned into an atelier.

"During the curfew, a painting was sold and from that money we provided a bite for the family, neighbors and elderly friends we had. My color has never been only mine, it has belonged to everyone", Zake confesses about her altruism.

Curfew can be suffocating for the population to which such a measure is imposed. For Zake and her friends, it meant more creativity, more opportunities to spend time together creating memories.

"In my atelier, friends were coming and we stayed up all night because they did not dare to go out during the night because of the curfew," she said. *"We were residents of a period of repression, of violence that we did not have the freedom to walk the streets. But we survived, because we were capable, and we loved life",* Zake continues.

Kosovo won freedom, and with it Zake's art as well. The artist started exhibiting abroad but she realized that the world did not know her country as she did. The western countries where the painter traveled did not expect anything extraordinary from an artist coming from a post-war country.

But Zake had dropped the point. She would use her art to do cultural diplomacy, making Kosovo appear as it is, not as it was said to be.

"I was in Manchester in Great Britain with the painting 'My body in the brush' and they were surprised when they realized that I am Albanian. So, I have told the world that we are not them, it is bad propaganda being made about Kosovo", she explains.

Zake's art as her only weapon, tried to "shoot" the narrow mentality and through the brush and imagination she tried to emancipate society on some topics, which at that time were difficult to discuss.

In a painting part of an exhibition called "Sexibiton 1.2005" she had painted the legs and bodies of raped, abused women and a dart (pikado) board, which she had placed on the genitals. Face to face with the painting, she put a chair where a man was standing dressed in black and shooting with an arrow at her genitals. Her works were controversial and as such aroused discussion.

"The idea was that between the legs is not only the act of sex, but from there the child is born, great things happen in the creation of this world. I think that between the legs is our greatest strength", Zake explains her art.

As always, every phenomenon and every event gathers different thoughts. Even for Zake's courage to express what she thought through painting, the audience expressed agreement and disagreement. But what makes an artist to be, is not to make calculations in disadvantage of his art.

"I did not start with the idea of what people would say, but with why I should draw. I wanted and I had that courage and I did it - in short, the stronger feeling was what I wanted to do than what they would say. There were some of them who would told me, no one will marry you, they will kill you, do not teach the girls to undress", says Zake with a laugh.

She listened to the comments and welcomed the criticism, but they did not have the power to influence on her. She just collect them and process them calmly. The two controversial works for which she stood out were nothing but the reality that was lived in her country and in the world.

"I did not made the chest, the body and the crotch (between the legs) to show off my body, but to show the chest as a source of food. Breast milk raises the baby and is not just to be touched by the partner. Some will even associate it with pornography or erotic art, and people are free to see it as they wish", she says.

Painting is not the only field of art for which Zake stands out. When the country of Kosovo, in which she grew up, was going through the most difficult historical period and at the same time the



Photos borrowed from the character herself

brightest for what came after the storm, Zake was hired as a photographer. She had learned from her parents that photos are the most realistic documents of an environment and event and every story is told through them.

She has documented many events of that time through photographs, and preserves them with fanaticism, and would never sell them because they contain the historical art of the country during the years of occupation.

Since 1997, she has been engaged as a lecturer at the University of Pristina, in the department where she was a student. Zake continues to work to this day at the university where she teaches painting and she is also engaged in the AAB College.

When she is not in the university, she paints. She finds inspiration in everything and then materializes it in her paintings that hang everywhere on the walls of the house.

"The painting of the main culprit why I am in art", she pointed to one of her brother's paintings which was hanging on one of the walls of the living room, where among other things there were also paintings of her friends.

At Zake's house, you can hardly see any white piece of wallpaper. Each space is filled with works of art and each had a history behind it. Time would not be enough for her to confess about each of them.

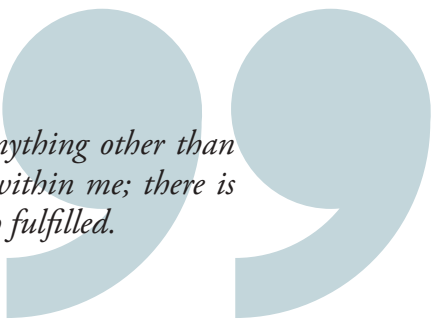
The black dress she was wearing had colored dots on it, which were accidentally glued during the work. She had come down to meet us from her messy studio and turned back there after she finished the story for magazine ZA.

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The Soprano



*Photo borrowed from
the character herself*



When I started singing I knew I would never do anything other than classical music. It seems to me that it is integrated within me; there is nothing else that could have made me feel so fulfilled.

At the Stara Zagora Opera House in Bulgaria, a Bulgarian artist may have been performing. The opera 'Lucia di Lammermoor' by the Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti had the Kosovar soprano Besa Llugiqi as the star of the play.

Besa is a girl from Pristina. In her life, she has done nothing but music. Even when she was little, she enjoyed the solitude under the music sounds.

"Mom says that before I even started talking, I started singing and I was constantly singing. It is not that I enjoyed being with the kids outside. I always preferred to sit down, play alone and listen to music."

The music class at the Meto Bajraktari School in Pristina, on one of the usual days for others, would not be usual for Besa. The professor of music, Robert Gjokaj, had asked from students to create a melody by themselves and on the next hour to come to class and show what they had prepared.

"Professor Robert has noticed my talent. I created the melody and I really did not know the notes and the heights of the intervals, I was very small. I just wrote something intuitively and he gave me to sing, and I sang. He was very impressed by my ability and talent," says Besa for ZA magazine.

Gjokaj, who was a clarinetist, invited Besa to learn to play the instrument with him. The music of both of them would be stopped by the start of the war. Besa stopped the exercises but temporarily. After the war, she returned to music high school and lived with music permanently. Besa found the music and music has found Besa.

"Ever since elementary school I knew I had to go to music school, and when I

started singing I knew I would never do anything other than classical music. It seems to me that it is integrated within me; there is nothing else that could have made me feel so fulfilled."

The naturalness with which Besa performs on stage makes her seem as if she can interpret in that way at any time. Misperception! Long hours of rehearsals and amazing effort to harmonize with everything else that composes the stage, even though to know exactly where to stand on the stage.

"Music has never been easy, it is a total commitment. You need not only to be good in one field, but you need harmony, counterpoint, piano, which means all the instruments, and in each one of them you need to be 100% present."

Moreover, in addition to merging every cell of the body to perfectionize every sound that comes out of the vocal cords, pursuing a professional career in classical music is a huge financial investment. Her father provided material support and Besa attended a series of courses.

"I have invested all the time in my exercises, trips, tickets, etc. Master classes have cost a lot, all the time I have been traveling through Europe to try to fill any gaps that an artist really needs to fill in himself."

She had attended master classes in Italy, Germany, Vienna, Luxembourg, and Bulgaria. For six years in a row, Besa had rehearsed with the great opera singer from Sofia, Christina Anghelakova, who had also left traces in her artistic career.

"She was one of the most supportive persons and together we worked on the roles I debuted."

I worked every day in Pristina and I kept two jobs. On Friday morning I left, I drove to Sofia, I had lessons in the afternoon, on Saturday as well, and on Sunday, I turned back. I have made all the investment to be closer to perfection each time, closer to a beautiful interpretation."

Besa's first appearance abroad was in 2011 at the Opera of Tirana in the role of Liu from 'Turandot' by Italian composers Franco Alfano and Giacomo Puccini. The lights and stage of the Opera and Ballet Hall in Albania were extraordinary.

Each aria was applauded. It was the Italian conductor, Vitorio Parizi, who also praised high her performance and invited her to take part in a competition in Italy. From this debut, she never stopped with having performances at various opera houses and internationally renowned festivals.

"It was the first time I was on that stage, and the interpretation has been as sincere as the role has required it. I know that every time I sing, the orchestra was applauding, and it motivated me to continue even more."

In 2013, Besa participated in the first international competition for young opera singers 'Elena Nicolai' in Panagyurishte, Bulgaria, where she performed as Donna Elvira in Mozart's 'Don Giovanni' and she won the Grand Prix.

"My performance in Bulgaria has been very important. It was like a springboard ('trigger') for me to take almost all the roles away. I did not expect this award, but the jury was unanimous in its decision for me. The last aria was very difficult, but I had invested a lot at that time without considering myself as really prepared."

The prize she received at Panagyurishte was the talisman. Another role was offered to her in a prestigious opera in Ruse, Bulgaria, and Besa seemed to become one of the leading voices in Bulgarian opera because the invitations to perform were not few, but dozens of them.

Photo retrieved from official page of Besa Llugiqi on Facebook



Among the most challenging performances during her professional career, Besa singles out 'Lucia di Lammermoor' of Berkanto style. This role for Besa had been one of the most difficult in interpretation because she had the title role where the whole burden of the opera had fallen on her.

"I think this is the most beautiful music that exists from that period but at the same time it squeezes you emotionally, mentally and physically. It is something extremely difficult to interpret because you are constantly on the stage. It is a titular role where the name of the opera is your role", she describes.

Numerous preliminary exercises and successful performances in such a challenging opera, had given Besa more self-confidence and it had been the 'food' for more challenges.

"When I was entrusted with such a role that I did not think I could be in that repertoire, at the same time it has grown me and given me a lot of self-confidence. Everything else was more feasible after that. I think that without challenging yourself you can no longer understand how much capacity you have."

Opera performances for a soloist like Besa are disciplines of the "military" category. Constant exercises to achieve technical perfection because is not enough to have just beautiful voice. Talent is the 'raw material', which should be processed.

"I have always dreamed of being someone who knows how to sing well, to be technically okay, to interpret in the most beautiful possible way and to be as close to perfection as possible."

When the role of mother enters between the talent and hard work, everyday life is loaded even more. The role of the mother made her progress in career even more challenging. However, the show must go on in Besa's world, so maternity leave had some music every day.

"After Luna's birth, at first it was not easy. I thought I would not have the same space to go out and sing. But two weeks after the birth my husband was the one who pushed me to start rehearsals. And I was practicing two hours a day, every day."

Three months after the birth of daughter, she had planned to sing Traviata. She had scheduled this concert so soon after birth, in order to motivate herself to continue. Even music would not detached Besa from her baby, if it were not the safety she found in her husband.

"He has been extremely supportive, especially during this time, and every day at 9 o'clock I have been at the theater all summer. He loves the music I sing, and he knows all my arias, sometimes he even sings them."

The 500-600 page long roles Besa rehearses every day while four-year-old Luna sleeps. Rehearsals are the evening break. The fact that she has performed in dozens of operas is not a 'visa' that she has reached the zenith.

"You cannot say calmly, I know this job and that's it. No! You always have to go back to the interpretation. Then, it has a lot to do with how you feel emotionally because everything reacts and affects in the interpretation. So there is a constant need for extraordinary self-control."

Career and family for Besa are bonded together. The business trips she makes, often turn into family adventures. The daughter and her husband have attended almost every performance on giant opera stages across Europe.

"We had more opportunities to move, to go out and to see more cultures. For us as a family, music has made our lives more beautiful."

On her many trips, Besa always takes her family who follow her to musical performances, which require a lot of dedication and involve many responsibilities.

Kosovo does not have an opera house. Besa rehearses at the National Theater of Kosovo and participates in small concerts without the opportunity to perform any opera. However, she contributes to the education of new generations who want to continue her path. She is a professor of music at the University of Pristina and at UBT College.

"Everything is achieved with consistency and determination. We should not stop in front of nothing; always find a solution to every problem we encounter. I was as such. Do not stop, because if you stop, all of your life you will regret for something you have not tried", emphasizes Besa, revealing another small secret of her success.

Madame Butterfly, Othello Desdemona, Maria Stuarda - three major opera roles, which she fully agrees are among the most difficult, Besa intends to attain and interpret them during her career.

To reach this level, she says, it takes another 15 or 20 years of dedication.

For the next two decades, Besa's soprano can ring at a ballet house like La Scala in Milan, Italy, one of the most famous halls in the world. However, before being heard there, can we hope that one day she will perform in Pristina and her compatriots will enjoy in Lucia di Lammermoor's performance?

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Everything is achieved with consistency and determination. We should not stop in front of nothing; always find a solution to every problem we encounter. I was as such. Do not stop, because if you stop, all of your life you will regret for something you have not tried.

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In search of freedom

"Freedom is the possibility to say that 2 and 2 make four. If this is guaranteed, everything else follows," says in Chapter 7 of his book "1984", British novelist, George Orwell.

Kosovars were at the peak of their patience from the systematic oppression of the occupiers in the 1990s. For decades, they could not say that "2 and 2 make four", to say that they want Kosovo as a free country. Thus, freedom as a concept began to be understood and used in terms of political independence, of autonomy.

This kind of freedom that of liberation from the occupier, the Kosovar director Blerta Zeqiri, had not experienced in her youth. She was born in 1979 in Suhareka, where she finished primary and secondary school. During her education, the social, economic and social inequalities in the country were increased exponentially, while the political relations between Kosovo and Serbia only became more and more aggravated. Therefore Blerta was always in the state of seeking freedom and she did this through music.

As a teenager, in 1992, Blerta and her two friends, Anila and Mimoza, formed a hip-hop band, which they named 'BAM'. The band 'BAM' first participated in the Showfest music festival in 1995, where they won a second prize.

"We were very happy, because we had not even dreamed that we could participate in the festival, and neither to go to the finals. It has been very interesting to us since we were three girls who are close friends. We always stayed together and dreamed of making music," Blerta tells about her first artistic project.

The dream was broken. Blerta and her friends were professionally involved in music for only four years because the war broke out. She left Kosovo as a refugee in France with her family.

"I do not know why, but at the moment when the war took place, my song stopped. I couldn't sing!" she says for ZA.

Her heart broke when she saw what was happening to her people. Things were unclear to her. Nothing she had done and learned until then could help her understand why is this happening. Even the art she made began to

seem 'useless' to her. Her dream of becoming a writer also faded because of her traumatic war experience.

"When the war started, I realized that person could not understand anything from all the books it reads and all the movies it watches until it experienced it itself. I thought I would never write or sing again. It seemed to me that the knowledge is not being transmitted," she explains her bitter experience in the war and her distancing from art.

She tried to cure the traumatic experience and her remedy was art. Although she was involved in music in her homeland, movie as another dimension of art gave her the opportunity to talk about the war from her perspective and to explain how she had experienced it.

In France, she began movie studies at Saint Denis University in year 2000. At the time, Blerta was very motivated and enthusiastic about creating. *"Since I wanted to work, the whole university, all the professors were mobilized if I needed a camera or something,"* she said.

Much of her desire to work in movie was nurtured by her professors, who provided her with what she needed most - artistic freedom of expression.

"They were letting you find your own ways. I liked that a lot", remembers Blerta.

Her first public creation in the film industry was in 2002. With her sister Lindita, they made the movie "Exit". This film was about the war in Kosovo, shown from the perspective of three students who remain trapped in their apartment when the conflict erupts. The process of making this film was full of concerns and the final product was not at all fulfilling.

"We did not like it at all. We did not like the picture, the voice did not sound that good. We let go for a week and said: 'Phew, we did not do anything. We just tried hard, but it's nothing.' After a week, we put a movie again. We watched it, it was still "phew, how bad", she says laughing.

When their father went to Paris to visit his daughters, he looked at them in amazement, watching the film dozens of times in a short period of time, and humorously said to them, *"Why are you doing this every week? The movie cannot be better. It is as it is; it can't be corrected by staying."*

The movie could stay there for another 10 years and it would get neither better nor worse. But as it was, it was enough to win first place at a festival where they sent the film encouraged by their professors. Their work seemed so poor to them, that they did not believe that their movie had been accepted at the festival, nonetheless aiming for the first prize.

66

I think that I have freedom as the main thing I follow and search for, and it seems to me that there are much more opportunities for freedom.



"No way, someone is making fun of us", were their first words when they received the news that their movie would be screened at the festival. This festival became the cause for the film to travel to many countries of the world, bringing the history of Kosovars to large audiences, which would understand from this movie what had happened in Kosovo.

It was very important for Blerta that her first film project was successful, because she believes that if the situation was different, she could have been finally demotivated to consider directing as a profession.

"If we had not had that success, we might have tried another movie. But I doubt it, because the movie is very difficult and is also very expensive as a product. It is hard to be motivated when you do not succeed. It's even hard when you succeed, let alone when you do not!" declares Blerta.

Blerta is from those directors chasing the freedom of art, without boundaries and rules that violate the originality. She has tried to break the old norms when the movie characters spoke in standard Albanian language and their acting was not very similar to the behaviors and ways of acting in everyday life.

"When we were watching American movies, the people who were part of the movies - they were real people, people who existed somewhere. While in our country, when we were making a film, the character immediately appeared false, as someone who spoke a language that no one speaks - an unknown literary language", says Blerta with opposing tones against the template that according to her damaged the movie.

"If it's about swearing, you swear - because until then it was unimaginable that someone swears in the movie. You cannot walk 100 meters here without listening to 2-3 people swearing", she adds.

The aim was to bring the film closer to reality, to bring to life the narratives of the society in which it was formed. She directed the movie "Marriage" and the movie "Return". The uniqueness of both films is that the script is not followed in strict terms.

She followed a special technique. She asked the actors for cooperation and gave them the freedom to improvise and inlay elements according to their imaginations.

"Do you know how beautiful it is when everyone who is contributing to the movie feels that their contribution is even more essential? I hope they feel that way. They give me the energy that they feel free, fearless they imagine and give, and they know that it is their movie. It is ours! I am there just to steer a wheel slightly, but I cannot do anything more, because we have all the power together", she says.



*Photo credits
to Fadil Berisha*

Blerta is now 42 years old. 20 years ago, even the freedom of choosing a profession had moral limits! When confessing for ZA, she explains that the expectations for a woman and a girl in Kosovo have been different from what they are now. Before moving to France, where she completed her university studies, Blerta had applied to the University of Pristina and the comments she had received from her potential professors and colleagues tended to restrict her personal freedom.

"It was least expected to be a director. Entering and leaving the house without a schedule. The professors tried to persuade me not to choose this profession by telling me: 'there was a girl earlier, she got married in the second year and left the faculty. She has just taken a place to one boy, who probably would have finish so far the studies.'"

Blerta is a mother of two children, Zogu, 16 years old and Nata 11 years old. As a 26-year-old, she was pregnant with her first child and at the same time was completing her master studies in France.

When she was going for lectures, she was leaving with a prejudice. She thought that the fact that she was becoming a mother would become an obstacle for her career. However, she learned the lesson not to prejudge when she confronted with one of the professors. *"When I went to tell to my professor in France, I thought 'now he will immediately change his look'. When I ask for the cameras, he will hardly give them to me. I remember how I told him as scared that I was pregnant, thinking that I will no longer be his favorite student and he would say like: 'She will not do anything in her life.'"*

A kind of fear of the responsibilities that came from motherhood and the impact that this epithet could have on her life, accompanied Blerta even after completing her master studies, while working in the film industry when she returned to Kosovo.

"In any moment you have shown as a mother, they should immediately throw that epithet in front of your face and say that you are not worth of anything else."

Although she judges motherhood as one of the most difficult commitments and at the same time one of the most fulfilling, she thinks that, maintaining balance in personal and professional life, is much more difficult for a woman than for a man.

"To be able to promote in a career, it was very difficult when you showed that you are a mother. It hurts me! I said to myself: 'eh, men also place the family picture and they clutter their desks with things, and they do nothing, but they place the stuff on a desk. And it seems to me that if I fill the table with such stuff, it will look as if I was subordinating.'"

She did not talk with others about her daily life as a mother due to the fear of professional stagnation. But at the same time, she shows that being a mother has helped her experience the world more empathetically and has taught her to follow and trust her intuition.

It is precisely intuition that women need to achieve freedom according to Blerta, and the definition of freedom and the narrowing of its meanings is made precisely by women, who sometimes consciously choose to defend patriarchy.

"We make this thing out of fear because of what they will say. People experience many things and tell very little. Too wrong! Mothers, women, daughters, share your experiences because they are not only yours", she says, calling for collective solidarity among women, where through the expression of feelings and experiences, the norm and system of society is restructured.

Kosovo can be a country with gender inequality in many areas. But perhaps the film industry is not one of them. Blerta says that women in this

industry are by no means a minority compared to what is happening around the world. While there is discourse around the world that there are not enough women directors who do not receive projects and institutional support, Kosovo can set an example for them.

"Kosovo has made giant steps," she considers. *"We are showing to the world that they might be women present and also be a majority in this industry."*

Freedom as a concept is closely related to peace. Peace is symbolized by the white color. Blerta, in search of freedom in all its forms, has painted the concept with the green color with which she will color every professional project and every step she takes in her personal life. *"I think that I have freedom as the main thing I follow and search for, and it seems to me that there are much more opportunities for freedom",* this is the green freedom of Blerta Zeqiri.



*Mothers,
women,
daughters,
share your
experiences
because they
are not only
yours.*



za | our artists

Alketa's 5000 dresses

The sun was setting in Pristina. That day, Friday, June 11, 2015, Alketa Xhafa Mripa was sitting in the highest seats of the football stadium "Fadil Vokrri" and was observing the field. At that moment, she experienced the most beautiful feeling during her artistic career.

"The dresses were waving, they all had a common story ... as if they were saying in one voice: Here we are ..., 'hear us out & hear our story' the fault is not ours I did not perceive that day only the dresses, we were all there - Myrvetja, Edona, Magbulja, Mimoza, Tina, etc., so for me they were persons, stories and collective pain from that part of history," refers Alketa for ZA, who made the voice of survivors of sexual violence during the war loud around the world through an installation.

In June 2015, the conceptual artist presented the artistic installation "Thinking of you" as a dedication to the survivors of sexual violence of the last war in Kosovo. For three months, she had collected 5 thousand dresses. Through this, she wanted to show these women that regardless of the circumstances, someone thinks about them.

Aside from being an artist, she is an 'artist' - combining her art with activism to drive change in society, to give a voice, and to strengthen the causes she believes in. Her creativity has been influenced by many events that had preceded Alketa's life.

"Activism helps me to approach issues and break taboos creatively but at the same time fosters debate and involvement. Before the war, the freedom of speech was not so strong, because we lived under occupation, but all of us as a society have expressed collective dissatisfaction in various forms, such as lighting candles and ringing keys on the balcony and many more," she explains.

Grown up in a family of six members, Alketa was the youngest child. Being the daughter of the famous Kosovar painter Xhevdet Xhafa, she grew up surrounded by works of art. Seeing her father painting every aspect of life, has shaped her future as an artist.

In the early 1990s, half of her family moved to London, UK. The same fate befell Alketa who, after finishing high school in Pristina, left for the United Kingdom. She was only 17 years old at the time.

The plans were different from the conclusion that Alketa had in life.

"I got a visa for England in Belgrade in 1997. I went to stay for a year after completing a pre-university course, to learn English and then to start the college. In 1998, the situation got worse a lot in Kosovo, and I was not able to return."



Her hometown was in a state of war and she could not return to a place where whether she would stay alive or not was the question of the day. She was thus forced to apply for asylum. To start this procedure was somewhat unacceptable to her.

"For me, asylum has been one of the most difficult moments in life. It seems to me that I have completely lost my identity. Who am I? Who am I now in a country to which I do not belong? I was eager to return to Kosovo like everyone else."

Asylum seeker questions would soon be answered. Alketa began her studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Central Saint Martins University in London. The semesters cost 'a hell', and to cover the cost of tuition and living, she worked almost as much as the day had hours.

She worked two shifts, in a restaurant in the morning and in the night in a nightclub. Immediately after she finished her studies, she entered one of the most important stages of her life. In 2004, she became a mother for the first time.

After graduation, she was giving herself all the time space she needed to figure out what she wanted to do with her talent and artistry.

"I have continued with my works. However, I wanted to know myself more or less, what I want and what spirit or direction my art will take. When you finish college in general and especially that of arts, then you stop and think about further plans of your creativity. But I was open to representations and art forms," she said.

Alketa uses her talent and art to communicate with people about issues that she considers essential. She uses her imagination to raise awareness of various causes and tries to give voice to certain phenomena.

"My art, the way I work is to make a difference, no matter how small. In order to have some change, the work must have a certain theme. I have to be teased by something, something that surrounds me, like some social injustice, in order to react and with presentation I try to present it visually," says Alketa.

She finds inspiration everywhere - even in the most unusual moments of everyday life. One afternoon, while she was at home with her children, she was watching a show on a local Kosovar television station. The interview given by a survivor of sexual violence during the war in Kosovo caught her attention.

Photo credits to
Fadil Berisha



My art, the way I work is to make a difference, no matter how small.



When a survivor was telling her story by calling for someone to think about them, Alketa had caught herself having a dialogue with the woman on TV, and was saying *"I think of you, we think of you, there are many that think of you, but my language is not strong, I'm not a diplomat to tell the world that rapes have taken place and that your story is true."*

What would follow from this virtual communication with the woman on TV was the installation "Thinking of you." Alketa wanted to tell the whole world about the fate of her compatriots.

"As an artist, I was free to do a work, a project or anything else personal, but what change would I make? Nothing at all," she says and her face takes an expression of denial.

The discussion for the realization of this idea that Alketa had since 2013 - to do the installation in the stadium of Pristina - started in 2015 in London. In the 'Balkan Artist Guild' gallery, where Alketa was realizing her idea on a smaller scale - she transformed a room into a football field and hanged her dresses on a rope - an Italian professor of sociology, Anna Di Lellio came to visit her.

Alketa told Anna that the original idea of the project is for this installation to be done on a larger scale and that at the stadium "Fadil Vokrri" in Pristina.

Discussion after discussion, together they decided to ask for help from the formerly President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga. Immediately, they contacted Garentina Kraja, the head of the president's cabinet, and presented her the idea of carrying out this installation at the "Fadil Vokrri" stadium in Pristina.

"President Jahjaga has supported me the most to realize this project", she confesses with gratitude for the support that was offered to her.

The symbolism of the football field was the masculine side, dresses hanged in a space that has historically been owned by men.

"Women's dresses on the men's football field are very light visual symbols. To me the dress is not just a symbol of womanhood. It conveys fragility and simplicity," she explains for ZA.

Dresses as a symbolic, to build the installation could be hung there by anyone. However, this technicality was not enough for her. It was important to her that the process of hanging the dresses itself was powerful. Therefore, war survivors themselves became part of her art.

"My goal was for the survivors to be part of this whole act. They would donate dresses, but at the same time would watch and feel a certain solidarity from the society, to understand that we are all with them, and that is how the title came out Thinking of You."

The wavy dresses had a great echo and created solidarity in Kosovo. The president of the state, the ministers, the civil society, the various people were present in the stadium, and through the media the voice of the survivors was heard worldwide. Alketa throwback the issue of Kosovo on the agenda once again, as in 1999.

It will be spoken about the war again, but this time will be talked about the history of women, whom for 15 years were silently imprisoned.

"I was very pleased with the results. The work has done its job. It crossed the borders, and showed the world that there are thousands of women raped in

Kosovo and that the rapes really happened. One thing that did not go according to plan is that these dresses have been closed for 6 years. The idea was that after the installation, they should turned into sculptures with these dresses, because it is the sculpture of all the people."

The project that Alketa had in mind as a continuation of the installation could not be done without a financial cost. This sculpture planned by the artist was not realized due to lack of funds. The dresses are kept locked in the studio of Alketa's father who also takes care of their storage.

In 2021, through art, Alketa decided to introduce the new generations with Kosovar women who were pioneers of various professions. This time it was not an installation measuring 120 meters by 90. Her art took the form of a literary work.

"Mummy, is there any story about Kosovo women", her 8-year-old daughter Tiba had asked Alketa one day.

Alketa was reading a book with her daughter describing the lives of the world's most powerful women, and this aroused the girl's curiosity to learn more about Kosovar women. Unfortunately, there was no such book. This dialogue with her daughter resulted in the publication of the book "Vepra e saj".

In this work are revealed the memories and works of 100 female pioneers of Kosovo who contributed to various spheres of life during the period 1940 - 1979. The character determination of this book was made based on personal experience and memories from Alketa's childhood.

"It started with the personal side, because I remembered as a child, my father and mother would mentioned to me the first women in different fields. The first woman they mentioned to me was Ganimete Nura from Gjakova, the first woman who landed with a parachute, then, Alije Vokshi, a painter and many, many other women. I wanted to have personal elements in the book and not just a research."

To the series of works of many Albanian authors that we are used to seeing in libraries, Alketa decided to attach the book "Vepra e saj". The stories in this book are dedicated to young people, mostly girls, to serve as inspiration throughout their lives.

"We are here today because of those women. Their contribution must resonate, generation after generation. I wanted to summarize, starting the each one with 'once upon a time', so that the new generations would know about these women and that their creativity and effort would not die."

All the stories were based on research, oral data and interviews with the families of these women.

Photo borrowed from Dukagjini Bookstore



Contributors to this book were numerous. It was the journalist Alberina Haxhijaj who wrote the textbooks, Kreshnik Berisha who edited and adapted them for children, the students of the Faculty of Arts and Architecture in Pristina, the students of the high school 'Hamëz Jashari' in Skenderaj, as well as the students of high school of art in Peja, who had made the illustrations.

"The beauty of this work and of my works in general, is that I have a great desire to include society, by giving them space and a platform. I wanted to give space to the students so that their illustration could be published in their name."

"I have collaborated with these fantastic students who have a lot of potential but do not have much space to show their talent. An important part of the publication and the campaign was the donation of 300 copies of the book free of charge to the National Library, through which they were donated to schools in the municipalities of Kosovo", explains Alketa why she decided to entrust one of her most important projects to students.

Alketa lives with one foot in Pristina and with another in London. She is a mother of four and her days are busy doing a lot of work at the same time.

The woman who filled an area of 9,000 square meters with her art will remain a prominent name in the modern history of Kosovar art. Alketa's 'artivization' made the voice of women that others forgot to resonate all over the world.

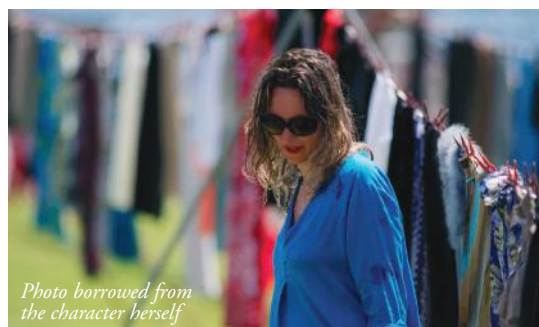


Photo borrowed from the character herself



za | our artists

Muralist from Gjakova

"Connecting to Mimoza Rraci's Samsung Note", was written in one of the small virtual windows of the Zoom platform. It was no coincidence that Mimoza's technological device was a Samsung Note.

For those who are not obsessed with technology and telephone devices, this type of phone has a larger screen and a digital pencil integrated in it, with which can be drawn and written on the device, and to control the device.

Mimoza always carries the phone with her together with her imagination. Whenever she get inspiration, the opportunity to save the image she has in her head is just a click away. Without pencil and paper, but on her Samsung device.

It may have happened to you that you have lunch or coffee in a bar in Pristina, whose walls are covered by murals. The chances that Mimoza painted them are relatively high. The 33-year-old from Gjakova is known all over the country for her art on the walls.

"It took me a decade to get here where I am. Everyone says that this job requires talent, but for me this does not stand. In my case, the talent is only 5 percent, while the hard work is another 95 percent", says Mimoza for magazine ZA, about her career as an artist.

For most of her life, she lived in the city of Gjakova. Behind Mimoza's paintings was never hidden a child who scribbles on fabrics and creates miracles. She discovered the talent on herself very late.

She finished high school attending the gymnasium of natural sciences and it was exactly this period when she began to show interest in art, especially in painting. Mimoza does not remember her first artistic creation, but she remembers very well how she decided to pursue a career in the field of art.



"I started to draw at the time when that point came to decide what I wanted to do after high school. I did not draw constantly; very rarely," she says, even sounding unbelievable in this statement when you see her paintings and her talent.

None of her family members was involved in art. Nobody at home was interested in this field. However, when her mother saw Mimoza's talent she became the main motivation and encouraged her a lot to pursue a career in the field of graphic design.

"I wanted to direct myself to paintings, but somehow they discouraged me. They used to tell me the common things, what do you want to do with painting in Kosovo? But that did not limited me. I went to graphic design, and there was also classes of painting," she said.

At the time when Mimoza decided to continue her studies in graphic design in 2007 in Pristina, this field was very trendy and highly demanded by employers in the market. Wanting a more stable future for her daughter and being aware of her talent, this was also one of the main reasons why Mimoza's mother advised her to follow this journey.

Studying graphic design for 3 years made her realize that digital drawing was simply not her thing. She was able to express her creativity more through the most traditional tools - with a brush and paints that she mixed herself in her panel.

The post-graduation period she spent in Gjakova. When she returned to her hometown, she started making handicraft-style creations, mostly embroidery. Later, she started working for a company as a graphic designer, but creating the art with 'mouse' did not fulfill her artistically.

"It is much easier for me to express myself with a brush. I studied graphic design but for ten years now I do not deal with it ", Mimoza confesses.

While she was mainly engaged in embroidery, she was given an opportunity to create something unusual. A volunteer project became crucial to the future of her career. She was invited to paint a wall in a kindergarten for Roma and Ashkali children in Gjakova.

The mural was intended to decorate the nursery building and create a more enjoyable learning atmosphere for the children. Mimoza's first mural, even nine years after, is still there and serves as a reminder of how she began this professional journey every time she passes by that place.



I fall asleep with a brush and wake up with a brush.

"It's good that they called me to work on this mural because I do not know when I would have the opportunity to try it myself," she comments.

Day by day, her passion for mural painting was intensifying. Even the desire to take up this job grew as friends and family praised her work. She wanted to turn the art she made into a profession, a profession she would constantly pursue and make a living from it.

Therefore, Mimoza decided to open an atelier in Gjakova, which she filled with paintings. The work she did in this small studio created a very pleasant space to visit. In the Grand Bazaar of the city, which is the oldest bazaar in Kosovo positioned near the Hadum Mosque built in the Middle Ages¹, is the place where Mimoza makes art.

Although her art was liked and her work was appreciated, Mimoza initially had no support in opening this studio.

"I had the same conversation about the atelier with my friends and family, as when I told them that I want to deal with painting. Why do you want to open it? There will be no work here. What do you want to do", they were telling her, Mimoza confesses.

Ever since she started working in the atelier, she knew she would not wake up the next day and find the client line waiting at the door. However, Mimoza believed in the magic of the beginning and did not give in to the pressure of failure that constantly knock you on the conscience trying to discourage you.

"I'm a patient person. I always know that without work, without hard work, you cannot reach. At the beginning, I could hardly earn 100 Euros to pay the rent of the atelier. Especially the first year", she shares pieces of her daily life at the beginning of the atelier.

The art that Mimoza brought to Gjakova was a new concept and it took people a time to understand and accept it. She gave herself and others time to understand each other and for her to make room in the market.

"I do not expect much from people. Most of the time I expect from myself. If I know that a road is worth it, I go for it, if not, I do not risk too much", she says, emphasizing that she relies only on herself.

¹ List of Cultural Heritage in Temporary Protection (2016). https://www.mkrs-ks.org/repository/docs/LISTA_E_TRASHEGIMISE_KULTURORE_NEN_MBROJTJE_TE_PERKOSHME_2015.pdf



From an artist who could barely pay the rent for her studio, Mimoza can no longer say yes to all requests for paintings and murals. Her colors have become almost indispensable for the premises, which are frequented by many people.

Moreover, her paintings on the wall were appreciated even beyond the borders of the homeland.

During the pandemic, a company selling medical equipment in Pristina asked Mimoza to paint a mural that would decorate and revitalize the facility where they operated. They even asked that the mural serve as a symbol of gratitude for the medical staff who worked 24/7 in the service of patients with COVID-19.

The mural caught the attention of one of the most prestigious magazines in the world "TIME" of New York in the series of photos entitled 'Guardians of the Year'².

The mural has a black background and on the front is painted a doctor with crossed arms holding a health mask with the flag of the Republic of Kosovo. The realization of this mural was by no means easy. Mimoza even remembers this experience as one of her most challenging creations.

"It was the most difficult mural I have technically made. The material I worked on was scraped and I had to work with car paints. It was December and very cold. The colors faded very quickly and it took me a long time to finish."

Rolling up her sleeves to melt her imagination into colors that result in works of art is not one of the works that gets the deserved appreciation in Kosovo. However, Mimoza is optimistic that perception has begun to change.

² TIME (2020). "Guardians of the year" accessible on: <https://time.com/guardians-of-the-year-2020-anthony-fauci-frontline-health-workers/>

She considers that the materialization of her work is necessary and the financial price for a work created by her is not a negotiable thing because it is not a mass-produced product where profit can move for a few cents.

"I often tell clients: you can live without the work I do, but I cannot live without it - because I do that for living," says Mimoza, explaining why she refuses to bargain for a price when she commits to work.

Meanwhile, as a female artist in Kosovo, Mimoza emphasizes that freedom of self-expression and work in painting still have limits for women. According to her, painting what you want is problematic. She relates to this issue recalling an incident she had encountered in the early days of her studies.

She was asked to draw the woman's body, naked, on paper. Satisfied with the work done, she posted photos of these drawings on her Facebook page. But the expectations she had with the way her art would be welcomed did not match with reality. In fact, she

was criticized so much and faced with insulting comments, that she decided to remove a large part of them from the site.

"I found myself very much in realism and in painting the women bodies. But, this is very taboo for us. The first comments were scandalous. The bad thing was that I mostly received comments from men," she said.

"If I was a man," she says, *"I would not face comments and criticism as harsh as it happened to me,"* adds Mimoza, making clear the differentiation between male and female artists.

Mimoza left Gjakova and moved to Pristina. As the capital city represents a larger market for artists, she has found herself. Although she is encouraged by friends and family to leave Kosovo in search of an international career, she does not want to leave and is content with what her homeland offers.

Whenever she is offered job opportunities abroad, she travels and returns to her small studio, which was her first artistic home. There is not a

day in the week that she does not use brushes, colors and paintbrush. She creates in every day of her life.

"I fall asleep with a brush and wake up with a brush. I do not know to perform any other work. While I do this work even on Sundays, I do not have what to say," says Mimoza laughing.

Talent cannot be learned, but it can be developed. Mimoza believes in the formula 5% talent and 95% work. Being talented has determined what she can do; motivation has pushed her to work while work has perfected her as an artist.

The monotonous surfaces are the memoirs where Mimoza expresses herself. Therefore, the next time you pass by a mural in the city or drinking a morning coffee in a bar with artistic walls where Mimoza has painted, appreciate the spirit and liveliness that her hand has given to that space.

Photos borrowed from the character herself

I found myself very much in realism and in painting the women bodies. But, this is very taboo for us.





za | starting from scratch

Ground zero can be quite a difficult position in which you can find yourself. Where are you to start from? But, in some cases the ground zero presents a sea of opportunities – a chance to start something anew, a chance to transform a difficult experience into something beautiful, meaningful and life-changing. This segment is dedicated to the people that started from the bottom and not only transformed their lives, but other people's lives as well. These people who work tirelessly and hard are the security that we have for a better future. There are many people who have fallen down or have found themselves in situations that they had not ever imagined. But even these cases show us that there is always a way that will take them to the path that they had paved for themselves, along with all the lessons that they have received from life.

Vjosa's Festival

She was 17 years old when she coincidentally came across to some brochures.

They contained information on how young people could go to the UK to work. Vjosa Berisha had it clear about the adventure of the summer of 1991: she would fly to London.

She describes the early 90s as a time when it was not common for girls to travel abroad, especially unaccompanied.

"I had a friend from the neighborhood - Dafina - whose mother was an English teacher. She had found some brochures that provided information on how to go to London and work as a babysitter. Dafina did not take it seriously while I did. I talked to my parents, I told them that I want to go, I want to send the letter to the agency and try it", Vjosa confesses, still in the tunes of a 17-year-old passionate girl about getting out of the routine.

"They encouraged me, but of course thinking that in the end that trip would not happen", she confesses with laughter about the discussion with her parents who did not take her request very seriously.

Three decades ago, communication technology was more basic. The telephones were terrestrial; from those standing statically in a corner of the house, and the internet had not yet penetrated Kosovar homes. It was equal to the unknown for Vjosa what awaited her in London.

"Everything has been through letters. I sent the letter to the agency and very quickly, after a month a family called me. There were actually 2-3 and I chose one. We communicated a few times before I left, normally through landline from 'home' phone and mail. I went to London in June 1991, without anyone, without any of my friends."

To board the plane to the unknown, it took her courage and perhaps her parents' "crazy" belief that all would be well.. This is Vjosa Berisha, who tests herself with discomfort. The rest of her life had the 'fate of London'.

In the cosmopolitan city, she went to a Jewish family and was expected from her to take care of a child and their dog. The house in which she was accommodated and would stay with the family that hired her, was in the suburbs of London. There she did not find London that she had visualized. The real look of the metropolis she sought after by herself.



Photo credits to Norik Uka

"Immediately 2-3 days after I went, I met one of my best friends who had gone to London and we did not know about each other. We accidentally met at a neighborhood. We decided to go out in the center of London. Even today, people are fascinated by a city of London, and especially at that time."

After she saw the city, she was no longer attracted to staying at home on the suburbs, nor to being a nanny. Until then, everything had been arranged for her in terms of housing and living. The decision to leave meant that she had to take care of everything on her own. The first job she did afterwards was in a restaurant bar.

"I worked in a French restaurant where there were a

lot of manners. When I entered, I told them that I have great experience in the bar. I recall the first day as it is now. It was lunchtime, the busiest period of the day where there were many customers. I was stuck - I did not know what to do next. It was very difficult as a job," she said.

She left for London to stay for three months, but she stayed for a year and a half. The opportunity to stay there existed, but she did not want the asylum status. She had in her head the idea that she had a house in Kosovo and had to return.

Returning to Kosovo was at the time when Vjosa had to start her studies. At her father's insistence, she enrolled in the faculty of technical sciences in informatics. However, this was not her wish and she abandoned this journey. She completed her studies at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Pristina, for English language and literature.

Things were happening fast in her life. In the meantime, she met the director Fatos Berisha, whom she married and has a son.

Being a mother and busy with work, on the horizon appeared the opportunity to return to London, this time as a student. However, not alone in this role.

"In 2001, I competed for the Chevening Scholarship. I was working for UNICEF at the time. I went to Westminster University and there I studied media and communication master studies. I took my son with me on studies."

The day for him was overflowing with commitments, just like the atmosphere of the British capital: noisy, always in a hurry and barely ending in the late hours of the night.

"Leka was in third grade in London. He was 7 and half years old. I went to campus 3 times a week. I was sending Leka to school and picking him back. We would go to visit museums and would go for walks. It was difficult because I had to dedicate the day to my son and only the evening was left for studies", she confesses, but in the end, while preparing for the graduation, Fatos, her husband, sacrifices leaving his job and goes to support Vjosa, to complete her studies successfully.

Before returning to Britain she worked for UNICEF and after graduating with a master's degree in media and communication, she completed her postgraduate studies in cultural diplomacy at the University of Malta in 2009.

Doing many things at once, she opened a public relations services company. Then, at one point, she found herself involved in the world of film as well. Her husband was a director and based on this, she had a clue in doing cinematography but more in terms of business, as a film producer.

"Being a producer came as support for my husband, I wanted to support him in realizing his movie ideas, and I believe my business skills have helped me do this job successfully."

Frequent trips abroad and entering this world full of opportunities opened Vjosa's



Photo borrowed from prifest.org

mind. According to her, the movie has an extraordinary mission in promoting a country. This is cultural diplomacy with great promotional potential.

Thus was born PRIFEST - Pristina International Film Festival.

"Fatos and I traveled to different places at film festivals. Observing their success and how they promote the place where the various festivals take place, we had the idea to do something for Kosovo, and for our city Pristina. Prifest started to develop as an idea in 2008."

Organizing a film festival, both in terms of content of the program and logistics, sounds like a chaotic process. It has 'this and that' and the list of things to do is not over. Yet Vjosa, during the time she visited film festivals around the world, caught every detail.

"We did not know about lots of things. But when you go to different festivals, you also see and catch the good things. I had experience as a manager. The company I lead had completely organized and managed the campaign and all activities for

the declaration of independence of Kosovo, so I had experience with large organizations."

On a day like this Vjosa had even fallen to tears. However, the lesson learned was invaluable.

"I remember the pressure of organizing the most important day of Kosovo in 2008, I had so much stress and discomfort in those days that there was a moment when I sat on my knees and cried. While Prifest, certainly like any new event aspiring to be professional, have had mistakes, but not big mistakes. They were small things that we fixed year after year."

Vjosa gave Pristina the Prifest. Filmmakers from all over the world visit the capital throughout the week of the festival. Local and international films are shown on all four sides of the city, while the National Theater of Kosovo is transformed into a "Dolby Theater".

The finale is the red carpet and shine that the festival throws on the premises of the National Theater, but all is the improvisation that happens in the absence of funds and infrastructure.

"Financing is very difficult in a country like Kosovo. The other problem is logistical. We have no space. We need to improvise the cinema, where we hold the opening. The festival opens with a big film that is very interesting to watch and we also need to activate several halls at the same time in order to accommodate the entire audience that comes to the opening."

Every year the team that works faces challenges that discourage them, but all are forgotten until the time comes to start work on a new edition.

"I have Prifest in my heart. So far, in recent years Fatosi and I have not even received a salary. The staff and the people who work know how much funds the festival has and how difficult it is to organize. It is more our wish that the city and the state have such a festival. It is our obligation as citizens to realize this festival with our experience as we know best, and to offer this pleasure to our filmmakers, artists, actors who are still isolated, as well as to the public of the capital city and Kosovo," declares Vjosa for ZA magazine.



In recent years, Kosovar cinematography has experienced a great success that makes us proud, especially because it is being built by women directors.

Being part of the Kosovar film industry for some time now, Vjosa highly appreciates the treatment given to women as directors and actresses. From her point of view, women have been supported in making films and they have achieved phenomenal results.

"In recent years, Kosovar cinematography has experienced a great success that makes us proud, especially because it is being built by women directors. The film industry in our country, unlike abroad, has supported and continues to support women. We do not have quotas that oblige the film funds to fund women for making films, and if you look at how the Cinema Center has worked from 2010 onwards, you will see that it is based on the quality of the projects," she said.

The film industry has been progressive and supportive to women, yet Vjosa has not always encountered the same approach throughout her career.

Being the leader of her company "B2" and dealing with male clients produced unpleasant situations.

"I was the director of the company and Fatosi dealt with the creative part. When we were dealing with politicians with whom we collaborated for the conception of political campaigns, in the meeting they were referring directly to Fatos. And since I was the director, I intervened in the discussion and they refused to look me in the eye and continued to look at Fatos", says Vjosa one of the professional challenges related only to being a woman.

Vjosa's professional activity has always been accompanied by physical activity. She never misses a day of going to gym for at least 1 hour. The lifestyle she leads in some form guarantees health. However, not everything was in order, as Vjosa would think.

"I discovered I had cancer in March 2021. I discovered it very accidentally. Sometime earlier in the year, I noticed that I had lost weight willingly. In the morning, my hand went to the part of the ovaries and instinctively I touched it and I felt that there was something there but I was not in pain", says Vjosa.

Since she always had regular medical visits, she went for a visit in this case as well. Doctors found that she had ovarian cancer and liver metastasis and immediately she started taking preventive steps. Medical diagnoses were shocking to her at first, but this condition did not last long.

"I had a strong faith that my body was strong enough to fight such a disease. I am now in the treatment phase of the disease. I have had surgery, and I am receiving chemotherapy. This disease is a process. It is not something that you overpass to survive. At the moment I am feeling well and later we will see and act."

Based on this saying, Vjosa takes the diagnosis very seriously, and makes the appropriate treatments with the support of oncologists in Kosovo and England, but she does not leave other commitment and work as long as she has the body strength and mental strength.

The next professional engagement is in Skopje as the director of Europe Houses of Northern Macedonia, which is a European Union funded project, designed as a communication and visibility project, as a platform that

gathers young people, fosters debate among them and connects people of different fields among themselves, as well as promotes environmental issues, culture, art, etc. Vjosa also successfully led this project in Albania (2013-2015) and Kosovo (2018-2020).

Not leaving aside the film, there are two films in the process of development and financing. One of them is a documentary about the history of the game of football in Kosovo entitled "More than a game". Meanwhile, the other film deals with a phenomenon present in Balkan societies, but which has remained in the frames of silence.

"The movie is called "Housewife". The main character is a young woman in her age and her life challenges. The whole story unfolds around her life. She is from Albania and her family marries her in exchange for money for a much older man of Serbian nationality. The event takes place in Kosovo, while the woman in the film comes from the north of Albania", shared Vjosa the details for the magazine ZA.

The work she has undertaken to do requires her maximum attention. Therefore, the disease seems to remain only in medical reports for Vjosa and is not manifested, but of course, she has maximum care in food and continues with physical activities because she strongly thinks that these plays an important role in defeating the disease.

Cancer is just the next battle she has to fight. In previous fights for the things she loves, she always wins.

Her body has whole battalions of soldiers to fight this disease and triumph is the only end.

The woman of plis

"Let me put this on my head once and then we'll talk,"
said Ergyle Gjurgjalo while putting a plis on her head, which she had taken
from one of her workshop tables.

Plis (headwear) is a requisite hat for Albanians. Among men a necessity not only aesthetic, but as a national uniform. You could not be an Albanian man and not wear a plis! This hat was worn only by men and was made by men artisans.

Ergyle is a woman and she works in her workshop located on the suburb of Prizren. She started a craft a year after she got married and for 35 years, she is known for her work fused in this Albanian national symbol.

She was only 5 years old when as a child, she had found a job to sew clothes with national motifs for her dolls and she changed them every day. She embroidered those long white shirts, made miniature 'xhubleta' dresses and arranged the dolls by the window of one of the rooms of the house.

"Before I went to school, I start working, I sewed by hand national clothes for my dolls", she refers for ZA magazine.

Ergyle was an excellent student and when she finished her homework, she could not stand idly. She says that since she was little she had entered the world of crafts and she was attracted to it. Her dad was the craftsman and he often engaged her in his workshop.

"Dad was a shoemaker, and at that time he would bring us slippers and clogs at home and ask us to help him. For that work, my father paid me, he saw that I had a lot of will for the work and I begged him to give

me something to work and not to hang out with my hands tied", remembers Ergyle.

In her fourth year of high school - the last days of graduation - she had met her love. She married with Naxhiu and this cohabitation gave Ergyle another craft. Her husband came from a family of craftsmen who worked for more than a century in Prizren creating plis.

When she got married and went to the husband's family as usual, she turned down the traditional role of a bride who does not work and mainly takes care of the house. She was accustomed to the commitment, to the handiwork that fulfilled her, and she sought for it even when marriage changed her life.

She started sewing hats with a hand machine she had encountered at home. She worked a little every day but did not find herself there. Guided by chance, one day she decided to accompany her husband to the workshop and see how the plis is made.

"One day I went with my husband to the plis workshop to see him and help him as much as I could, and somehow I saw that I liked making plis more than sewing in the machine, and since then I have already decided to work with plis."

The process seemed interesting and attractive. She had always liked this kind of work and found pleasure in it. Every time Naxhiu left the house, Ergyle found an opportunity to leave with him,

but without getting the attention of the other family members she lived with.

She had a problem here. The secretly entrances and exits of the house made her tired. Feelings of guilt overwhelmed her every time she went to work with her husband and decided to tell to his husband's family members about the decision she had made.

They did not like what they heard. Meanwhile Ergyle was not open to criticism in this case. She focused her energies on stabilizing the situation and negotiating her position.

"The reaction at the beginning was a disaster, we had a few problems then but gradually and with wisdom, with kind words I convinced the family that I am helping Naxhiu, because he cannot work alone", says Ergyle for ZA magazine.

His family did not like the decision, whereas her family highly valued it. Mom and Dad were used to seeing Ergyle always engaged and were happy that their daughter would be engaged in the family factory. She grew up in a family where it did not matter whether you were a man or a woman, you had to work.

"I come from a family where both my mother and father worked. My mother worked in the printing house and my father was a shoemaker. Therefore, my father was very happy when I went out to work and I did not stay at home," she said proudly.



Before I went to school, I started working, I sewed by hand national clothes for my dolls.





Photo borrowed from evropaelire.org

Ergyle's move was unusual for the family in which she married. Their bride to make plis headwear? Not needed. In their eyes, she had enough housework to do and there she had to show her concern.

However, Ergylja could do both. She had made a compromise within herself to keep a balance in family relationships. To get their approval, as the youngest member of Gjurgjialove's house, she took care of the house so that it would be all clean and food prepared. It did not matter if the hours of work were over the regular norms. Only her purpose matters.

"I have always done the housework once; and the whole house was in order. I left the pot ready for lunch. Let them have food and eat and then I go to work. To me it seemed unfair, because I was leaving house to work with my husband," she says, though she has no regrets about the sacrifices.

Ergyle 'steal' her husband's craft with her eyes. One day, while her husband was working on a plis headwear, she asked him to leave her to continue the work.

"I told Naxhi, take it off a bit, and let me continue with the iron and to cut the plis. I also told him that even if I destroy one hat, it will not be the end of the world. That's how I got it, ironed it, cut it, because the main point is to cut the fleece, it must be straight on all sides, so I finished it completely and I got an excellent grade from my husband", says Ergyle for the first exam given in the workshop.

She worked with her partner to develop a family business but also to keep a centuries-old symbol alive. However, Ergyle's daily routine would not go unnoticed. She and her husband had to move from workshop to workshop several times because the machines they used to make the plis made noise and often had complaints from neighbors living near the workshop.

She put an end once for all to this situation, when she decided to use what she inherited from her father.

Her father had left her a plot of land and this was the ideal opportunity for the business to grow and solve the problem of the workshop location. On her father's land, she and her husband

built the only plis headwear-processing factory in Kosovo.

"In the beginning, my husband was always saying that this is Ergyle's workshop, because the land was mine. And one day I interrupted my husband and told him not to say that again, because this belongs to our family, it is ours and of our children," she said.

Making plis requires dedication, like all other crafts, which includes handicrafts, and above all love for work. She was 22 years old when she made the first plis, which she still keeps with a lot of love. She does not glorify the learning process because she had the main ingredient, the will to learn.

"No, it was not difficult to learn, because there is nothing in the world to stop you when you have the will and desire to do something. I am used to making plis hat, while watching my husband," she said.

Ergyle quickly grasped the craft and makes it seem like making plis headwear is easy work. But creating a single plis must pass 26 times in human hands to get the perfect shape.



**No, it was not difficult to learn,
because there is nothing in the world
to stop you when you have the will
and desire to do something.**



As they are masters of this work, they take care to ensure that the wool for making the plis is of the highest quality. They import from Australia. When the wool comes to Prizren, Ergyle hires the women of the area to clean it, so that the final product, plis hat, turns white.

I carry the bag on my back, and I am not ashamed of it, I carry it to women in the house. They clean it and I come tomorrow to withdraw it and to pay them", she describes in detail the process of processing the wool for plis.

The process of plis processing has several stages and cleaning the wool is just the beginning. The processing of wool bundles lasts for 1 week and requires perfect craftsmanship for the product to come out perfect. Ergyle performs these dozens of procedures together with her sons and her husband, working day and night.

"They are usually much disciplined at work. We are colleagues at work and they are my sons at home," she said.

She initially joined her husband in business, but it has been a long time since Ergyle has been running the factory, starting with the daily chores, ordering all over Kosovo and beyond, then transporting and every other step. She makes sure that each of the workers, who in this case are her sons, does the work accurately.

For 35 years, Ergyle does not remember ever being fired. She had only a month and a half of rest after she gave two very difficult births. Even as a woman after childbirth, she did not leave the factory premises.

"After 40 days, I took the children with me, and I had one leg by the cradle and the other leg near the machine," she says proudly.

Although Ergyle's decision to make plis headwear was not initially welcomed by the husband's family as they assumed she was supposed to be a traditional bride, clients did not even have the thread of prejudice for the woman working on the detail with which the Albanian men and not only, were historically identified.

"I see that it is welcomed. There is no bad reaction either before or now. Usually for Eid, I go to the store two or three days before and I sit with a white plis on my head, and the elders were always proud when they saw me and they were saying: there she is Shote Galica who sells us plis headwear."

Plis is no longer a daily part of Kosovars' clothing, but despite this, the interest to buy plis hat is still high due to its national value.

For Ergyle it was not enough to make plis headwear as a job for survival, as the market price for a plis headwear is only 5 euros.

For three years now, she has opened another business where she works national clothes, various hats, slippers and other products all made of wool.

Engaging in other business never interferes with her first love – plis hat. The schedule is specified for the work in the factory. She works with plis starting at 8:00 until 16:00 in the afternoon, while the rest of the day she deals with other works.

Next time for the Independence Day, a traditional wedding or just because you like it, if you decide to wear it, do not forget Ergyle. The beautiful hat you wear on your head may have come into your hands from the shelves of its factory and it may have been cut it precisely from her.



*Photos retrieved from
official page of
Atifere Jahjaga
on Facebook*

But this was not just a moment of inspiration or revolt. It is Armenda's duty - literally a job - daily commitment to gender equality and women's rights.

She works for UN WOMEN, the United Nations entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment which has been operating as such since 2010.

"Working every day at UN WOMEN normally changes your mindset. You look all the time where the girls are. You become a kind of calculator, you just measure the percentages", she says.

For Armenda, beyond that perception, discrimination takes the form of concrete numbers.

"When you work around this cause you notice that girls are always discriminated and those who want to be vocal tend to be oppressed, there is always unnecessary prejudice."

Just as discrimination takes the form of numbers and becomes an undeniable reality, for her, working in an organization that aims to achieve equality, perceives that concrete action brings concrete results.

"You can change," she says confidently to ZA magazine. "Support someone, someone who has a good cause and will definitely move forward."

The whole activity of Armenda Filipaj, doubled between the desire to do sports and that to achieve equality, is not accidental. She is now known as the founder of the girls' football club "Prishtina", she had played basketball at her school as a young. However, due to the circumstances of the time then, she had to interrupt.

"Because they took us out of the sports halls, and we did not have the opportunity to train, we were close to the Serb neighborhood, and they attacked us," she recalled.

Not only did they interrupt the game.

"I had to stop the exercises completely, and transfer to Macedonia to study."

"Then the war started," and the rest is history.

She continued her studies in Tetovo and after the end of the war, she was transferred to Pristina. Sport remained only a passion for Armenda. She was deprived of the opportunity to pursue the dreams of an athlete, but not the dream to help girls get involved in sports.

"I think that every child who grows up with sports is healthier, has a completely different physique than a child who spends his free time on the phone. Both the immunity, the food, the complete development, and the motor skills of the child are different when they exercise. They are educated from childhood to be part of the team", she lists the benefits of taking up sports.



Mbështetë dikë, dikë që ka kauzë të mirë dhe s'ka qare pa ecë përpara.

However, the road to team formation was not easy. Everything costs. The coaches also cost. As the number of girls who wanted to play increased.

"One month they came for free, and then the next month the coaches started demanding payment."

Many girls could not afford to pay for the exercises, and began to leave. This influenced Armenda to look for another sports field, in order to move to the basketball field of the "Don Bosko" school in Pristina.

They practiced there twice a week. It was almost impossible for the girls' families to afford an additional football bill, so Armenda herself made the payment.

"When the pressure for payment started to increase, I decided to take the girls and establish the club. I sent them to another field, I constantly paid for the field and I trained them for free".

However, Armenda could do anything – except to become a coach herself she could not do. Then, Kroni enters to the "field".



We want to give an example that in sports there are no ethnic or gender differences.

Photo borrowed from the character himself

Kron Sadiku, is known as a journalist. For many years now, he has been part of the morning program on the national television Klan Kosova. Since he is an agronomist by profession, large parts of his stories are related to the field of agriculture and not only that. He is also a coach licensed by UEFA.

With the arrival of Kron in KVF Prishtina, everything started to make sense structurally. The girls were divided according to age groups, becoming the first team in Kosovo to start working with girls from the age of five.

"We have two separate groups, the big girls (U15-17) who are in the league, and the little girls. Within the term with little girls, we have to work with two groups, because some of them are very small, and some are bigger. This is also a problem with the leagues because they have made it for example from 12 to 17 years."

For the coach this is challenging because you cannot use the same techniques with players who have such pronounced age differences.

"This is a problem because a 12-year-old plays football differently and a 17-year-old plays differently. We want to change this through the division of age groups into groups."

Kroni, same as Armenda, is paid only with the currency of community service satisfaction. He neither receives nor will ask for money for the work he does.

The feeling of giving to the community, Kroni says he developed a lot during his stay in the United States.

"During that time I did not work anything but play football", he claims for ZA.

"I had a school near where the girls trained, and I saw that unlike here, how much they pay attention to girls in sports. Moreover, what was interesting: their coach, he did that job for the community; he was not paid for that. And what I can offer to the community is football."

Armenda's invitation to join the Prishtina girls' team for Kron was an opportunity to fulfill his goal of contributing to the community.

"I just got the license then, and when Armenda told me if we were founding the club, I recalled that trip in America, and I accepted. I was also interested to coach classes, but most of all I was excited to do this job. Even two years had already passed."

Club development and girls coaching involve a lot of work and challenges. Therefore, Kroni as a coach, in addition to the professional advancement of girls, tries to work on their emotional and psychological development.

"The main problem in child development is group work," he explains.

"Many children have problems with the ego. We first learn teamwork; our players in the future understand that to achieve a certain goal, they must also perform certain tasks."

Through the game on the field, together with Kron, the girls learn that each of them has a task and how to cooperate with each other to achieve the goal - to score as many goals as possible.

"It's important for them to know and do their job during the game. We also develop girls' cognitive skills, speed of thought and speed of reaction. In addition, we develop psychomotor skills. They become more responsive and develop their passion by spending excess energy."

Initially the plan had been to gather players and then identify talents. Today, the Team "Prishtina" has about 80 players, and among them many talents and trainings are done twice a week for the youngest, and three to four times a week for the older age groups.

Are girls at the same level in football as boys?

For Kron, maybe even higher. He shows how girls develop the sport differently than boys, both in training and during play.

"They give 100% even in training, while men are hold back (saved) in training, they do not escape any duel, and men avoid the duel", says the coach.

The club is already professional and has many talented girls.

They take part in competitions, where during the last year they have grabbed the first two victories. Club "Prishtina" has a memorandum of cooperation with a club in Las Vegas and if the girls are successful, they will have the opportunity to go to Las Vegas for preparations and continue their education in America through sports scholarships and at the same time play in some club there.

"But, we have to find financing because it costs. All we could do for our children is find them families and accommodate them when they go there. All the families of those girls who practice there have agreed to accommodate our girls."

Armenda and Kroni are not doing things in a hurry, but in slow and confident steps. Now they are waiting for the support of the municipality of Pristina with a plot of land to make their stadium.

"We plan to become the only club in Kosovo where girls are a priority."

The interest of the girls to be part of the football Club Prishtina shows that they like this sport, they are related to the game, and the coaches of this club offer them this pleasure.

"Children today are not associated much with idols; they are more associated with play. They like the game, they want to play and enjoy it."

"And we," says Kroni, *"offer exactly that; play, fun and development at the same time."*

The club has now started the cooperation with the football school "Brezovica". Until this agreement was reached with KFV "Prishtina", in this school only boys were trained. The ice was broken and together the girls from Shterpce and Brezovica will train together with those from Prishtina.

"We want to give an example that in sports there are no ethnic or gender differences. So far we have conducted several trainings and we have noticed that the interest of girls for football is extremely great in the municipality of Shterpce", says Armenda.

By involving as many interested girls as possible in their club, Armenda and Kroni try to break the prejudices of society, including other coaches, to change the concept of treating girls on the football field.

Therefore, all it takes is will, commitment, desire and in Armenda's case, a green field and a white ball.



We plan to become the only club in Kosovo where girls are a priority.



Photo credits to Arben Llapashtica

Vjosa

who dared to dream

“ *Whatever comes forward, whatever despair or betrayal, whether from the circle, society or whatever, never give up. Every despair is a lesson.* ”

It was late autumn in the city of Skopje. In the middle of the streets, as if half-running, she was walking in a hurry and the money she had available for the whole day she had decided to spend on food.

Vjosa Metaj was away from home, but her willingness to learn was great. She had moved from Kosovo to Macedonia and had very little money to live there. She was following one dream; the other things were less important.

"In Macedonia, I had a weekly amount of as if to say 5 euros that my family would give me, either to go by bus and return, or to eat some food. I lived with mom's relatives. That was probably the most difficult period I can remember", begins the story for ZA Vjosa.

Vjosa Metaj is known as one of the first makeup artists in Kosovo. At the time she was fascinated by the power of makeup, to others it was seen as insignificant. It was even difficult for Vjosa to find a role model. Yet her mother became her muse.

"I decided by taking as an example my mom. She was a woman who was taking care of herself, and I was inspired. I also always liked everything about beauty, but at that time, there was no real makeup artist. Even watching fashion TV, I was inspired a lot", she says remembering herself in the period when her future started to take shape.

Vjosa did not come from a family of artists, and no family member understood her desire, which they considered unreasonable. Her parents had finished superior schools and probably had a judgment of what career their children should focus on.

Parents' skepticism sometimes pushed her back. She sometimes had doubts on herself but she followed her instinct and chose to believe in herself and her dream.

"What bothered me the most was that my parents were

always a little bit disappointed with me. They thought I was not going to succeed and I do not even know what I am doing. They thought that all trainings that I am doing for make-up are a waste of time. They did not understand my world and with 16 years old, nor did I understand my world, nor what exactly is happening. But I never gave up."

The story of Vjosa and her big name in the beauty industry started after she finished high school in Pristina. When you are in front of the decision for the future, you calculate with the perspective that the professions have in terms of the labor market. Vjosa did not calculate she just did what she liked.

She made her first trip following her dream to Albania where she went in search of a good school for professional makeup. However, there she did not find the professionalism she was looking for. Desperate, she continued in Macedonia to a make-up academy, where she learned her first techniques. She was only 16 years old.

"It was very difficult when I got out of the house at that age. The sisters were very dedicated after school, and I was the only child who was not very pro school," she said.

While her parents were proponents of formal education and this was her family's "ABC", Vjosa had her way with a double challenge: to pursue the dream and fight with her parents for it. Moreover, her dream had a high financial cost, which made the situation even more difficult.

"I had a lot of difficulties until I convinced my parents to go and live on my own with 16 years. The family has had financial difficulties, but every time I have had to go and complete a course, they have not always been financially well. I always have a lot to lift. But because then I had a lot of difficulties, now I enjoy success and the pain of adolescence has paid off."

After a three-months stay in Skopje, Vjosa returned to Kosovo with the desire to open her own makeup business. However, at that time, clients still did not separate the makeup service from the hairstyle; they wanted to do both in one place. Therefore, Vjosa decided to expand her knowledge in other areas of beauty. She went to London for further training. Even there, life was full of financial challenges.

"I worked and finished the professional make-up school in London. I worked in a bar where I was adjusting the jackets of the guests upon their arrival to bar. I worked there at night and I was paid very well, like 70 pounds a night, and I collected that money to buy makeup products."

"But still, the first money I saved I bought some clothes for the sisters", she adds and laughs.

She stayed in the UK for six months. The English metropolitan capital has filled her with ideas. Pristina was small for what Vjosa could do, but she wanted to return to her homeland.

She came to Kosovo in 2002 and rented an old garage, which she turned into a makeup studio. She woke up with the fear of failure because she had invested so much money, which she did not have, hoping that she could cover her debts with work. For each month, without other expenses needed for one studio, she had to pay 500 euros installment for the debt she had taken to make the place where she would work.

"In that period I had cried more than I had good days because I did not have much work", says Vjosa about her emotional state during the initial period of business.

"My sisters have supported me all the time, and I am very, very, very blessed to have these three sisters," she says.

The business that Vjosa decided to open hardly attracted customers. She was new in the market and people had no idea who she was. It was hard to gain trust and as a result, it was hard to maintain such a business.

At that time the news was more difficult to spread, there were no social networks to use for marketing and internet access was limited.

Photos borrowed from the character herself



"I had to go on my own to send the invitations to women who have worked in banks, in various institutions and to make them offers and to tell them who I am, I do these and these services...".

Even today, when 20 years have passed, Vjosa still remembers her first client, which was Tuba Breca. For two decades, she has kept records of every client she had. She even keeps notebooks in which she wrote the schedules as a reminder of that time.

Vjosa's technique was different from the usual make up technique in Kosovo, as she had learned to do professional makeup using brushes. By then the makeup was done with fingers. Hence, the interest in her services started to grow.

"I had 2-3 clients a day, but for me it was enough and I managed to pay for the investment I made. Then the clientele grew. Many were interested and curious about what make-up brush is all about. And I think from then on, make-up was divided from hairstyle, and it developed as an industry itself", Vjosa describes the period when she started to advance.

She had even started to stabilize financially with her business. Her client base was growing and with them also Vjosa, who was expecting to become a mother. She gave a birth of twins and post-partum for her was a double challenge.

To make it easier for her to take care of her babies but also to keep her engine running in business and not lose customers, Vjosa decided to live and work in the same building.

"I was 8 months pregnant when we got an apartment on the fourth floor, and I rented the space on the ground floor to be close to the children and work, to be able to manage the day when the children sleep I would go down to work. That period have been the most difficult if I may say, because I am a mother of twins, plus for the first time a mother."

The dedication and trust she invested in her business initiative was rewarded. She constantly followed the intuition, which accompanied her with work. Life is full of good and not so good events, and according to Vjosa, the whole trick lies in how you react to them.

"I do not know, I work a lot with intuition, what I feel, if I have a goal and I feel that I will achieve it, I just do not stop. I despaired, I get up again the next morning and I said 'no, why should I give up, I want to try, I am a human.' No one was born successful to be immediately successful."

The name of the business is key to be known among the clients; therefore, her studio got the name "Angel". There can be no person who has passed through the main street of the Peyton neighborhood in Pristina and has not noticed the giant iron doors that lead to her studio.

From a small garage, which she had decorated with borrowings, the entrance to Vjosa's studio looks magnificent, resembling a castle. She has a staff of 30 people, with dozens of work desks and treatment rooms of various kinds. Yet this place is built on the ruins of mistakes and challenges.





"I think I made the biggest mistake in business that I did not leave Kosovo and developed my career a little more outside Kosovo as in America or in any country in Europe. Although, maybe at the same time family and career is a problem, and I did not have the opportunity to develop abroad because I did not want to miss my children. But it's still not too late, and I can correct that mistake", says the ambitious Vjosa.

Currently, Vjosa is making final preparations to open an academy for professional makeup and other cosmetics departments, in order to offer new generations opportunities for professional development.

In her genes flows feminist blood. For ZA magazine, she states that she plans to open the "Angel Foundation" for women in the most remote places of Kosovo and to provide them with professional training at her Academy.

"From the payment of each student there will be a financial percentage that will be dedicated to help women in smaller places, villages and so on, to advance them with training and make them more independent."

Vjosa's humanism does not begin or end with that. She often offers free services to women who are suffering from diseases because of which they lose their hair and eyebrows.

For eight years now, Vjosa has been offering Microblading's eyebrow tattoo services free of charge to all women who have been affected by breast cancer, as well as people with Alopecia, a disease that causes hair loss in certain parts of the body.

"The only thing that makes me happy when I work is when I help someone else. That fulfills me a lot. It is the only thing that makes me cry with joy, it makes me feel good and I feel good with it", she says when she tells the reasons why she provides those free of charge services.

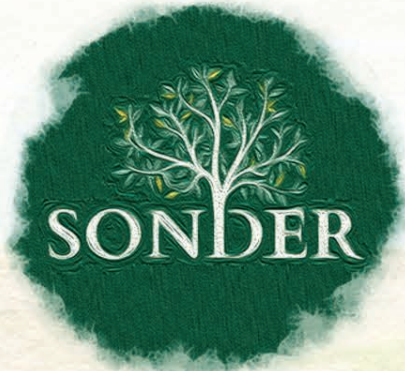
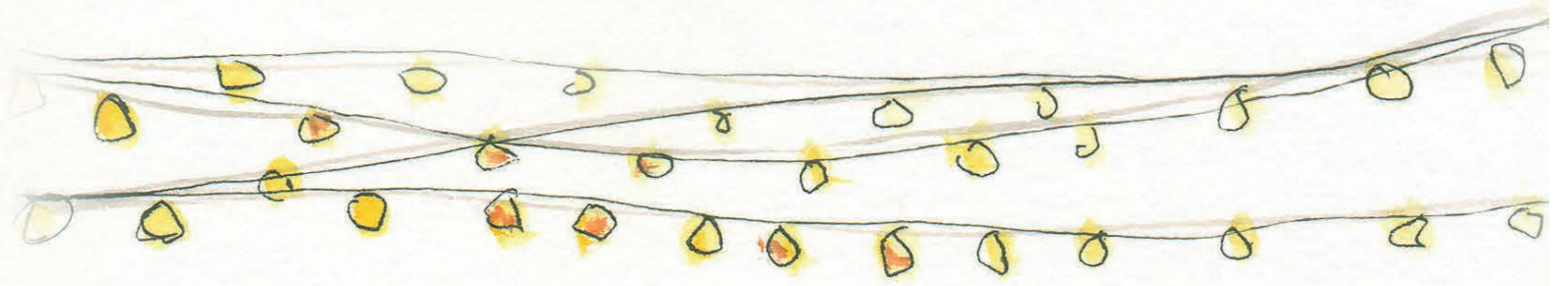
When you set a goal and strive to achieve it, success is inevitable. This is Vjosa's opinion, who has functioned with this maxim in her life.

"Whatever comes forward, whatever despair or betrayal, whether from the circle, society or whatever, never give up. Every despair is a lesson. The more you learn, the stronger you become. When you become strong, there is nothing to stop you and push you back."

Vjosa Metaj once lived on 5 euros a week, which is 0.70 cents a day. However, in her pockets she had her dream along with the belief that her efforts are not hopeless. Not everyone can and should be lawyers, doctors or architects. That's what she thought 25 years ago when she decided to listen to her call.

Today, in addition to herself, she has hired 30 other people who work in a business where the investment amounts to hundreds of thousands of euros. Moreover, she is neither a doctor nor a lawyer she is a makeup artist!

Photos retrieved from official page of Angel Studio Academy on Facebook



The woman behind Sonder

On the slope that goes up to Sunny Hill in Pristina, on the second turn to the left is one of the most special restaurants in the capital city. As soon as the door is opened, the aroma of cinnamon and coffee wafts. Should you go during the lunch breaks, the aroma of food makes you ask for the menu even if you are not hungry at all.

This is the Sonder restaurant.

Founded by Agnesa Rexhepi 5 years ago, the restaurant is unique in all dimensions. The interior is all retro that makes you feel 'at home'. The food menu is simply unique, unusual for the mostly traditional taste of Kosovars.

It may sound simple when you see it so complete that someone would bet it was created in 2 weeks. Nevertheless, to create this Sonder concept, it took Agnesa about a decade to come up with interior design ideas, recipes and the strength in herself to take a step towards realizing her dream - to be an entrepreneur who supports a social cause with her work.

"I had a dream to have my own coffee shop / bakery; this seems like an unachievable dream to me. Then Sonder was born," says Agnesa for ZA magazine.

The creator of Sonder was born in 1984, and has spent her entire life in the capital city. As a teenager in the 1990s, her childhood was not like that of all the young people in the world - happy and by the sea, because Kosovo was living in an unfavorable situation with the Serbian regime.

However, despite difficult political and social circumstances, Agnesa continued her studies at the University of Pristina, Faculty of Philology, for English Language. Later, she worked for various organizations, and most recently for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) - Mission in Kosovo.

Working with internationals, exposed Agnesa to the different cultures from which she tried to absorb. While working in a non-gastronomic sector, she was constantly gathering ideas and working on her dream of becoming an entrepreneur.

"I always wanted to create something where I would enable the opening of new jobs in Kosovo, where I would give the opportunity to some women, who do not have any profession to have a profession because of themselves", she says.

It took her a decade to start a business because she wanted to offer something unique that was not uncommon. The recipes she works with today in Sonder, she started to prepare them at home. So she thought, would be best assured of quality.

"I started making all the recipes in my kitchen. Banana bread, lemon cake, cinnamon rolls, and various biscuits. One product that identifies Sonder has been very difficult to summarize, and that is bagels," she explains.



Agnesa explains that 'bagel' is a product of Jewish origin, perfected as a recipe by the Americans, and widely used in New York. This type of bread is stronger and harder to chew. Therefore, she was not sure if her customers would like it. She tried and tried and after a while she achieved the perfect consistency with the dough so that her bagel was 'bagel' but softer.

Foods that make you lick your fingers and the aroma that leaves you wanting to come back to Sonder tomorrow again, are not the only elements that make this place special. Agnesa has invested greatly in her staff. Everyone is individually trained and adapts very easily to the work dynamics due to the system created from the root, adapted exactly for this industry.

"I created a working atmosphere where we all work as if we were a family. Furthermore, my goal has been to employ women and create new jobs for them, so out of the 21 staff we are, there are only 5 men and we are 16 women."

The recruitment of Sonder staff was done by various referrals from Agnesa's friends and family, to women and girls who had the will and desire to work. The sister of a nanny of a friend of hers; a client's friend; cousins of a lady who has heard of Sonder, and so on, have been proposed to Agnesa and hired by her.

She had a job with stable finances even before the restaurant. Therefore, her purpose was not to create a typical business where the main orientation is profit. She wanted to hire women. Full stop.

She had noticed that even in this industry, men were dominant and women were absent. So she thought, *"Why keep them at home in the kitchen, when they can cook and get paid?"*

"The first question I ask in an interview with chefs is do they know how to make bread? We women have 'a clue' with cooking, but women are not entrusted this job. At home, yes, but not in the gastronomy industry", she states.

So dominated by men is this sector of the labor market, that when Agnesa opened job vacancies, the applicants were mostly men.

"I saw it myself when I opened a competition for cooks and most men apply. I say no to them, thank you, because I want to hire women, and they tell me, 'hope you will find since there is no any.'"

Agnesa has challenged this gender norm in the industry. There are women entrepreneurs who have come out of Sonder, who have decided to open their own businesses based on what they have learned from Agnesa.

"When Remzija left to open a business with her husband, she was one of my biggest encouragements. I hated the fact that she went and I need to work without her, but I was very happy that she created something of her own, because this was the goal", she says while her eyes shine with pride for her right hand in business once.

If one of her staff has a good job offer elsewhere - even for 50 euros more - she is happy to have managed to create a staff for which others are willing to pay an even higher price.

"With both hands they have the blessing to change jobs because I know that in his place will come someone else who will be trained and advanced professionally."

Agnesa is a woman. As such, starting from scratch was not an easy experience. It is not that is easy for men to start a business out of nothing, but for women it is twice as difficult. She does not rely on anyone financially, except for her ability to work hard and pay off her loan installments on a monthly basis.

Despite the problems and complications of doing business for women in Kosovo, Agnesa has no regrets about getting this job. Her goal is to one day expand and create another business, with the same cause as Sonder.

The next idea is to organize trainings for cooks or the creation of consuming products by women, which could be sold in the premises of her restaurant but also exported abroad.

To combat the marginalization of women in business, she wants to see as many women as possible resist the system and reap success in a male-dominated field. According to her, economic independence is vital for the empowerment of women and she tries to show this to her daughter Lidia.

Lidia is now 11 years old and during the weekends, she comes to the work environment where her mom works and helps with simple work in the restaurant. Agnesa tries to show her that a woman can be independent.

"I ran the business on my own and with my own finances," she says.

She so strongly believes in the power of women and the ideal of financial independence that she recommends that a woman should not seek financial help from anyone to start the business of her dreams.

Finally, she requires each entrepreneur to enter the market with unique products that have not been presented before. She says she has often been criticized for prices, but she has not paid attention to or taken into account criticisms of this nature. She believes that her products have the best value for money.

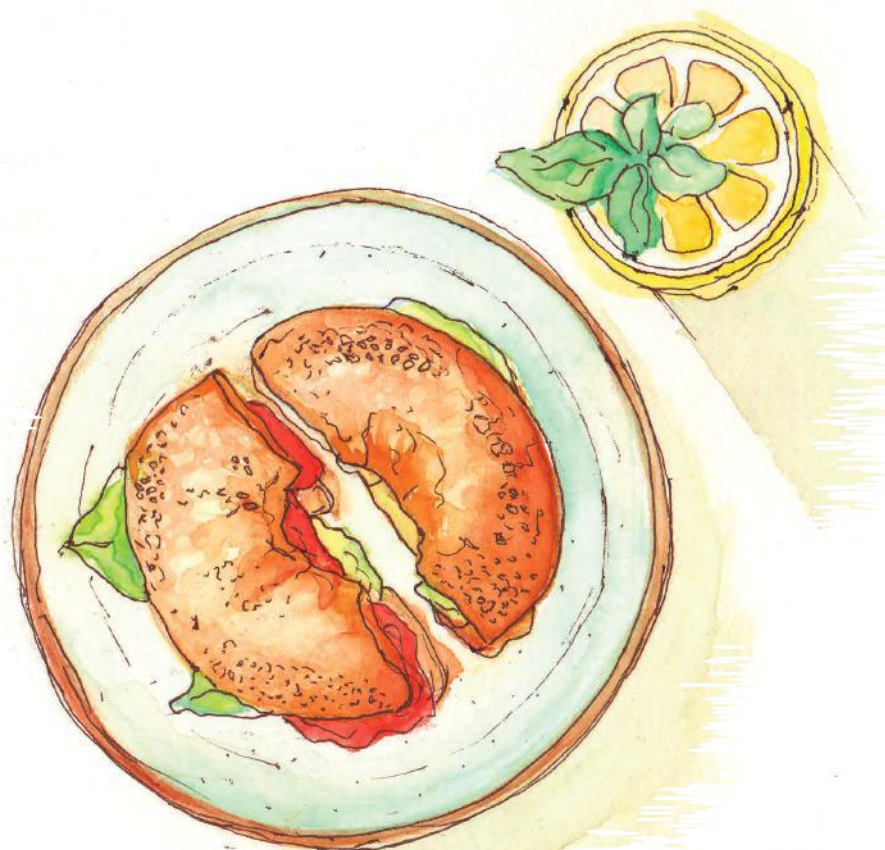
"You have to build a wall as strong as you can show with your works for the business and its quality. If you cook eggs, make them well, because people will only come for that."

Sonder was Agnesa's dream. Maybe she woke up every day imagining her restaurant and did nothing, until a certain point. It may have taken her 10 years to do it, but she did.

Her previous experience did not consist in gastronomy, but it did not matter. She wanted and learned how to bring us scrambled eggs and bagel with relish and chicken even though she once had no idea how to make bagel.

69

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Rebirth of Arjeta



"The schedule at 15:00 should start," said a girl in her 20s when she stepped out of one of the rooms of the Ri-jeta center in Ferizaj, a non-profit organization that provides services to young users of narcotic substances.

Arjeta Musliu, the director of this center was arranging the room where a young man was expected to receive treatment from one of the psychologists who works as a volunteer in this center. Arjeta removed some things from the desk, took them with her and entered her office.

Psychologist by profession, Arjeta has opened the Ri-jeta center in Ferizaj. On a daily basis, the center is frequented by young people who want to be cleared of their addiction to narcotics. The opening of this center was not in her professional plans, but she lives the legacy of her son Riad, who is no longer alive as a result of drug use.

In October 2017, she got the terrible news that her son had passed away. It was a cold autumn day when her life changed radically. Now she lives with the memories of Riad and tries to make young people like him not to have the fate of her son.

"His absence speaks a lot, it hurts a lot every day," she said.

When she reveals her memories of Riad, she inevitably talks about the time when it all started. For three years, as she explains, her son had shown signs of aggression, delays at home and changes in his physique, which had made Arjeta suspect that something was wrong.

"This is the most serious problem you can admit to yourself, therefore it is easier for you to accept the lie, it fits to your soul because you want that lie to be a reality. This is how

you decide to neglect the truth because you cannot just accept it", explains Arjeta for ZA magazine.

In the summer of 2016, Riad decided to tell to Arjeta that he was a user of narcotic substances.

"He was waiting for me until I came back from work and he said to me: Mom, I will discuss a topic with you, but just if you are strong, that were his words", says Arjeta while her eyes were constantly in tears.

That her son was a drug user was not even on the list of things she thought he would say.

So even before Riad told her what it was all about, she had comforted him by telling him that a solution to that problem would be found.

This confrontation with her son made her cry, despite the fact that she still did not know the problem in question.

"I can tell that in that conversation I received one of the most sincere hugs and a request for forgiveness from the soul, he would say: mom forgive me, forgive me I went to the wrong direction. I asked him what happened? He told me, I am a user of heavy drugs," she continues through tears.

He directly told her he was consuming narcotics. He was at a point where he could not get out of that cycle. Therefore, he was desperately calling his mother for help. This was the moment when Arjeta was confronted with a reality.

"At that moment, the world collapsed for me", she concludes this part of the story.

Her only hope was the fact that Riad had decided to ask her for help, and this kept her strong on the path that she would take with her son. She knew little that this battle would be waged on all fronts.

The joint battle with her son for recovery from the habit, as far as time promised, was accompanied by challenges. She faced with the prejudices, the lack of developed institutional staff and the financial inability to pay for the most sophisticated treatments for him.

That was painful. The path of healing caused pain to the whole family.

"I have not found a reliable address to ask for help or hope in it. I kept asking and the only support I found was at the Department for addictions in Pristina. But it was not enough," she said in despair.

It was during his stay in the Department for addiction that came up the idea of opening a Ri-Jeta center discussed between Riad and Arjeta. It was one of those days when Riad was feeling good and seemed to be improving. It was Sunday and they were walking on the streets of Pristina when Riad proposed to his mother to open a treatment center.

He came up with the idea while he was watching his mother talking to psychologists in the Department and how well they understood each other. He was in a position that was in great need of professional support and services.

He knew many people, his friends who were in the same situation, who could help him. This turned into hope.

He had finally identified his mission in this world and was getting better. Arjeta

had no choice but to comply with his request.

"He told me, Mom, I'm asking something from you. I asked him what Riad?" she confessed.

"He said: I am now feeling very well because I am away from drugs here and I promise to give it up. But, we will open such a center, where I would come and say, come over here, because you can give up from drugs, I am that one that have given up drugs", she tells the conversation with her son for ZA.



*Should I stay
locked up and
give up? Or
be the voice
of change?
I chose the
second.*

"But things ended differently. And I took that wish of Riad as a mission, obligation and trust", she says being upset.

It took her two years to recover and decide to live his son's dream through the opening of the RI-Jeta center. She has embarked on a journey full of challenges again, this time for the sake of his son.

She faces a lack of institutional support and funding to provide the center's services. Every day young people knock on the doors of Ri-jeta of hope and that is why Arjeta does not give up.

"After he left, I was between two roads. Should I stay locked up and give up? Or be the voice of change? I chose the second. It has not been easy at all. The pain from the tragedy does not end within one or two years. I am used to living with the pain, which there is no scale in the world that measures it."

Re-jeta takes her a space of the day and fulfills her at least a little. Every day she meets young people from different parts of Kosovo and tries to convey the strength to abandon the habit of consuming

narcotics by dealing with their treatment.

The center, which got its name from the combination of the letters of the name of Riad and Arjeta, has so far managed to cure 23 young people, who have given up from the use of narcotics and have returned to normal.

"I made a combination of the two letters of Riad's name "Ri" and the abbreviation of my name "Jeta", a name which fulfills me in two senses, that of the son and that of the return to life, because a consumer who gives up from drugs, comes back to life", explains Arjeta.

Re-jeta tends to serve as a meeting point for people who want to overcome the habit of consuming narcotics. Many mothers in Arjeta's position have turned to her for help.

She has been through this road once and already knows exactly the obstacles. She advises them how to act and how to work with their children because above all, according to Arjeta, this is a battle of the whole family and in battles, they must all go together.

"I am happy that I managed to unite many hands of mothers, who face the same problem. One thing that has been difficult so far because they were even disturbed by the stigma that surrounded them when they confessed that their child is a drug user. I think that to some extent we have managed to break the stigma regarding this very sensitive issue."

Arjeta continues to work as a nurse at the Family Medicine Center in Ferizaj and now as a psychologist at the center. Recently, she has started a small business where she deals with the cultivation of flowers. Flower shop gives her peace of mind while she invests a part of the income in the center.

The session at 15:00 was over. From the next room the door was heard to open and then close and the footsteps heard in the background indicated that the young person who received treatment went. Arjeta turned off the lights, wiped away the tears, put a smile on her face and continued to Rolinda, her daughter, who was calling her to meet her in the flower shop.

"There I get a bit relieved", said Arjeta and made the last turn of the key in the door and we left together.



The depth of a nun's life

August 19, 2007 was a very common summer day for the citizens of Prizren. The streets of the city were hot and there was little movement during the day. This is how Lindita Spaqi remembers that day.

She was standing by the Cathedral Lady Helper and sporadically glanced out the window to see the city. She could not stay at one place since that day she would take the final oath to become a nun. This was the most important day of her life, as it determined every future moment.

Under the sounds of liturgical-church music, in the presence of the Bishop, some priests, nuns, family members and other citizens, Sister Lindita swore an oath on the condition of poverty, purity, honesty and obedience, to protect and increase the sanctity of human life and continue faithfully until death. She decided to dedicate her life to God, serving all people, especially those in need.

As a symbol of devotion and eternity to God, she also accepted the ring, which she has never removed.

"Sometimes when I reflect, I have always been confident in what I did. With the same certainty that I have today, with the same criteria. It was a very special feeling. It is an inner feeling that cannot be described. It is a source of freedom, you feel so free that it is really beautiful", were the words with which she describes the feeling she has in relation to the decision to become a nun.

It all started with the question *"Why don't you become a sister?"*



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A priest had spoken these words to her, as she briefly describes, without considering that she would consider them. This question got her thinking and the voices of reason in her head convinced her that it is the right decision.

"He told me that words just like that; obviously he said it in vain. But it has affected me a lot. From that moment, I started thinking. This was exactly the moment when I finished 8th grade. Even then, gradually, it has grown over time with age, in religion, then the maturity of these things..." explains Sister Lindita for ZA magazine, whom was 18 years old when she made the final decision for this journey.

She was born in the village of Atmagjë in the municipality of Prizren. Lindita belonged to a large typical traditional family. They lived together with their uncles and children. Living surrounded by the whole family, made her childhood happy.

"Until the second grade, I also lived with my uncles. We were a big house, with many people, with many women, kids. Mostly, the men were abroad and my dad has been the one who has managed the whole big family. It was a very beautiful period. We were many children, but there was a lot of harmony and organization; each with his own duties", she recalls.

In 1996, when Sister Lindita finished primary school, the political situation in Kosovo was aggravated by making it difficult for Albanian students to attend school. Teaching took place in private homes and there was a fear of persecution. There was a lot of uncertainty.

Girls her age had started dropping out of school for a variety of reasons. However, the same fate did not follow Lindita.

The contact with the nuns who were present in Prizren at that time had influenced Lindita to continue her secondary education in Shkodra.

She was allowed to live in the girls' dormitory, with the nuns, and attend classes at the gymnasium "Jordan Misja".

"It was a time when it was normal for girls not to continue their education and mainly boys were given more of this opportunity. The honorary sisters (nuns) who were in Prizren also cooperated with Shkodra and there they opened the girls' dormitory. At their suggestion, I had the opportunity to go there, even at a very young age, 15 years old."

As she says, she had worshiped and devoted herself to God since she was a child, because her whole family was religious and practicing the Catholic religion.

"My father was a practicing believer. In general, in our family the faith is nurtured, traditions are kept, but the father has been regular in the church, has cooperated and done volunteer work. Maybe his model has influenced me a little indirectly," she says.

This wish of sister Lindita had continued to be nurtured during the contacts with the sisters in Prizren and then during her schooling in Shkodra.

"It was as if I had a sympathy for the sisters when they were doing the activities. And as a child I grew up with them and in a way the contact has been constant, even though I did not think that tomorrow I will be like them."

Lindita made her wishes and decision to become a nun public after finishing school and returning from Shkodra. She first chose her sisters to tell them the news and then she told her mother. She had already lost her father.

The mother was skeptical. A decision like this meant a life more isolated from the family and with strict rules.

"The mother was not very happy," she said, adding that "maybe there was more fear, because the parents always have that fear of failure. Not that they do not want to, because this is a very nice thing, but they are always afraid that maybe you are wrong, it is not for you, you will not behave well, they do not want you to come to that bad position."

Education in Shkodra had driven her away from Prizren, and relatives and friends remembered her as a 15-year-old girl. In addition to Shkodra, she was educated in Italy - Rome. She had grown up and changed. Now she was not 15-year-old Lindita, but was 21 years old. She had returned wearing a gray uniform, ready to accept the white uniform and accept the tasks that awaited her.

"My decision was received well. I had a break, four years in school in Shkodra and two years in Italy and my return was completely different. I returned as an adult in uniform and straight to duty. I felt a special respect for myself."

Having given the First Ordinary Conditions before God in the Cathedral of Our Lady Helper, on September 15, 2002, she had joined the Congregation of the Angelic Sisters of St. Paul which was the Italian Congregation, therefore she studied about theology in Italy.

"There were also some girls from Albania in Italy, while from Kosovo I was the only one. There was a nun, a spiritual leader who supervised and guided us spiritually. She has supported us to see if this is really

what we want and if we are still behind that decision", Lindita explains in detail the procedures.

Lindita and other girls who want to become nuns are given enough time to understand themselves and the will of God. Years of formation vary by age; the first conditions cannot be obtained before the age of 20 years. After the first conditions, the conditions are renewed every year, until the eternal conditions or the final oath, on the same date. This time is predicted to be 5-8 years.

Sister Lindita has done everything; the first conditions in 2002 and after 5 years, in 2007 the eternal conditions.

The meaning of this whole journey is the revelation of the will of God and the devotion to Him, which takes life in service to others, brothers and sisters.

"Every sister has this as her primary mission, that is, we live a spiritual life with God and the style of this life is service. The forms of services change afterwards."

Nuns have three basic conditions that they must adhere to faithfully throughout their lives. They voluntarily give up from any property and possessions. The second condition is purity, which means renunciation of marriage and any affective relationship, and the third condition is obedience to offer readiness whenever and wherever needed.

"We have nothing of our own, but we also lack nothing," she says happily.

The nuns belong to the various Congregations, which are part of the large family that is the church, and it is a member of the Congregation of the Angelic Sisters of St. Paul. It is the first Congregation of active life in the history of the Catholic Church - meaning that its members do not live a closed life in the church.

"Our congregation mainly has the mission of educating children, young people and adults everywhere in the world. In Prizren, in addition to pastoral engagements with Catholic believers, we are also engaged in education; we have the kindergarten "Mother Kabrini" which we have been running since 2002, as well as the primary school "Loyola" since 2016. There I was appointed by the

superiors in agreement with the Catholic Church and the Association "Loyola Gymnasium" in the title of director."

Earlier, in the communist period, in the time of the former Yugoslavia, the practice of religion in the open had been more limited, every activity took place more within the walls of the church. This had affected the sisters have no right to work or lead institutions other than a small number who worked in hospitals.

They have led a closed life and that is why they did not happen on the streets of Kosovo. With the transition to another political system, the democratic one, beliefs are practiced freely. Nuns lead active lives and we can meet them more often.

"With the end of the war in Kosovo, the centers have started to open, where the sisters can lead. Now we are not only in the service of the Catholic community, but of all faiths. Now more frequent contact with the community, with people, makes them know us better and creates a different opinion of us that we are not just people who stay inside and pray, but we make a completely normal life."

Being part of the Congregation, which deals with education, sister Lindita, had studied Albanian language and literature in order to adapt to the job she would do at that time as a director in the kindergarten "Mother Kabrini", in Prizren.

"I studied Albanian Language and Literature. It was not exactly what I wanted to study, but I had no other choice, because not many opportunities were offered at the University of Prizren. Then I continued in Tirana master studies in School Psychology."

Lindita returned to Prizren in 2002. For four years, she has been engaged in pastoral work with children, young people and families within the parish community. At the same time, she has worked as an administrator in the "Mother Kabrini" kindergarten. In the meantime, she has started her studies. After graduation she worked as an educator with children; later, for 6 years she was the director of the kindergarten. Lindita now runs the "Loyola" Elementary School in her hometown of Prizren.

Every day near the children is different. She has sworn allegiance to God and she is fulfilling this oath by being close to the children. The active life she leads enables Lindita not to feel so much the lack of things or experiences that she had before becoming a nun.

"I love nature and travel. We live in community and it is a rule that keeps us together. We use the holidays to visit families and we do not have the opportunity to travel much", gives details Lindita from the internal organization of the Congregation.

During their work, the sisters have the opportunity to contribute to the community, but also to support women by listening to their problems and offering them advice and solutions.

"I personally have a lot of contact with young people, families, parents of the younger generations, who bring children to our school and I think that through that contact we support them a lot."

While in other churches there have been many changes in their hierarchy, especially the Anglican or Protestant church, where women have been given the opportunity to hold Mass, to lead the church, in the Catholic Church there are differences, but the possibility of a woman being put in charge of the church is not predicted to happen in the near future.

"The church is still led by priests and it is not thought that it can be a sister, because it is a matter of the sacrament³. This has more to do with the founding of the Catholic Church, and not with the prejudice that a woman cannot hold that position. The sisters only make conditions, while the priests receive the Sacrament of the Holy Order and have more authority automatically, in the liturgical and sacramental sense."

Despite the changes in the lives of nuns that are now open, in recent years in Kosovo there has been a decline in the interest of girls to dedicate themselves to the spiritual life and to take this oath before God.

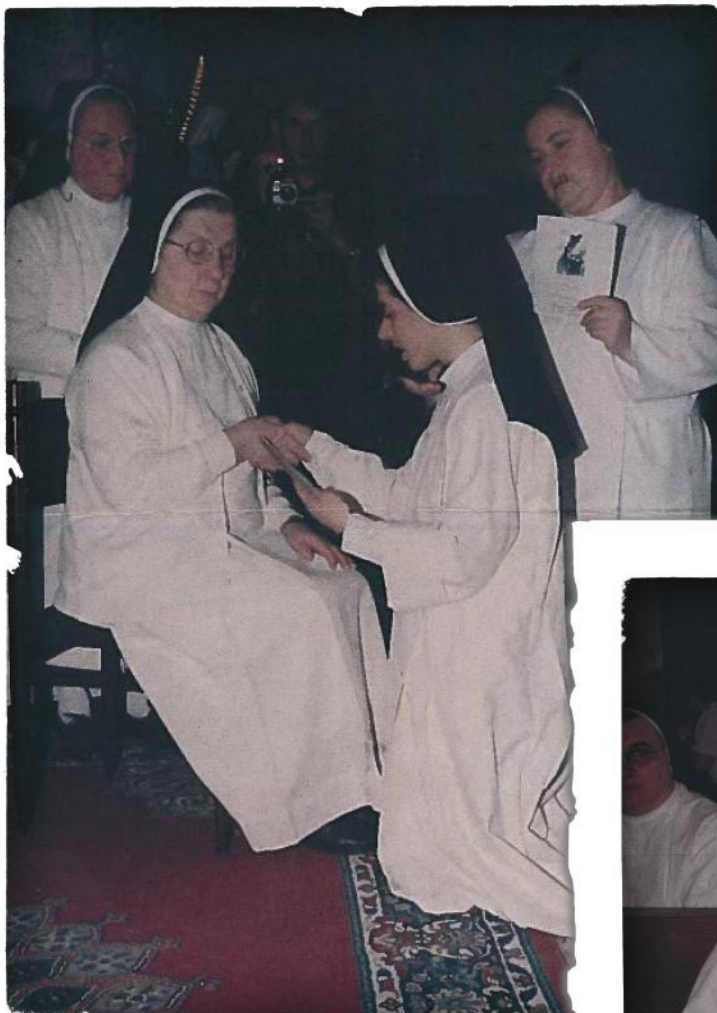
"Girls are not following this life now, because it seems very difficult to them. Apparently, our young people are afraid of decisions. Now there are no calls, there are very few, but I think that after a while there will be more, because maturity is coming much later."

It is a pure curiosity to know more deeply the life of a woman who becomes a nun. Leaving behind their lives, families and the opportunity to start a family, they find spiritual refuge in another home, which becomes their permanent home.

"We wake up early in the morning and pray," says Lindita.

"We fulfill our spiritual obligation together and then we are distributed according to the work we have. In the afternoon, we meet at home. We are all in our duties, our services. Then at 20:00, we meet again and have a joint dinner where we talk about the day. For a weekend it is different, we wake up later, we organize some lunch together, or visit families."

This is Lindita's routine. Meanwhile, her story as a nun is rarely shared with the public, as this time for ZA magazine.



starting from scratch

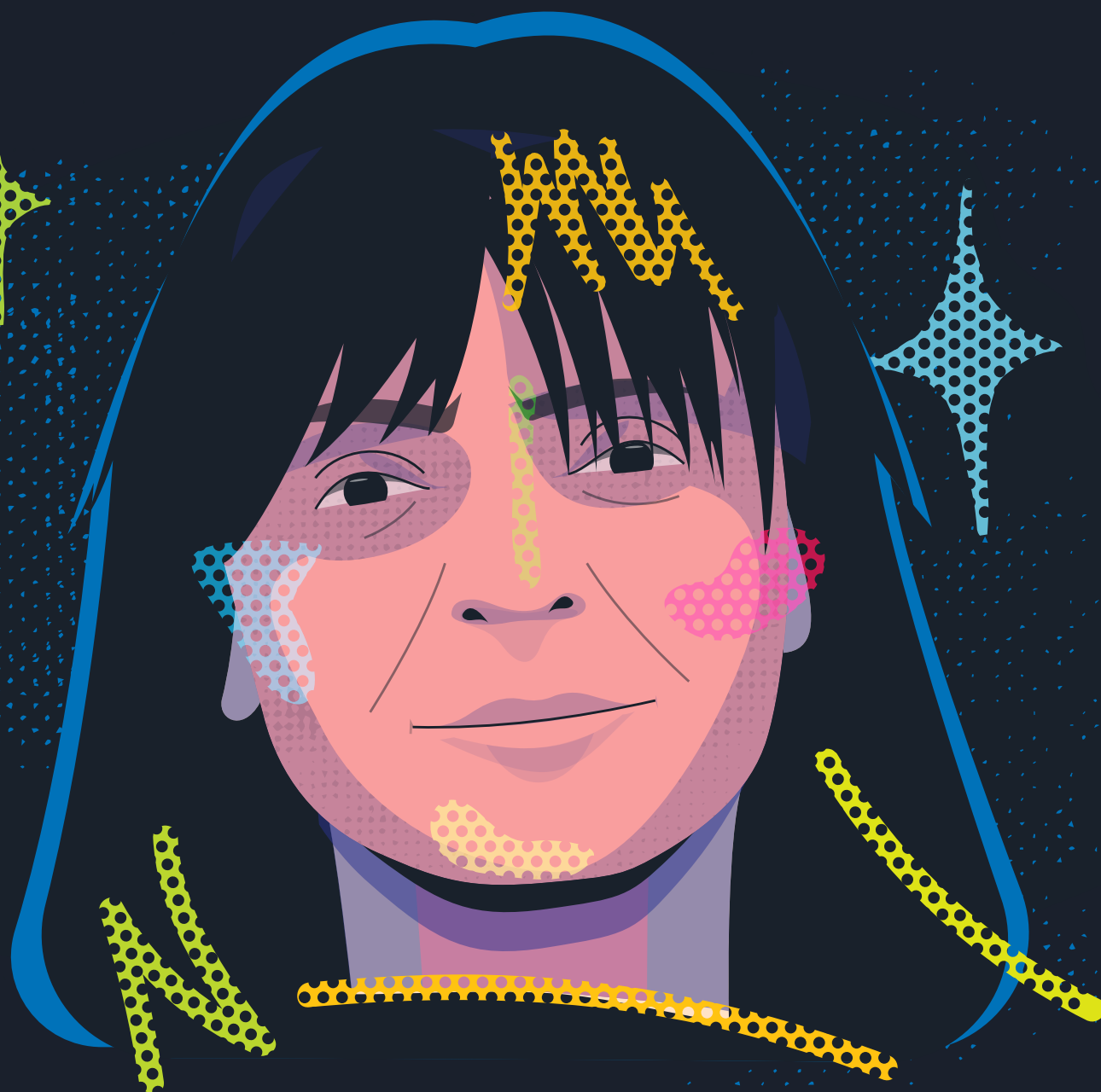
³ The Christian rite (like baptism) which is believed to have been instituted by Christ and which is considered to be a means of Divine grace or to be a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality. According to the faith, Christ ordained only 12 male apostles, so the sacrament does not provide for women to be put in charge of the house of God, the church.

Photos borrowed from the character herself



za | men for women

Gender equality is not only a mission of women, because men share the same duty in their fight for equality. Gender equality ensures that everyone regardless of gender will have equal opportunities to fulfill their potential and consequently have opportunities for a better life. Society progresses when girls, boys, women and men work without being challenged on account of their gender and they support each-other in achieving their life goals. Furthermore, equality breaks the limits that are caused by the gender norms that influence the private and professional lives of everyone. In order to make a world where women and men are free from the pressures that arise from the gender norms, it is not suffice that the war be led by women only. This is not a war between genders. It is a war against the outdated mentalities that still dictate the directions of our lives. Men lose in these wars too. For this reason, we should have men in the frontline too so that together with women they fight for a better life for our girls and boys.



Armend is not forgotten

"Me kilometra" (Far away kilometers) was the highway of Armend Rexhepagiqi's stage absence in Albanian music. An extraordinary personality and figure who for a long time determined the music and fashion trends, Rexhepagiqi decided to return in February 2021, after years of absence.

The concert may have had a plan to reduce the nostalgia for his art, but it caused the opposite. The super show he produced, made everyone understand him better and more, than they miss.

However, to portray Armend as an "unforgettable voice" is a great reduction of his qualities. For a long time, being a progressive man, he led Albanian art and artists, not only with music.

The concert as expected was a huge success. Unfortunately, due to the situation with the virus COVID-19, the spectators had to cheer only in front of their TV screens, while the hall without spectators was filled with the presence of the artist.

"I told myself that I want to do the concert for all those who asked for it for years, but also for my pleasure, to have a little fun", he says in this interview for ZA.

The desire to make music was not something that Armend caught on the road. He was almost born with the "allegro" inside him. The music school he entered at a very young age would only conducted his desire.

"I was 5 years old and in singing lessons, I said I'm shy, how can I sing in front of others? But after a week, no one could stop me from singing - when I once broke the ice of singing in front of others, I was never afraid," he said.

With all his talent and inclination, when it came time to study, Armend, more to prove himself to others than out of passion, decided to break the path and enter the Faculty of Medicine.

"I studied medicine because I was an idiot for not listening to my father who insisted on studying music - but I wanted to prove that I could be good at difficult medicine."

In conclusion, despite the fact that he graduated from the faculty and actually became a doctor, he practically never practiced the profession. The study of the anatomy of the body may have been interesting, but never as much as the dismemberment of the wounds of the soul, to which Armend sings.

"I never worked a single day in the profession for which I was educated," he says.

Instead of listening to his heartbeat with a stethoscope, he continued to make his heart beat by beating the piano notes.

However, as he says himself, the best composition in life would be his unification with Aida Baraku. They, both together, will dominate the Albanian pop music scene since the 90s.

"I remember the extravagant outfits, which are so funny today, they always had more details than they should - because I did not know how to express the joy of being where I need to be in music, I exaggerated it - out of a great desire to give the whole world and myself prove that I got where I needed to be, that this is my favorite place under the sun, I lost my measure and prudence", remembers Armend.

He criticizes the former self, but excessive enthusiasm came from love for what he did.

"I was naive to the point of ignorance, madly in love with music, without prudence or measure, I had found my happiness and rest and I wanted the whole world to know this," Armendi recalls of his beginnings in music.

But, there came a moment when the artist would reconsider everything.

The kitsch that began to dominate the post-war music scene, where outside influences were taken so crudely and imposed on the public, therefore made Armend to stop and ask himself, should he continue?

"I was full, I had nowhere to go, and it was the feeling: that was it. There is no better or different, no further, I do not want to sing folk, I do not want to trample on the past, I do not want to be a parody of myself, I do not want to repeat... I had a lot of 'I do not want' and very little 'I want'", he explains about distancing himself from the scene.

Away from the scene physically, but never as far as influence.

The songs composed by him and Aida are a distinct brand in the Albanian musical culture. There is a large number of compositions and texts that fantastic duos created for Albanian artists. Characteristic melodies and their iconic lyrics always have the "white stamp".



I will be back, I cannot wait, I want to create and sing new songs, I have it almost necessary... strange.



Photo borrowed from the character himself



Artists like Tuna, Jehona Sopi, Elvana Gjata, Nora Istrefi and many well-known pop names over the years from the close collaboration with Armend and of course Aida, have reaped countless successes.

Almost all the lyrics written by Aida and the songs composed by Armend are so fondled that in them female artists have found themselves more than male artists.

This gender imbalance in the collaborations with Armend was completely accidental.

"There are more female singers than male singers who want to sing my music, this is just a fact. I sometimes work better with women, maybe because I know how to listen to them, and there is no rivalry that sometimes arises between us men," he said.

The songs composed by Armend, which we can freely say remain immortal hits, remain so because he refused to create short-lived "art".

"Aida writes the lyrics, but as far as I am concerned, there is no sexism in the lyrics of our songs because we are not like that. What is your kind, you will have the work, in this case the text, it is so simple", he says.

Some things to understand need to create a distance. We need a new calm and perspective of thought. This had happened to Armend with his fans and his music.

Only after his physical withdrawal, he says that he really understood what his meaning in the Albanian artistic world is.

"For a long time I had to realize how infinitely lucky I am and pampered by God for my music fans; I do not want to analyze the reasons because I want to continue to create this without fully understanding or completely decomposing the formula for success, because I think when a thing is rationalized to the end, it loses its true value, instinct and spontaneity are irreplaceable," he explains happily.

It is for these fans of his music that he cannot leave it at that way. For everything that had come to his nose once, now he misses it and from those "I do not want much", now it is "I want very much".

"I will be back, I cannot wait, I want to create and sing new songs, I have it almost necessary... strange."

He will return and will return in full light.

"And then... comes my new song, after so many years, the first new clip and my album I do not know which in turn because I forgot how many I have, so old I am ha ha ha, new concerts etc".

However, when he returns, it will be as if he had never left. This is the fate of someone like Armend Rexhepagiqi that the songs that were made 30 years ago are still heard today by 18-year-old lovers.

Because, his songs are the story of everyone and the love of everyone. His "evergreen" tunes are lullabies of the soul, and just like the soul, they are ageless.

The persistent teacher

As he was climbing to the second floor of a bar in the center of Gjakova, his Fedora-style hat could easily be seen from afar.

He was easily held on the sides of the moving stairways, although after reaching the target he started throwing the steps more uncertainly. Xhevat Koshi, in his 90 years of life, as he approached the table, took off his hat, took off his jacket and ordered a coffee.

"I can't see with one eye," he said. "I had an unsuccessful intervention", he continued, browsing one of the editions of ZA magazine that was in front of him on the table.

Teacher Xhevat was born in 1931 in Gjakova and is one of the oldest teachers in the city. He was educated in his hometown and when he was only 18 years old, he first took on the role of teacher.

"I was assigned teacher in a place I did not even know," he recalls. "I went to the village of Zabel by chariot and on horseback and arrived there in the middle of the night. A family opened the door for me and I slept there. It was a great poverty."

"The school courier gave me the school supplies and there was half a chalk and an old cloth to erase the blackboard, but there was no blackboard because it was broken," he said.

With this investment in hand, he started teaching for the first time. The students were coming to school half with their chairs and half sitting on the ground. Since there was no blackboard, he marked on the knee the letter he wanted to teach them. He told them how to pronounce and write and they went home with letters drawn on the body.

"However, those students had the only thing they needed, the will to learn," says teacher Xhevat for ZA.

After two years of service in the village of Zabel, he was appointed director of the school in the village of Reznig, where in addition to this administrative role he continued to work as a teacher. The first thing he noticed was the presence of only boys in the classrooms."

"At the beginning of the school year 1951-1952, I was appointed director of the lower gymnasium in Reznig. I took over the school from the previous principal Nazimi, whose last name I do not remember now. When I entered the classroom, I saw that there were no girls," he said.

When he took over the school, he was handed a mountain of records. There he saw that in the villages there were lot of girls among whose children were destined to attend classes.

"The village of Lumbardh had the most girls, followed by the villages of Llukë e Epërme and Ulët and Dashinovci, as well as Prilepi", he lists.

When he saw that the girls were staying at home, he remembered that when he attended elementary school he had female classmates, but they were only from the city. Those living in the villages were not educated due to the attitude of the families that girls should not be allowed to go to school.

As a teacher, he could not tolerate such behavior to continue. Therefore, he immediately mobilized.

"I also had a friend, a teacher Shaban Vokshi. At that time he was brought to my school, he was teaching defense, he was also an officer. It was October and I said to him: Shaban girls are not coming to school anymore, what can we do? In Lumbardh there were mostly girls, I explained the problem to him as well", the teacher described this moment as if it had happened a year ago and not 72 years ago.

Photo credits to
Jahjaga Foundation

His colleague Shaban had suggested him to invite the people to the meeting and together they lobby for the education of the girls. Ahead they had difficult negotiations because to change their minds required dialogue mastery.

"Shabani took on duty to go because he had a kind of authority that came from politics because his brother was the mayor of Gjakova. That was the way things were at that time. He had gone out at night with a lamp and called the men of the villages. We gathered the next day in a house of one of the villagers. It was the men's stove, private house. The place was full of men and with no free space", is one of the memories of that period.

When it seemed to them that everyone had come, he invited Shaban to sit down, one on one side of the chimney and the other on the other side.

"Shall we start the conversation," he asked them. Do you know why we are here tonight, I asked the people? They said you called us to the conference. I told them, you have been lied to, oh mine! I spoke this way, so that I could win them over", the teacher further confessed, looking in the middle of a pile of letters for some notes from that time to refresh these memories even more.

"I came to talk to you about how to make the girls to come to school together with the boys. There were betrothed girls there who still did not even know they were engaged, their family had betrothed them in the cradle. They were more stubborn and nurtured a strong belief that girls should not be sent to school."

Many hours of discussion, teacher Koshi managed to persuade the grandparents to send the girls to school. In fact, it was one of the men in the man's room who made the first promise.

"An old man close to 60 years old had spoken. He told them to bring on the girls on the street in the village of Lumbardh tomorrow. The inhabitants of Lumbardh were known as very difficult and stubborn".

"Men, we are all bringing at our girls, do not miss anyone!" he had told his fellow villagers, the teacher remembers even today, happy for the results of that meeting.

The next day the lesson started and Xhevat was barely taking his place. Somehow, he finished the first hour with the boys in class and was sitting in the discomfort caused by the insecure reception.

"The first hour is over ... oh mine oh mine, the girls are not coming. I had colleagues Sevdije Dushi and Ferjon Baraku. I had prepared them so that when the girls came I would give to them a notebook and a pencil. I told my colleagues to take the girls with only one class and prepare them to start the lesson."

While he was holding the first class as he confesses, he had one eye on the students he was lecturing to and the other on the classroom window. He was waiting to see the results of the meeting the night before. He wanted his initiative to succeed because he believed that girls' education was necessary.

"In the village of Reznik there is a slope that we used to call the cooperative. I was looking out the window even when the girls arrived; I saw them in the horse-drawn carriage."

He left the classroom and shouted for his colleagues to hear: *"They came - quickly be ready because the girls are coming".*

The man who had led them and brought them to school had invited to his office. At the time, it was common for men to smoke as a sign of friendship and for the conversation to go smoothly.

"I threw him a cigarette and a coffee. He told me: you left us without sleep last night, good job", the teacher talks and laughs.

They spent some time together in his director's office and moved from there. He invited him to go and visit the girls who had been placed in a classroom and were being acquainted with the rules of the school. There were about 14 school-age girls who had come that day from the village of Lumbardh.

Then the girls from other surrounding villages started coming to teacher Xhevat's school. The girls who started attending Reznik's lower gymnasium - the lower gymnasium is equals with the last four grades of today's primary school - had dropped out of primary school.

"In the beginning they had stagnation because they had interrupted their lessons for some time, but they got on their feet quickly," he said.

For the time this teacher performed, he made a revolution in the community. At a time when parents' only aspiration for girls was marriage, and they even got engaged when they were in the cradle, Xhevati believed in equal opportunities and offered this to the girls of his area.



If women are not prepared, there is no society. Women not being advanced is a great loss to society.

At that time, his agenda may not have been perceived as a fight for gender equality, but he has taken the core steps towards what is being fought for Kosovo today.

"If women are not prepared, there is no society. Women not being advanced is a great loss to society. There is no place for discrimination against women," he said.

In a pile of notes, he had taken with him to say goodbye to the forgetfulness that age could cause, though he gave no sign that his memories had faded, he distributed a letter summarizing his professional biography.

Xhevat Koshi, after serving as director in the village of Reznik, studied at the Department of Geography at the University of Sarajevo. He had also taught in the normal school of Ferizaj and after graduating in Bosnia, he had taught in the gymnasium "Silvira Tomazini" in Mitrovica, in the gymnasium "Hajdar Dushi" in Gjakova, where he had become director.

He ended his teaching career retiring in 1989. His confession ended with the wearing of the brown Fedora hat.

"I never take my hat off in the winter," he said as he steered the hat well. Perhaps coincidentally, but the hat of this model is a symbol of 19th century gender equality activists and advocates. Whoever wore the Fedora hat was identified as an activist for women's rights movements.

With Fedora in his head and a baggage of memories with him, he asked to take a photo for the magazine, posing in front of the iconic building in the center of Gjakova.

Then he left to meet with his friends.

Feminists are made, not born

"I identify myself as a feminist for 20 years now", were some of Dardan Velija's first words for ZA Magazine.

Dardan is an entrepreneur and public policy and business consultant with experience in the public, private and civil society sectors. He is 43 years old. Born in Gjilan, he has spent most of his life in Pristina and in several countries for education and work.

He studied politics and governance in Bulgaria, while completed his postgraduate studies in London at the LSI University. Being a student in two different countries of Europe, one close to the region where he was formed and one in a metropolis has made him exposed to different cultures, which influenced his approach to be more open-minded.

As Dardan has understood and explained, "Feminism [is] not an idea to develop war, if any, between the genders." He thinks feminist activism is built on principles that identify and address problems that disproportionately affect and harm women (note this term!).

"In Kosovo, country of dreams, no one is privileged or discriminated against because of belonging. Neither men, nor women, nor other groups within these genders. Even people with different sexual, ethnic and religious orientations and whatever else, are not discriminated against either", declares Dardan while imagining a utopian future for Kosovo.

In the part of the day that he is not engaged in the work from which he lives, he gives his voluntary contribution to the civil society, to the non-governmental organization "Rotary Club Prishtina International". This organization brings together professionals from different fields, in order to contribute together to projects that serve to improve the social situation in Kosovo.

Although the organization is at the service of the society and community, it is not a humanitarian organization for that. This entity operates fully on a voluntary basis of goodwill professionals, who engage in their spare time and consider working in Rotary as a hobby. Their purpose is to put time, personal, and professional skills in the service of society.

Rotary Club Prishtina International has two main projects, through which tries to contribute to improving the quality of life of citizens. One of the projects is to provide drinking water to schools in Kosovo villages and support girls to continue their education.

The social cause that Rotary deals with is the empowerment of girls in rural areas of Kosovo towards higher secondary education. Human and material resources have been invested in this direction since 2013.


When the idea of financial support for girls from villages attending high school began to take shape, two former teachers who have made an invaluable contribution to the education of the younger generations, Naxhi and Fahri Buçinca, took part in weaving the scholarship scheme for families who face financial difficulties in educating their daughters.

High schools in Kosovo are located mainly in cities and towns. Therefore, students are forced to travel certain distances to attend classes and to go to and from school, they often have unaffordable costs for Kosovar families and as a result, they interrupt the education of their children.

For traditional and economic reasons, if parents are put in front of the position to choose, according to Dardan they rarely choose the daughter.

"We were not aware that in rural areas, families with financial problems, if they can send a child to high school in the nearest city, that child is very rarely a girl. The absolute majority of the time it is a boy!" he says for ZA.

According to Dardan, educating boys is a more profitable investment for Kosovar families who are not financially well off. He points out that traditionally girls leave home when they get married while the boy continues to live with his parents and returns the investment that has been made for his education. According to him, this is the starting point where inequality between girls and boys starts and later on between men and women.



*We all pay
the cost of
inequality.
Part of
creating
inequality is
everyone.*

"This is a pretty big problem in the country, affecting thousands of girls, who are not selected by the family to enable them to go to high school in nearby cities."


With a goodwill, Dardan together with his friends from Rotary, after identifying this problem, have created a fund with the means of club members. Subsequently, as requests for support increased, so did members' ambitions to contribute.

They organized fundraising concerts in Kosovo and collaborated with sister organizations in Denmark and Sweden, where they raised enough funds to financially support 50 to 100 girls each year to get an education.

The project aimed to find in each municipality of Kosovo four girls, who come from families with difficult economic conditions, which deprives them of upper secondary education.

The only criterion for girls to be beneficiaries is to prove the financial situation of the family and their academic performance will not be taken into account.

The organization has withdrawn from participating in the selection of beneficiaries considering that it has no competence to do so. Therefore, the municipal directorates of education, the Bućinca Foundation and high schools come into play here, which together make the selection of beneficiaries coming from rural areas. Then, Rotary Club Prishtina International raises funds through donations from members and through cooperation with international organizations around the world. Dardan praises the work of his entire club, but for this program, he singles out the member Ilir Krasniqi.



Gender inequality, more than a gender problem, is a social problem. Everyone should be part of the solution to the problem. Like men, like women. We should call on everyone to be part of creating a just society for all. Not to fight men, nor to oppress women. Nor should oppress men, nor raise women.

The funds raised are allocated for 40 Euros to the accounts of the girls or their parents on a 10-month basis. The transfer of 40 euros is a symbolic amount, however, to some extent enough to cover transportation costs and a modest meal during the day.

"Our goal has been to contribute to the cause and we wanted from the beginning not to be involved in the selection of girls. It is not our intention to show them that we stand behind this and to ask them for gratitude for what we are doing", says Dardan, explaining why they have stayed away from the scholarship selection process.

Since getting the scholarship is not done based on academic merit, tracking girls' academic success is not on the agenda of the club or its members. However, the club always gets good news from the girls they have supported.

Often, high school principals inform the club that the best students of the generation are exactly those girls who have been awarded scholarships. This is the best reward for the Rotary club engagement. The effort that the members of this group make, leads to change and it does not matter at all how many girls are supported, as long as the scheme continues to exist.

According to Dardan, when a student drops out of school after the ninth grade, the chances of her returning to school later are small. If they complete the 12th grade, they may not continue their academic journey at all, but it is important that they have enough knowledge to enter the labor market and why not, even become entrepreneurs themselves.

Considering that the future of his country was more important than the personal agenda, Dardan is a typical patriotic citizen, who, no matter how well is economically settled somewhere abroad, returns back to his roots because there he feels that they need him.

"I joined Rotary when I returned to Kosovo from an engagement I had with working abroad. And I am very grateful to this organization that gives me the opportunity to make my modest contribution to achieving social goals."

He has an activist spirit and is involved in a spectrum of causes struggling to create a more inclusive world. Feminism however remains at the center of his attention.

"In our society as a patriarchal society, women are not seen as an important factor in the development of public life. That is why I have supported gender quotas in institutions, as a mechanism to equality", Dardan emphasizes the key problem of the patriarchal system as an obstacle to equality.

Throughout his discourse, Dardani refers to women as "female." This term has often provoked controversy,

while feminists and advocates for women's rights have opposed its use to name a woman, arguing that "female" or "male" are notions that should not be used to refer to women and men because they have biological connotations and refer to anatomical sex rather than gender.

Dardan has another point of view regarding this issue.

"I think the argument for not using in English makes sense in the linguistic context. Whereas in our linguistic context, as in French, female is not just sex. Women also presuppose the social and gender role of the person", he explains, emphasizing that it seems unfair to spend time and energy in a debate imported from another language instead of focusing on the empowerment of women.

Feminism, according to Dardan, is not an objective in itself. It is a tool to build a better society by addressing the problems that disproportionately affect girls and women. However, at the same time, he emphasizes that in this cycle, men should not be considered as only culprit. It is the women themselves who agree with the norms and stereotypes, which then reflect them on each other and on the boys and girls, they raise and educate.

"We all pay the cost of inequality. Part of creating inequality is everyone. More men than women, but they are all!" he says.

Furthermore, he believes that men and boys are also negatively affected by gender inequality. Emotional and psychological violence are present phenomena between men and boys, but so invisible and unspoken, that they are hardly addressed at all. For fear of not being 'good enough' man or strong, they suppress their feelings and do not talk about the psychic oppression that is done to them.

"Gender inequality, more than a gender problem, is a social problem. Everyone should be part of the solution to the problem. Like men, like women. We should call on everyone to be part of creating a just society for all. Not to fight men, nor to oppress women. Nor should oppress men, nor raise women."

Dardan has realized that patriarchy as a system of domination, institutionalized and maintained for centuries, has regressive power for a society and even he as a man cannot see the 'grace' of this way of organizing society.

"Feminists are made, not born," says author Bell Hooks in her book "Feminism is for everybody." "One does

not become an advocate of feminist policies just because one had the privilege of being born one. Like all other political positions, you can become a feminist in terms of choice and action," she continued, reiterating her position that feminists can be anyone.

Dardani, too, has become a feminist. His choice was to take this position in a society where women and girls do not always guarantee equality before opportunity and do not always escape unscathed by sexism and discrimination.



Photos borrowed from the character himself

⁴ Hooks, Bell (2000). "Feminism is for Everybody". Routledge, New York

In memoriam

A few words about "Lezeti" of Kosovo



Leze Qena was born on March 1, 1935 in the city of Prizren. She came from an average family of many members, where she was the second of nine children of the Spaqi family. She finished primary and secondary school in Prizren, while she studied at the Faculty of Arts in Pristina. She was part of the troupe of the National Theater of Pristina and an actress in many theatrical and television shows as well as Kosovar films and series.

I was a primary school student when I first met Leze - a meeting she does not remember, but which has stuck in my mind as a warm childhood memory. I saw Leze on Radio Television of Pristina and I never thought that she and I would become friends. Not even in my most sensational imaginations...

I always followed her through the screen, while playing on stage for the first time I saw her when I went to Peja to see the theatrical play "The Diary of Anne Frank", where Lezja played the role of Anna. I was fascinated by her performance and the way she was embodied with one historical character. It was a performance felt down to the last detail. It gave you the impression that you are meeting the real Anna.

She started her artistic career very early and enriched it with works highly appreciated by critics and colleagues in the field. In nearly 70 years on stage, Leze gave generous love to art and people, youthful energy and endless positivity. She was a multi-dimensional artist. She knew how to make the public her own from the first moment the theater curtains were raised.

Although the audience wanted her in more comic roles, Lezja was very skilled to be embodied with characters of more serious themes and to give tragic coloring in works of more dramatic contents. Her energy filled every hall, and Leze's presence was a blessing to everyone around her.

We who know her we loved her very much; we call Leze with different nicknames. Liza, Beta and Leze. However, I added a letter 't' to Leze's name and called her Lezet, because she was the epitome of lezeti (delight).

Lezja has been part of our artistic culture since the last century and will remain in the minds and hearts of the public for decades to come. Ever since she was a teenager, she had started dealing with theater and acting.

Have you seen her on stage playing and walking up and down the theater boards like a butterfly? There is one detail that not many know about our Leze: She was once engaged in sports and athletics. In fact, in 1953 she won first place in acrobatics. In this competition, she displayed her acting talent. Ahh, what a delightful story I will share with you in the following...

When we gathered with friends, Lezja often showed with a laugh, the moment when she won first place in this competition, was probably one of her first acts in her career. As part of the competition were also performances in parallels, rings and running; and the latter Lezja did not want at all. Although she tried to escape the running race, she, as a fighting spirit, decided to run even though she did not have suitable running shoes.

The moment a friend of hers came out earlier than she did in the race; Leze collapsed acting that she had fainted. Such a performance helped her, that judges have considered this discipline as passed by Leze, and thus she emerged successful from the competition. She told this story with lots of humor, emphasizing the fact that she had cheated in the competition, but also showed her acting skills.

Acting in the field of sports, opened her doors to the theater.



Leze passed the entering exam to be part of the Public Theater of Pristina in 1954 when she was only 19 years old. Her first show, in which she had the main role, was "The word is for the apartment", and where part of the troupe was the famous actor Xhevat Qena. What makes it even more interesting is the fact that in this play, Lezja played the role of Xhevat's lover - a love that would start on stage and would not end until the last breath.

Lezja married Xhevat and the public recognized them as an inseparable tandem for decades, even in shows and movies where they played husband and wife. However, not every Leze's art project was about love and comedy.

In fact, years later after playing dozens of characters, Lezja confessed to me that she loved Anne Frank as a character because she found many similarities with herself and had always dreamed of playing her role. Although the end of the story of her favorite character is tragedy, Lezja played it by expressing her love for life despite the bitter time in which Ana lived.

She adored Ana Frank, while Lezja had a dream to become a ballerina. However, conditions did not allow her to pursue such a career. She had always liked ballet and said, "*You can communicate with body language without the need for words*".

Even though she had a profession dominated by language, Lezja managed to make a whole people for herself through words on stage, conveying positivity and a lot of love.

Even Anna's added love for her father was something that connected Leze to her. Lezja loved her father very much and always talked with a lot of nostalgia about his role in her life. Selecting an artistic career has been a very controversial move for the time, so the support of the father has been a supporting pillar for her.

She loved this role so much and she has so much passion for this work that this performance in "Anne Frank's Diary" managed to become one of her most appreciated works. She used to say to me: *"While the curtain is on, I did not believe that this was really happening. I did not need to act much because I was like her. I immediately went inside of her. When the war started, I always said, 'If it was Anne Frank now playing my role in the war.'"*

She always appeared to us smiling full of humor, but she has had difficult experiences in life. However, like Ana, she did not share them with others so as not to upset them. Ana wrote them in her diary, while Lezja kept them inside. But how did she never know how to upset someone?

She has always been smiling and we have never understood the pain she has had. She has never shared her pain with friends and has not charged others with her problems. She even said that when she was upset and sees an acquaintance on the street, she used to sit down and pretends to tie her shoes so that they do not see her moody or unhappy of as she usually was. She always said: *"The way you expect the good, you have to expect the bad as well. Even evil passes."*

With that positivity that characterized her, she attracted lots of love and gave a wonderful school on how we should love work and how we should love life. I have not heard a single bad word about Leze from the people or from her colleagues. She was loving and very sincere, and these qualities make Leze unforgettable and rare.

It was so good to be around Leze, that even shortly before she left, she took care to leave me beautiful memories that will accompany me throughout my life.

Twenty days before her death, we were together at a music event where I was going to perform. I also invited Leze, and she came without hesitation. Although very tired from the disease, lost weight and less energy than usual, she did not hand me down.

During my performance, I invited her on stage and handed her the microphone. She improvised for more than half an hour and made laugh the entire hall. She embroidered those jokes, as only she knew and embellished those events of her life enough to make the whole hall laugh. Even in the last days of her life, Leze managed to make others laugh and feel good about her presence.

Leze was among us, made us realize how beautiful it is to have her around us and she left.

On March 25, the theater lights went out for the last time for Leze. She received applause from all over Kosovo. She left with full grace and elegance, just as she deserved and as she wanted to leave this world.

I often told her *"there is no lime that will eat you, oh Lezet!"* And so it was. Neither old age nor time managed to take away the energy that characterized her. She will always be remembered as a gem of Kosovar Theater and cinematography, and her sweet voice will be heard for generations.

Although Leze will never be forgotten and her deeds are documented in theater and film, I miss her very much! I have said it many times in public - she has broken my arms. I no longer have the positivity and love that surrounded me when Lezja was around. My name means hope in Albanian (Shpresa), but she has given me the greatest hope for life! I miss her everywhere. Not just me, but all of us.

Lezeti's friend,

Shpresa Gashi

Za

ZA {Alb}

Voice is power. It enables us to communicate with others, to express joy, sadness, and all other feelings and ideas we may have. Regardless of language or the manner in which we communicate, all of us have a voice. In certain cases, voice is the strongest weapon available to us in our efforts to push forward for the changes we seek. In such cases, even a single, quiet voice can make an echo.

ZA {Ser}

In Serbian 'za' means 'for'. This magazine is dedicated to all women and girls who face extraordinary challenges and prejudice, but still stand strong and serve as the main pillars of their families and the society. It is a dedication to all girls, boys, women and men who fight for equality, and demonstrate their belief in equal rights through their actions and their life. This magazine is for all the people who work day and night for society's best interest – you are our inspiration and role model. We are forever grateful!