

Women Who
Tell the Truth

Starting From Scratch

Women Who Challenged
Gender Stereotypes

Men for Women

za

#06

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dear Kosovan girls,

Kosovo is a place in the world that I love very much, as much as I love Albania. I have always wanted to write and this passion threw me into journalism, and it was journalism that has always kept me close to Kosovo.

There are so many things that cross my mind and which I want to include in this letter. I have witnessed many events in my life and I have a lot of things that I want to say to you and the girls from Albania as well.

My professional career began at a time when there wasn't much space for women as there is today. However, even then I did not have much doubt if there was a place in the realm of journalism for a woman like myself. I did not want to put obstacles - let alone gender-related ones - in my path. It sounded unfair and even if there were obstacles, I wouldn't notice them.

Photos retrieved from official page of Rudina Xhunga on Instagram



I was lucky because writing became my job, and thus I have always done what I have wanted. I tell about the world that I see with other people. I tried all the time, submitting my writings to newspapers in hopes that they would publish them. I was very little and I would wait every day for the Drita magazine to see if they had published my poem. Drita was a literary magazine and among the first ones in the Albanian language, and I held it dear to my heart. And one day, they did publish it.

Immediately after the 90s, which was a difficult political and economic period for Albania, I was among the few women whom one of the biggest national televisions in the country entrusted with hosting a political television show. I was a woman among men and the audience surely put me under scrutiny and judged me harsher than them in every case. Ultimately, the thing that I believed – that my gender was not going to be an obstacle – happened.

I have seen throughout the years how the environment of Albanian journalism has changed and women have enabled that change. The arrival of women in journalism has made journalism more humane because more women everywhere mean more humanness. Seeing that they could exist in this environment and they can make it, women began to approach this profession which was deemed to be men's cup of tea. We can do everything. Everything is women's land too.

As a world citizen and then as a journalist, I observe everything that takes place and I reflect on those situations. In February, when Russo-Ukrainian tensions culminated in war, I stayed up almost all night despite knowing that a long day awaited me due to my motherly duties as well.

When the unexpected happened, a war between two European democratic countries, I was thinking how this type of situation would have ended had there been two women in charge of Russia and Ukraine.

If there would be a woman there deciding on peoples' fates, then there would be no war. I am talking about those women who recognize the compromise because being a woman in a world as difficult as ours, you should compromise. And those women who recognize the compromise wouldn't allow this war to happen. Those women know that a war will enrich one side and

impoverish severely many others. A war benefits some and wrecks some others. War changes the world and it takes the world to another level. And I am certain that women would prevent this war from happening.

Thus, we who try to make this world a better place should celebrate our existence. It is important to believe in ourselves, receive education, and training, and undergo development. Only this way can we improve the world. Your voice has to be resonant, clear, and confident when you talk. And for your voice to sound confident, then you should know well what you are saying.

Thus, in a letter like this, I want to tell you Kosovan and Albanian girls not to waste your time doubting how you can become someone and how to say what you want to say. Learn and develop in what you are good at. Do you want to become a journalist? Then, go for it! Stay close to those whom you deem good at this profession. Perfect yourselves and give yourselves a chance!

I want to say these words from Eleanor Roosevelt that always accompany me, *"No one can make you inferior without your consent"*.

Bear in mind that nothing comes from nothing. Things come from your efforts. Learn to say the truth. Learn to extend your hand to others and learn to do this, especially to those who have fewer opportunities. Do this with other women so that you can all walk together.

Women were those who gave me a hand in my first step in this career. Some of them, from Helena Kadare to Vera Grabocka, have taught me a lot. You can possess some things without your being aware that you possess them. Not having someone to point them out when you can't do that yourself makes it difficult for you to put them to use. I never forget the important women in my life, those who told me about myself and lent me their hand when I thought I was alone.

When I imagine Kosovan girls, I imagine my 10-years old daughter who is growing up so fast and everything I tell her doesn't sit well with her. She is one of those little Albanian girls who mostly talk in English, and who live on TikTok and YouTube. Their land is borderless, nationless.



Bear in mind that nothing comes from nothing. Things come from your efforts.

Photo borrowed from Top Channel



Women were those who gave me a hand in my first step in this career. Some of them, from Helena Kadare to Vera Grabocka, have taught me a lot.

When she's at school, we don't exchange letters, but we e-mail each other. One day she was telling me that she doesn't like learning Mandarin and that she didn't want to stay at the Mandarin classes after school. I encourage her to stay at school for every language and every class and I tell her that the world is a big open window if you know everybody's language.

This is a perennial conversation: do it, learn it, get involved! Sometimes she listens to me, sometimes she doesn't. However, I never grow tired of telling her how beautiful the world is if you learn its languages if you communicate, if you try, walk, get to know people, love, be loved, and live.

One of the most beautiful books that I have written is the one with the fairytales about Pitolushe. It is a book about our problems that turned out to be everyone's. I don't chance upon meeting someone now who has not heard of Pitolushe.

She is my daughter and it is the life of a child who makes questions, and who expects to be known and expect from her life to teach her.

Without knowing their portraits or their names, I would tell every Kosovan girl who is growing up and growing taller like my daughter: you are stars, you are the beautiful and smart Albanians who are going to unite us one day into one body – into that body where we have belonged forever - that of the Albanian nation.

You will do that without any insecurity, with your eyes full of curiosity and love for the future. If once there were doubts, they are no longer there. The future belongs to girls.

You are the ones who will take over the direction of this country very soon and very nearly. Because you are the girls who will become the ladies that will lead this side and that side of Albanianhood towards development, change, better economy, stable and peaceful communication.

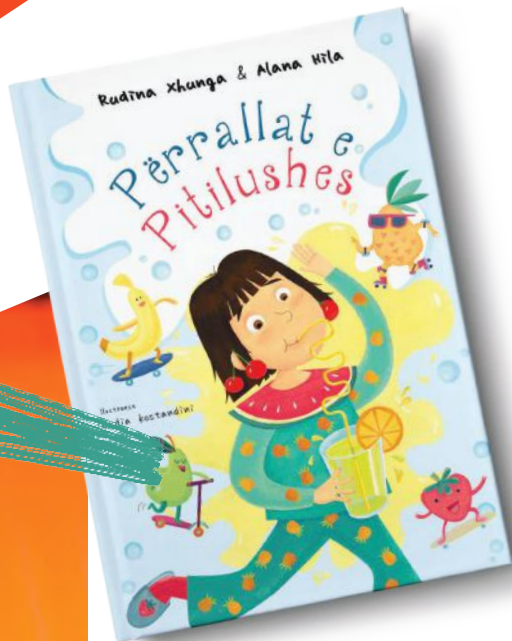
This is the world that girls want, and this is the world that will be governed by the ladies.

Without any aggressivity, or propaganda, with prosperity and dignity for everyone who lives in

these lands and who is Albanian. Girls will bring back pride to this nation, because they are the girls of Mother Teresa's nation.

The time for girls is coming. Get ready, little girls! Great work lies ahead of you! I love you!

Rudina Xhunga

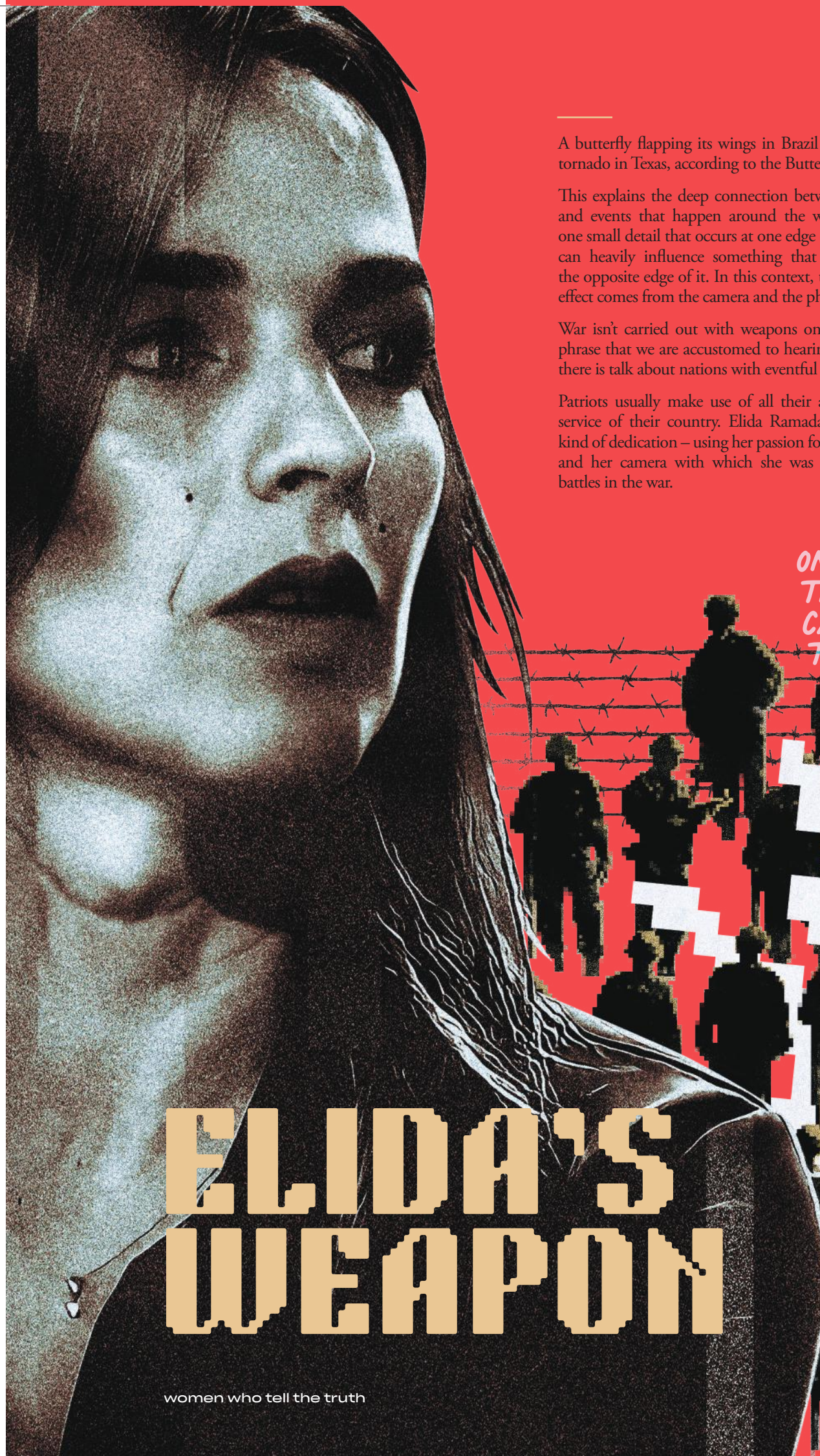


za | Women who tell the truth

Kosovo has four national television networks, two of which are run by women. Also, some of the most reliable media outlets in Kosovo have women as their leaders. This is not common in the world, let alone in the Balkans where societies have yet to recover from a long history of gender repression and patriarchal mentality. Although there are currently no studies that support a correlation between these two, still the high number of women involved in running the media in Kosovo could be one of the reasons why Kosovan media outlets are the most liberal and professional ones in the region.

There have been attempts for some time to showcase women merely as aesthetic adornments on television, but these efforts have proven to be fruitless. Women - unlike in the majority of other areas - are very well-positioned in the mediatic map of Kosovo. Media could be the only area in Kosovo where there is no gender discrimination at all - and not for the lack of trying. Such tendencies have succumbed to the tireless commitment of women. Today, women are ubiquitous in Kosovan media, and they form the core of this industry.





A butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can cause a tornado in Texas, according to the Butterfly Effect.¹

This explains the deep connection between actions and events that happen around the world - how one small detail that occurs at one edge of the world can heavily influence something that happens at the opposite edge of it. In this context, the butterfly effect comes from the camera and the photo camera.

War isn't carried out with weapons only. This is a phrase that we are accustomed to hearing whenever there is talk about nations with eventful pasts.

Patriots usually make use of all their assets at the service of their country. Elida Ramadani had this kind of dedication - using her passion for journalism and her camera with which she was to start her battles in the war.

ONLY THROUGH
THE CAMERA
CAN WE TELL
THE TRUTH



ELIDA'S WEAPON

women who tell the truth

"I did not want to fight, I did not have any weapon...but, the camera was my weapon! I hate weapons! I am strongly against them, but I noticed that only through the camera can we tell the truth," Elida said, who has so far spent 24 out of 49 years of her life in the truth-telling industry across the world.

Elida was born and raised in one of the 15-story apartment buildings in the famous Lakrishte neighborhood in Prishtina. She lived there with her parents and three sisters and shared quite a happy childhood.

"We were happy with so little," says Elida.

Elida was part of the last pre-war generation that attended regular classes in secondary schools. Soon after her graduation, a parallel public education system began to take place. As a result, she started her bachelor's studies in what were called home schools that became available for Kosovan Albanians back then.

A career in journalism? That had not ever crossed her mind. She began her studies in Philology and dreamed of studying film direction at the University of Zagreb, but given the circumstances at the time, that remained a desire that eventually waned as time went by.

Her plans after graduating from the university were to move to London.

"My friends were in London; I wanted to join them. Everybody from my generation had moved there," recounts Elida who is now talking to us from her home studio in the capital of the U.K.

Elida would eventually move to London, but not straight away after completing her studies as she had first planned. Through some mutual friends and journalists, quite accidentally, she began work for the news agency Associated Press.

They needed a translator who could translate from Albanian to English and vice-versa. She possessed language skills but what mattered more was that she had the will to translate during the reports on the 90s tensions in Kosovo, and during the war that was soon to follow.

She did not stay long as a translator. Associated Press (AP) proposed that she work as a field reporter.

"They proposed I become part of the AP and learn more from their work. I was a bit in doubt about whether to start working for them because I had already other plans in mind. Furthermore, as a woman, field reporting looked very difficult to me," she shares some of the dilemmas that flooded her when she received this offer during a difficult period for her country.

Even though in doubt, Elida took up on this offer and rid herself of all the stereotypes that she had fed in the beginning. Reporting as a woman was difficult, but it wasn't a job that she could not do.

"Soon after I began working, I started to notice that I was quite natural at that. I had the instincts and the orientation from the start. I was very good at planning and seeing the stories in front of me. People had so much faith in me, and this was very important to me."

She was only 22 years old when she started working as a field journalist, a job that required her to travel to the remotest villages - at dawn and at dusk - to report on the war that was happening in Kosovo.

In a period when moving from one place of Kosovo to the other was almost impossible, Elida threw on her Timberland boots, put on an oversized sweater, cut her hair off, assembled her team, and not only did she travel from one edge of Kosovo to the other, but each of these were road trips.

"Before I began working for the AP, I did not have a clue where Drenica was located or the location of the war zones at the time. There were only a few couples of villages when the war began," she says regarding her lack of information about the topography of Kosovo as a young girl without any experience whatsoever in the field reporting.

War zones were traditionally covered by male journalists. Society considered men to be tougher in facing such appalling sights. A woman journalist in a war zone was even more unusual for Kosovo.

"It was very peculiar how an Albanian girl was working for foreign journalists, especially on the frontline. That was unheard of for them because there were no such women at the time," Elida shares some of the first impressions that people had.

"I was working as [an on-the-scene reporter] for three years, until the end, when NATO troops entered Kosovo."

While Elida was traveling across the mountains and untrodden roads of Kosovan Albanian villages to arrive at the frontline where she would report on the situation, and where she interviewed members of the Kosovo Liberation Army, Elida's family did not know a thing about it. They were assured that Elida's main duty was translation and that she was working from the AP offices at the Grand Hotel, where she was not in danger.

"There were times when I would return home, we would sit down and watch the news and when my family members would see that footage, they'd go like: 'Haa? Who captured these? We can't believe it!' How was I to tell them that I'd been there? They had no clue about it even months after the war was over," says Elida as she recounts how she had to lie to her family so that they wouldn't worry about her.

They were shocked when they learned who was behind those video recordings that they would see on the primetime news. Her family was surprised by the courage of the reporters but learning that such a courageous reporter was among them, was a whole different feeling for them.

"Mama cried. It bugged her that she did not have the chance to support me. Mama told me: 'You witnessed so many things, and I feel very badly that you could not share them with us'"

Making journalism in wartime is way more problematic and complicated than doing it in normal circumstances. There isn't a fixed schedule. It requires full physical and psychological commitment. Furthermore, all this increases twofold when it is a woman field reporter in question for the sole fact that it is a woman.

"This profession is very difficult. It's still difficult because you always have to fight twice, thrice as much as your men counterparts, to prove that you are better than your colleagues of the opposite gender. This continues to this day, but the support from your family, friends, and loved ones is indispensable otherwise you cannot make it," says Elida.

The main professional criterion for her was to be objective - to tell the truth. She was an Albanian Kosovan and her

people were stricken by the war, but she could not allow her emotions to take over her objective reporting.

“AP has journalists all over the world. But, when there’s a conflict, they send foreign journalists so that they can be more objective. The local journalists are always more subjective, especially after some time. To me, objectivity was a number one priority despite everything”.

Maintaining objectivity wasn’t that challenging for Elida. What proved more difficult for her was managing to arrive at the location for her story, then returning home and closing the door of her apartment as if nothing had happened.

Her routine was as follows: she would wake up at five in the morning, reach out to her connections from the villages, and then leave for work. She would relay all of her information to the AP offices at the Grand Hotel, and she would then convince the foreign journalists to go to those places where there was fighting, although it was very dangerous.

“It would take seven hours to get to Skenderaj as soon as we’d get out of Pristina - to pass through all those checkpoints, and mountains. All the time on the road, near mines, near shelling. There were times when we wouldn’t reveal the entire story of what had gone down so that the journalists would join us for the recording.”

To come up with a news report, the crew car would have to pass through bullets and near grenades. In lack of internet and GPS, they used maps for orientation. Although a place would be merely 20 kilometers away, the crew had to walk 12 to 13 hours to get there.

After recording and photographing the scene, another problem would arise – that of returning to Pristina. This would be somewhat of a déjà vu experience for Elida’s team. They had to go through the same checkpoints monitored by Serbs.

“I often think about how I managed to stay alive,” Elida says. “I’m very good at reading the maps so this was of great help. Also, I had a good command of the Serbo-Croatian language and I always pretended that I knew nothing. I played ‘blonde’ to evade the danger,” she says laughing while remembering her creative survival methods.

It was of utmost importance for Elida to have her camera with her at all times. She would always travel with a photographer and a cameraman. She was present in each warzone. She stayed in Koshare for three consecutive months on the frontline, and she was the only woman there.

The footage from the Recak Massacre was captured by the AP first, respectively by Elida. Her footage brought other journalists there who returned the international attention to the issue of Kosovo thus changing the course of the war.

After the NATO bombing started, there were many protests against the bombing in Europe.

“But, NATO [officials] took those recordings [AP reports] and they only modified them into black and white colors and showed them: This is what is taking place. This is like a ghetto!’. From then on, the global politics changed once again,” Elida says.

Elida’s team who worked for the AP won three world prizes that are renowned in the journalism industry. This footage not only secured their gratitude and international recognition in journalism but also changed the global community’s approach to the case of Kosovo.

After the war, Elida was offered to work for the AP in London but she insisted to stay in Kosovo and work for the AP from here until Kosovo would earn its independence.

“I decided to stay in Kosovo thinking that independence was within reach. I opened the office. Kosovo became almost like its HQ for the entire region. I was a senior producer for the news in Europe and Africa’.

She lived in Kosovo but she continuously traveled to the conflict zones for news coverage. She was the first to assemble the team that went to the danger zones of the Kosovo war to show the truth to the world.

Elida is now based in London and she is still working for the AP, serving as the Head of the Division for Europe and Africa Planning.

She is happy to have documented a historical period of Kosovo but to have also changed the narrative of the war for which there were tendencies of distorting the facts on the part of the repressive politics of Serbia at the time.

“I have found my courage in knowing that if I wouldn’t go there, then nobody would have done that. I knew that if I didn’t go there then those villages were going to be destroyed and the war was going to continue. Were there no recordings, the war would have continued...” says Elida with an air of conviction.

According to Elida, each should find the courage and the will to push their limits. She believes that human potential knows no borders. It only requires determination and durability in one’s principles and objectives.

“I found that there is nothing that you cannot do. You don’t dare say, ‘I can’t do it. I managed to go many days without water or food, walk for 24 hours and then return to the same mined place. This is something that a normal person does not go through. But I always stopped and thought once again about why I was doing it. I’ve talked so much to myself about it.”

With this lesson in mind, Elida’s greatest achievement was the fact that her job helped the truth prevail and saved so many lives.

She was stubborn in continuing with her mission - courageous, and with a rock-hard durability. Elida needed only these three traits to shed light on the stories of the civilians and the oppressed.

Elida is the butterfly effect herself. It was due to her bravery that the world learned the truth about the war in Kosovo.

¹ Dooley, Kevin. (2009). “The Butterfly Effect of the “Butterfly Effect”. Nonlinear dynamics, psychology, and life sciences. 13. 279-88.



The Will to Improve Life in Kosovo

Journalists have one mission: to inform. This is also what is expected from them.

Based on the teachings of Bob Woodward, the former reporter of The Washington Post who now serves as an associate editor of this newspaper, there are five steps² to write an investigative feature: find your story, hunt down documents, find sources and interview them, write your story, polish your story. That's it. That is when and how they fulfill their duty.

However, a media house can go beyond the five recommended steps by Woodward. It can get to the sixth step which we may phrase as 'perhaps, the insistence on a solution'. Well, that is what the Kosovan journalist, Jeta Xharra, has been doing in Kosovo.

"Seeing justice not taking measures to solve a problem, or politics not taking measures, based on our reports, then the need arose that we go beyond reporting. We came to this conclusion because we would continuously report about scandals, and nothing would happen," says Jeta, who now serves as the editor-in-chief of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN).

I figured that I was not interested in going to work every day without my work having any effect.

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"Thus, we began to advocate by establishing a legal office that would take legal action by sending letters and creating court cases and institutional cases based on the violations that we would include in our reports. So, it is an approach wherein our job does not end with reporting only. Our team engages in fixing an unfair situation in society (as much as it is possible), and not simply report about it," Jeta says.

"I figured that I was not interested in going to work every day without my work having any effect," is her maxim.

Exceeding the expectations set by her profession and practicing journalism that seeks solutions for the reported problems, Jeta had to go through many periods that forged her as a journalist but also as a woman in this type of journalism in Kosovo.

Born in Skopje in 1978, Jeta was raised in Pristina where she completed her elementary and secondary education. During her elementary and secondary education, she cultivated her love for reading, and her passion for writing and nourished the logic of argumentation in debates - abilities that she would need later in her life.

In high school, she arranged her memory book and she was one of the leaders of the team that gathered the contents. At the same time, she would write for some of the newspapers and magazines such as for the Xhevdet Doda High School's newspaper, Gjmnazisti, for the youth magazine Shpresa in 1995, and for the Post Pessimists which was an appendix to Koha Ditore, for which she contributed ever since she was 14 years old.

² MasterClass. (September 29, 2021). "Learn How to Write an Investigative Feature in 5 Steps With Tips from Bob Woodward". <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/learn-how-to-write-an-investigative-feature-in-5-steps-with-tips-from-bob-woodward#step-2-hunt-down-documents>

Photo borrowed from the character herself



“My mother pressured me to read a lot and become active very early so that I could become independent. My mother is a feminist and has supported my career to this day. She has contributed the most for my career because from an early age she instilled stubbornness in me, and also the accuracy in writing and expression,” Jeta says when as she unfolds details from her childhood.

Whoever has seen Jeta on television conducting her interviews would think that she has only practiced journalism and nothing else. On the other hand, were she not to reveal this, few would have believed that Jeta has studied drama at the University of Prishtina.

She was on brink of graduating when the Kosovo War broke out. She shares the same fate with so many Kosovan students of that time whose dreams were cut in half due to the circumstances. However, those very circumstances directed Jeta towards a different career decision.

During that time, she started working for a nongovernmental organization that had founded a youth newspaper. This organization was a point of reference for many other organizations that were seeking translators who could translate from Albanian to English and vice-versa. The word was out that many teams from international media such as BBC and CNN had arrived in Kosovo which was a war zone and they were looking for translators.

Jeta came to BBC’s help so they could understand Albanian.

“I have worked at the war front, in field reporting, ever since I was 19 years old. It is really extraordinary what kind of opportunity I have had with the war breaking out. I have worked in a place where they assign only experienced journalists,” she says.

She was given the chance to work with famous journalists who had 30 to 40 years of experience in journalism and who had been proven on and on in this field. For nearly two years, she was mentored and she learned all the tricks of journalism from the best.

Having got a hold of journalism, she left Kosovo and went to the United Kingdom for her studies in August 1999 - after the NATO troops entered Kosovo. Influenced by the events in her homeland, she earned a degree in War Studies at King’s College in 2000.

However, she returned to Kosovo not with one but with two degrees. In 2002, she earned a Master’s degree in Film Screenwriting at the then-London College of Printing.

During those three years, while she was in London for her studies, she continued working as an Assistant Editor for the Foreign News Planning Desk at the BBC World Service. Although her work in such a reputable institution as BBC was a far-fetched dream for many young journalists, Jeta’s main objective was to return to Kosovo.



She considered that Kosovo needed her more than Great Britain did. Meeting all the criteria that are needed for one to be a journalist, she returned home with a great professional experience. She returned with the idea of starting a show that demanded a lot of time and energy. Above all, it required financial independence to investigate the truth.

She spent a year and a half writing projects and writing her idea down as well as possible.

She wanted to create a TV program that would put institutional leaders in front of the Kosovan citizens in direct and unmanipulated confrontation with the field journalists' findings. According to her, this kind of TV program would provide the most recent information for the Kosovan citizens and at the same time would ensure the space for the people in charge to give their sides of the story and to present their explanations.

Nearly a year and a half went by with her writing and writing until she consolidated her idea. She compiled 20 project proposals to convince the donors to offer their support. 18 of them were turned down, and two of them were greenlit.

"At that moment we founded BIRN – Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – it was us and four colleges from the region. With BIRN, I raised funds for nearly two years until I founded "Life in Kosovo," she recounts her beginnings in forming one of the most independent media outlets in the Balkans.

Her TV program was named "Life in Kosovo" and it was picked by the Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK), where it was to broadcast biweekly at 11:30 P.M. Life in Kosovo was broadcast for almost a year in that time slot. After this period, the ratings showed that the TV program hosted by Jeta was the second most watched program after the main newscast even though it was being broadcast almost at midnight and not during prime time.

Ratings changed the game for Jeta and her television presence. RTK moved her to prime-time, at 08:30 P.M. which was far more favorable than the previous time slot. Jeta was offered to have her TV program broadcast daily on the condition that RTK fund the production and the rest of the expenses be covered by the

donors. Jeta considered the support she received from her donors as a provision of independence which enabled her journalistic impartiality and qualitative work.

"It was of importance to have my own money for this enterprise. Period. Economic independence is very important to our women. You should have your own independence both personally and professionally. You should secure unconditional financial support, and I was aware of our media's mentality so I had to found my own media to do what I intended," Jeta says.

My stubbornness and my tendency to not allow them to wriggle out of the questions was interpreted as arrogance.

"Life in Kosovo" was BIRN's first product. Then, Justice in Kosovo, Prishtina Insight, Life in Kosovo Newspaper, and recently Kallxo.com was added. This network expanded by each year and the organization which debuted with three people in 2005 now has 70 of them.

Age, gender, and stubbornness made the politicians loathe the sight of her, and they did not hesitate to complain to the then-director of RTK.

"How can you allow her to do this?" and "How can you allow her in this television network?" were their words, according to Jeta, who would ask those politicians for accountability in every single show.

The hesitation of politicians to accept her invitation to her TV program came as a result of their fear of her approach. She did not fret about pointing out their leadership failures and their lack of fulfilling their responsibilities.

Asking difficult questions and confronting politicians for their mistakes and violations, had some people label her as arrogant.

"In Kosovo, there's usually been this practice of letting the politicians go about with their long speeches on TV and ask them for stuff like NATO integration. No politician was invited to give accountability. And they'd be

like: 'look at how arrogant this girl is, look at the way she poses these questions!' My stubbornness and my tendency to not allow them to wriggle out of the questions was interpreted as arrogance," she says.

She needed to expand the team which was to investigate and collect an ocean of information. It didn't matter whether every piece of that information would serve her anything or not, she still needed to know everything about her guest.


"It's in my nature not to want to go unprepared and be put on the spot. It vexes me when I don't know everything about the topic and appear on my show scarcely informed. If I enter an interview about a certain topic, I should know everything that has to do with it," she explains.

Even if some of that information from the sources go unused in the debate or the final report, they are needed to form a general idea about the debate. Jeta has implemented this practice of journalism since her days at BBC, where it would take more than 10 people for consultation, and 12 hours of gathering information, and all that work would come down to a mere two-minutes long coverage.

Jeta attributes the success of BIRN to teamwork without which she wouldn't have been able to have done all that work and achieve all those results. This network has produced hundreds of investigative reports and has managed to see into the most sensitive issues of society as well.

She says that work always pays off. The fruits of her continuous and honest work take time to happen but this doesn't mean that they don't see the light of the day. Patience, durability, continuous work, and commitment must be the main pillars upon which stands the youth of Kosovo in their quest for a better future.

"You never know how and when your work proves to have been effective. If you're constantly planting and working, then by all means a seed is going to sprout. Is all this effort worth it? Well, what else are you going to do in life? Sit idly by and just drink coffee? Our brain, as opposed to the other organs in our body, is inclined to be the laziest. And the brain is predisposed not to engage if you don't force it to do so," she says.



I have worked at the war front, in field reporting, ever since I was 19 years old. It is really extraordinary what kind of opportunity I have had with the war breaking out.

Jeta Xharra's story for ZA ends here. Of course, her full experience cannot be compressed into a few pages of a single article, but as Jeta recommended from the techniques she had learned while at BBC, we are concluding her story in less than 2000 words.



za | women who tell
the truth

Something's Cooking with Xheri

If you say “*What’s Cooking?*” then you’ve said Xheraldina Vula.

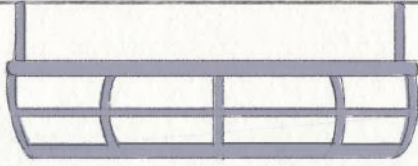
There are many television networks and with that so, many TV shows titles, but none of the shows is as personified as easy as this one. Xheraldina, or generally known as Xheri, is dynamically inspiring, but to understand how she became this way, we should of course visit her house to see “what is cooking” there.

When we arrived at her house which is situated in a tranquil suburban area in Pristina, we first encountered two white puppies who wished us welcome. They are Xheri’s puppies. Then came out Xheri with her husband Agron, a famed Albanian director. They had been hanging out with their one-year-old niece, Poem Blue.

Once you walk into her house, your eyes capture the walls that are full of paintings presenting moments of suffering and joy of the women from different periods. We sit by the chimney, on her reading corner, and on the table rest some books from foreign authors and a loupe that Xheraldina’s mother Naxha uses for reading.

This lady, as Xheraldina tells us, has been her inspiration. She inherited from her a passion for reading and her activistic spirit.

Xheraldina Vula, the co-founder of Radio & Television 21 (RTV 21), was born in the city of Vushtrri, and she grew up in a small family comprising her parents and her older brother, Genc



"Nana," Xheri remembers, "describes me as a rogue, a kid who never took 'no' for an answer. With my brother, he has been that type of person who wished to assert dominance over me, but my parents made it difficult for him, neither my dad nor my mother allowed him to do so."

Xheraldina's parents, Naxhije and Fahri Bucinca, were both women's rights activists, and they fought especially for the young girls whom they had helped get an education by offering various scholarships in collaboration with domestic companies.

"If they hadn't been that way, I don't know where I would have found the strength to create the space initially for myself, and then for the other women," Xheri says convincingly. "Mama has always been an activist for the education of young girls, but also for the women's rights, but especially those of girls. Not only mom, but dad too, and I followed the same path that my parents did."

Xheraldina spent all her childhood in the company of books. Today, among other endeavors, she is also a poet, or as her mother calls her, "a silent poet" because she shares her poems only with her small circle of people.

Her wide readings dictated her formal education as well. In 1981, she began her studies in Albanian Language and Literature at the University of Prishtina.

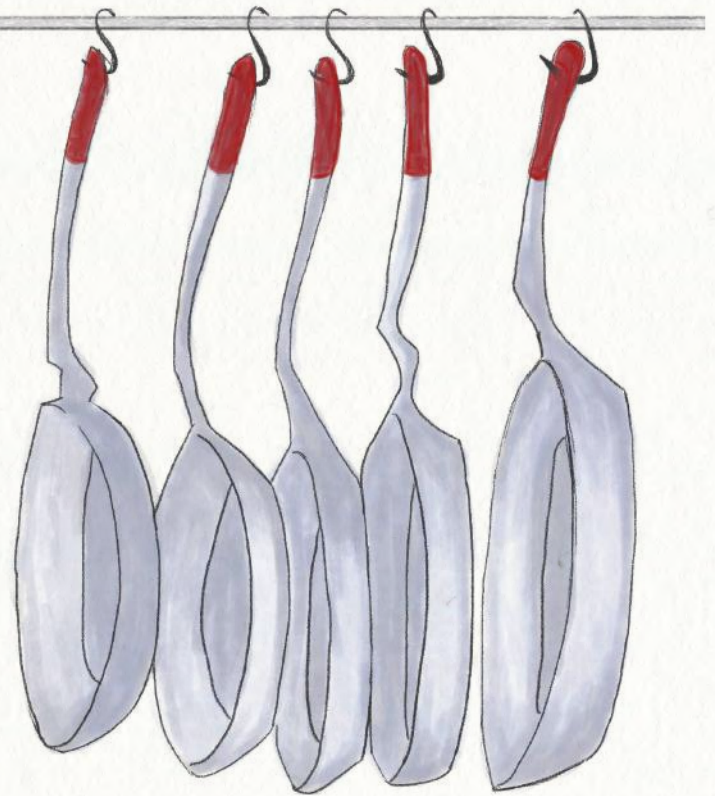
She got more than she bargained for there. She found the love of her life, Agron. They sealed their love five years later and she officially took his last name Vula.

She had passed all her exams and earned a Bachelor's degree after the birth of her son Ledri.

Having completed her studies somewhere in 1987, she then began work as a Technical Secretary for INA – a large oil company.

While working for INA, Xheraldina was also engaged with other things. In 1992, she started doing voluntary work for the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms, translating various articles and providing simultaneous interpretation for Kosovan Albanians and foreign delegations.

"Whenever I had free time, 2 to 3 hours a day, I'd go there for voluntary work," Xheraldina says proudly as she recounts the work she has done in the service of her country.



In 1993, she became part of Creators and Education Veterans Group, an organization that her mother had founded along with Shukrije Gashi, Edi Shukriu, Miradie Ramiqi, and Zake Prelvukaj.

"We would hold poetry readings, and various exhibitions, among them, was the first exhibition of Zake Prelvukaj."

Two years later, in 1995, she started something with which we all are familiar - the media house called RTV 21.

Xheri and her best friend, Afërdita Saraçini, were at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in distant China.

She shared the same interest *"with Dita,"* - as Xheri calls her - regarding the workshops at the conference.

They attended together the workshop Women and the Media and that is when Afërdita told her that she was planning on founding a nongovernmental organization for women in media. She invited Xheri to join her initiative.



You first have to create space for yourself and then you have to create space for your friends because you can do nothing by yourself.

“There, at the conference, Dita told me that she wanted to found an organization and asked for my opinion. ‘Would you join me?’ she asked. And I told her: ‘I’m in, totally in.’ The conference was held in September and by November, on International Women’s Day, we founded Media Project.”

Media Project had at its center the girls whom they provided classes in radio, TV, and photojournalism. In the beginning, 13 young girls began their training at this center. Among them were Jeta Xharra, Nora Visoka, Vlora Citaku, Linda Gusia, Donika Shahini and Ariana Qosja.

“All these outspoken, fantastic, hard-working women who are successful today.”

“I would attend training in an American organization, and Dita would attend them in another American organization. The communication skills that we would acquire from American women, we would then pass on to our girls, and then we began to send our girls off to trainings that were held in Hungary, Croatia, Italy, and so on.”

That initial idea and the Dita-Xheri partnership evolved and resulted in RTV 21 in 1998.

Xheraldina’s first TV show was broadcast both on the radio and on the internet during 1998-1999. The show was called Inter Ars (internet and arts) and she would hold interviews with poets, writers, and various artists.

Kosovo War began in 1999, and like many Kosovans, Xheraldina and her family found refuge in Struga, in neighboring now-North Macedonia.

After almost three days, Afërdita finally arrived in Skopje. They met up and rolled up their sleeves to inform the public. Xheraldina had left her son with her parents in Struga, whereas Agron was in Germany reporting for Deutsche Welle.

On May 11, 1999, their radio internet broadcast began from Skopje.

“We were the first radio network ever on the internet. The idea for RTV 21 was Afërdita’s, but she had Xheraldina as her right hand whereas Driton Hapqiu was to be thanked for making that technically possible”.

“The first news that we delivered on the internet was the meeting between [Robert S.] Gelbard and Ibrahim Rugova.”

After the war ended, their team returned to Kosovo on July 14, with KFOR helping them transport their equipment and technologies.

“We returned in the morning and at 6 A.M. we began with 24-hour radio broadcasting and with a timetable of programs arranged by Florin [Kelmendi]. Then, a year later, in 2000, beginning on November 22, we debuted with our television network on satellite broadcasting. Two hours of satellite broadcasting.”

The RTV 21 co-founder, journalist, and editor had always had a penchant for media studios.

That is why we always see her come up with various TV shows. She is a night person. She likes working on her own accord and rhythm. She had hosted various shows and programs such as television journals, newscasts, debate shows, 21 Drejtpërdrejtë, and even political interviews with foreign guests. After a time with political situations on a loop, she decided to give up on ever dealing with them.

“From year to year, we would hear the same things on and on. Nobody brought anything new to the table. In 2003, I switched to the cultural department with Florin, with a special focus on documentaries.”

Among Xheraldina’s favorite shows was Sundays with You which was mainly dedicated to the Kosovan Albanian diaspora.

“That show lasted approximately three years...and it was a live broadcast every Sunday. This was one of the shows that I loved the most because I figured that I was contributing a lot. If nothing, family members would get to see each other through RTV 21.”

She left this show because she had grown tired of the job being too demanding and her not being able to spend her weekends with her family.

“I never rested on Sundays, my family would gather and I was nowhere around. So, I passed the show to my two colleagues, and I paused, and decided to stand behind the camera, create new shows, new segments within the existing shows.”

The first show that made Xheraldina a household name for a wider public was “Something is Cooking” which she hosted for 15 years. It was a show that enjoyed high ratings.

This show was pitched by the domestic company Zero Positive in 2007. She counted almost four-thousands Sunday guests during all those years of broadcast.

“What I liked about What’s Cooking? was my role as a cook. I switched from being a poetess, an intellectual, a journalist who had interviewed statesmen and army generals to a host of a cooking show watched primarily by women, but in fact, men watched it as well. Throughout this show, I wanted to bring up good topics which were easily understood by the audience.”

The taboos about men not belonging in the kitchen were broken.

On March 6 of this year, after a year-long hiatus, *What's Cooking* ended. A new show was welcomed, though. This show is called *On the Tip of the Tongue* – which is a double entendre in Albanian, carrying both the literal meaning but also the second meaning of the phrase in Albanian – of someone having the words “on the tip of their tongue”, meaning that they come up with quick quips or one-liners.

“I couldn't continue any longer without Ceka, without Buqe who had been my director, and without Përparim, a great chef consultant, because all of them have passed away. Thus, I couldn't imagine returning to What's Cooking without them being part of it.”

Her new show is about the kitchen and cooking as well.

“I love my status of the cook who's never even cooking. That's how I am known – they call me the cooking woman. Meanwhile, in 15 years of hosting that show, I've only cooked once,” Xheraldina says and laughs.

The way that Xheri recounts her journey, gives away the impression that everything has been easy, but that is naturally not the case. Her commitment to the profession leaves a void somewhere else – in her family.

She had to be away from her only child due to her demanding job. During the time that Xheri began working in the media, Agron had been working in Germany so it was Xheraldina's parents who took care of Ledri.

“The challenge was how not to let Ledri alone for a long time. I had so much work to do, then I'd come home, hang out with Ledri, eat dinner together, help him do the homework, and I was worried about how I was going to convince him to come with me to the Media Project so that he wouldn't be alone so that he wouldn't feel alone.”

It was challenging for her even while she was working at INA in the 90s when violent measures were taken and Albanians were fired from their jobs. Surprisingly, INA's workers had not been fired. However, they were under watch by the Serbian regime.

“At the time it was challenging for them not to find out that when I would say that I was sick, I was in fact in different conferences, for instance, when I went to China, I had to take an excuse note from the doctor that

I was going to have surgery. They thought I was at home but I was in fact in China lobbying with 10 other Kosovan women to Prevent the War in Kosova”.

Xheraldina and her institution, RTV 21, have been the backbone of all the nongovernmental organizations that engaged in social change in Kosovo.

“All the activism has been natural before the war. We always had to fight for a position, and if you already had that position, then you had to fight for your friend to secure a position. You first have to create space for yourself and then you have to create space for your friends because you can do nothing by yourself.”

Four family generations live together under the same roof: Xheraldina, her mother, her son, and her niece. She usually drinks her morning coffee with Agron, and they spend some time dotting on their niece and then they head to work.

“My love (Agron) makes my coffee in the morning. Usually, while we drink our coffees, our honeypie, Poem Blue, joins us. We stay with Poi for half an hour and not for long because her caregivers come and get her so she can go about with her routine.”

When one wants to succeed, then one must work hard. Xheri's working schedule used to be 16 hours a day at a minimum. However, that kind of hard work also comes at a price in terms of health.

“Everybody was telling me that I was overeating, overeating, while I was eating at a normal rate. I noticed that something was going on in my organism but I did not know what that was...two years after I had gained too much weight, I decided to pay a visit to the doctor. And I found that I had Hashimoto's Disease.³ In the meantime, my weight had doubled, but I had not been aware of what had been going on.”

Through her media platform, Xheraldina tries to empower Kosovan women and offer them the space they need. She tries to be a helping hand for many women, including those who hold decision-making positions in Kosovan institutions. She had worked a lot to pave a stable and steady way for other young women to hold the positions that they hold today.

Xheri keeps cooking new shows. But that's how she is – creative. And she'll always remain this way.

³ Hashimoto is an autoimmune disease that affects thyroid glands



Photos borrowed from the character herself

Everything is Possible with Ana

Her show was called Sve Je moguće. Sa Anom.

Anamari Repič, a journalist from Kosovo, started this show in 2009. It was broadcast on the first channel of the Radio Television of Kosovo. Everything is Possible with Ana is the title of her show when translated in English, and she brought this program to the screen weekly. She showed stories of the lives of the Serbs in Kosovo and this show was also broadcast on the Serbian television network, B92.

“It was of high importance to me and to the people who watched it. Every week I’d bring 10 to 15 Serbs from different regions of Kosovo. The main point was to bring the Serbs closer to Pristina and to show how they lived in Kosovo. I even had their representatives from various institutions. They would face their citizens who would ask questions and share their concerns.”

This show was the first television experience for Anamari as a journalist. She was previously part of a different dimension of journalism. She had spent a decade working at Radio Blue Sky in Pristina from where she had reported as a Radio Free Europe correspondent.

Before she began working as a professional journalist, she had a personal story that she relates to the news and reporting.

Born and raised in Prizren, Anamari took from that city all that it had to offer: respect for other ethnicities, languages, and religions.

“I am very happy to have grown up there because it is a multicultural city. It has all the different but interlacing lifestyles. I grew up among different languages and religions and this is very important to me. This is how I became more open. I belong to this multicultural life. When I was a kid, I could not understand who was what, but this didn’t matter to me. This is me,” she says as she describes what her childhood and youth were like.

Even if you visit Prizren today, you’ll hear people on the streets talking in Albanian, Turkish, Serbian, and Bosnian. In this mixture of languages, Anamari began to learn Albanian and she learned it quite proficiently until something happened and halted this process.

“It was normal for us to learn each other’s language when I was in elementary school. The Albanian language was secondary to me at school so I learned it. You’re surrounded by people who speak Albanian and Turkish, and both of these languages are different from Serbian, but I was lucky because I was little and I managed to learn them quickly. However, due to the situation in the 90s, we stopped studying Albanian. There were no longer Albanian classes,” she tells ZA.

She might have stopped learning Albanian for a while but she had not given up on it. After the conflict in Kosovo, she and her family left for Serbia where they moved in with some relatives, but when she returned to Kosovo, she began where she had left off.



If we ignore each other, then there’s no full democracy

Photo borrowed from the character herself

“I came back to Kosovo in ’99, sometime after the conflict, and I began working at a multiethnic radio network where I had Albanian, Turkish, Serbian, and international co-workers. I began learning the Albanian language again. I think we should learn each other’s languages. I wanted to understand people around me and people from anywhere – what they were saying and writing. This was important to me,” she says.

It is of high importance to her to know the language of the people with whom she is working. She speaks Albanian even in her reports from Belgrade, where she is currently working as an RTK correspondent. This language may have appeared difficult to her, but it wasn’t something that Anamari could not do. All that she needed was the will to go through with it.

“It is a true challenge for a Serb to speak Albanian. Not many Serbs know Albanian, there’s a handful who do. But I noticed that they have begun to learn it, and I think that it’s a good thing. I have admired Albanians who have reported in Serbian, some can do that. You make use of what you know and surely, it is not perfect, but I think that by reporting in Albanian, I prove my professionalism. I also send the message that knowing Albanian if you live here [Kosovo] is very important.”

Although she had left Kosovo, she had returned immediately with the idea of finding a job and continuing living where she had grown up. She wanted to try to build her future regardless of the things that had taken place in the recent past.

“The decision to come back was practical and logical. I had grown up there and I wanted to return and find a job. There was not a thing that I didn’t know about Kosovo. Both sides had experienced lots of trauma. I was thinking that it was very important to begin this peacebuilding process and I wanted to be a part of it.”

As a young girl who was living in an unusual situation, she was glued to the TV eager to be informed. Gradually, the news was getting into her blood. She moved to Pristina and the first job that she did was a radio journalist.

“We lived in terrible and difficult times during the 90s. I had been spending a lot of time looking for news and wanted to listen

to normal news. I became obsessed with the news, even though I was studying something else. I have a degree in education [which I earned] in Prizren. Soon after the war, I was lucky to find a job at Radio Blue Sky. I was 23 years old,” says Anamari.

She had Serbian coworkers at Blue Sky but also Albanians and people from other countries who had come to Kosovo after the war. As she says, she began small in the radio and she gradually evolved into doing serious things. Being a journalist in that particular period meant that one had to face the aftermath of the conflict between Serbs and Albanians firsthand.

“It was a difficult period full of uncertainties and distrust after the war. As a journalist, I had to face personal tragedies. I had a colleague who had survived the war, another one who had lost someone during the war, and another one whose family had left Kosovo... it was a difficult period. People were trying to rebuild their lives and we had to report on this and it wasn’t easy.”

Anamari recounts how at that time, immediately after the 1999, the safety of journalists was hanging in balance. People were still suffering from the war and there were uncertainties. She would find stories about the Serbs who were living in Kosovo and then bring them to the radio.

What had been done could not be undone and while everyone was dealing with the consequences of the past, Anamari had a different vision in mind.

“I was reporting about Serbs, how they were living and how they were envisioning the future, what their hopes and fears were. I had a thing in mind: maybe the past divided us, but what about the future? Before we talk about the past, we have to talk about the present, about the future. That was how I thought at the time about the rebuilding of the Kosovan society.”

Working for a multiethnic radio in the middle of Pristina, she has never felt any discrimination. Her work in field reporting taught her something else and made her see beyond the established model of how the relations between Serbs and Albanians should be. She wanted to understand the situation in which people were.

“People may not want to talk to you because you are a Serb or the other way around. It does not have to do with discrimination, but mostly with fear and distrust. It’s not that people don’t trust you personally, but they don’t trust the context. But we should understand them. I could not report because Albanians weren’t talking for me, but to me it was important to find a way to approach them, to create a communication space and this was crucial,” she shares some of the details from the dailiness of her journalistic work in the 2000s.

While Anamari was bringing the stories of the Serbs who were living in Kosovo to the listeners of Blue Sky, it is worth mentioning that Albanian and Serbian print media, broadcast media, and internet media differ a lot in terms of content.

Albanian television networks report exclusively for the Albanian audiences whereas the Serbian media for the Serbian ones. Even internet and print media focus on news that concern the Albanian majority. The only times that you hear something about Serbs in Albanian news is usually when the news has to do with Kosovo-Serbia relations in a purely political context.

“We often discuss with our colleagues why we don’t have more stories of Serbs in the Kosovan media and vice-versa. If you [are Albanian and if you] go outside of Pristina, just five kilometers

away from the capital, in Gračanica, and you pass by, you’ll see some people [Serbs] about whom you know nothing. Or if you’re a Serb from Gračanica and you go to Pristina, you have no idea what is currently happening in Pristina. They’re like two separate worlds. This means that if you report only about politics, you’re not presenting the reality,” says Anamari, adding that the same goes for the Serbian media where she is currently living and working.

“If we ignore each other, then there’s no full democracy,” she says convincingly.

Albanians and Serbs have been living together in Kosovo. Despite the disagreements between the two sides on an institutional and political level, it is indispensable for the citizens to look forward to a common future, according to Anamari.

Citizens of both ethnicities have something in common: their daily lives in Kosovo. This joins them more than anything that can divide them.

“We should communicate and cooperate more,” she emphasizes. *“We should find mutual interests, more unifying things than divisive ones. We should look towards a common future. We witness politicians make political statements that are followed by tensions, but behind them, it is a life that is taking place, and life goes by. Some people go to work, and have hopes and dreams to contribute to society.”*

Anamari is a journalist who embarked on this profession at a time when journalism was synonymous with a challenging dailiness. Working for the media in those circumstances taught her in a short time more than she could have learned in any other situation.

Being a woman herself, the situation of women in media – be that in their media representation within the institutions or in the media content- has been important to her. She says that she did everything in her power to change the status quo.

“I am well aware of all the gender issues and stereotypes, and about the insufficient representation of women in media. I am trying to contribute somehow and change this. We don’t see women in the media talking about important political issues. I try to change this thing by including women analysts, politicians, and experts in my reports. Men talk about everything then why shouldn’t women?” she says.

She has served two mandates as a deputy director of the Radio Television of Kosovo, and she tried from that position to influence the ways the public television channel ensured gender inclusion and integration in their television content.

“When I was part of the RTK management, I was trying to change this thing, so we could have a more professional attitude within the institution. I was trying to tell women that they should be present in the media. Women should not be invited to talk only about the topics that are children-related and family-related, but they should necessarily be invited to discuss about other matters who are just as important for the society,” Anamari says for ZA.

You can watch and listen to the correspondent Anamari on many TV programs on the Kosovan public television channel. She has spent more than two decades in journalism. By talking in Albanian - aside from showing professionalism - she makes a statement that it is of vital importance to learn each other’s language because that is what brings us closer together.

Rajmonda's Journalism



“I cannot get on a bus and not think [as a journalist]. I listen.”

Photo borrowed from the character herself

What do you want to be when you grow up?

This is perhaps one of the first questions that we are asked in our lives. It's a short question, but not easy at all to answer.

For some people, it takes years to finally answer it. Some others cannot ever give one. But Rajmonda knew how to answer it the first time she was asked.

“A journalist,” she had said. And there was never an alternative to it.

“Ever since I was little, I've always been curious, and I became even more curious growing up, always wanted to write, to be part of school programs and act as a journalist”.

She decided to go to a linguistic high school for that reason. A journalist should write well.

What was she going to study? You guessed it. In 2004, she began her studies at the AAB College in Pristina and that was the place where her dream began to take shape.

She began working as a journalist before she even graduated. Rajmonda says for ZA that she was one of those students who never turned down any opportunity that came knocking at her door. In what appeared to be just another ordinary day

in her first year of studies, one of her professors notified her class that a radio station was looking for interns.

There is no doubt that Rajmonda was the first one to raise her hand, interested in this opportunity that later converted into a job. Her routine changed drastically and she was no longer merely a student. In the morning, you'd see Rajmonda at the university with her backpack, whereas at noon you'd find her at Radio Urban FM.

Journalism is a profession that can be taught, but some instincts distinguish a couple of people from others in this job. Rajmonda showed that she had these instincts from her first days in the job. On the radio, they asked her to cover an event and come up with a news story.

Hashim Thaçi, the then-prime minister of Kosovo, had opened his office for journalists and citizens to come by. She headed for the government building, but she arrived late. When she got there, the Q&A session had already ended. She tried to enter his office but to no avail. She was told that it was impossible. Most would have returned to the newsroom and come up with the excuse of tardiness. However, this is not her style.

“I had to insist for a moment, I told them that I want to make the news story, and I

told them that it was OK and that I would enter his office as a citizen, and then they let me in,” she said.

Receiving the theoretical foundation at the university and forging herself as a journalist at the radio, Rajmonda grew into a professional. In 2009, she became part of a team that had undertaken a gigantic project – that of forming a new national television in Kosovo, Klan Kosova.

“At Klan, there was so much work and enthusiasm and I am very happy that that enthusiasm was channeled to me and I have so many years of work experience now, but to this day, when I find the slightest irregularity, even a pothole, I still have that enthusiasm that was instilled in me while at Klan Kosova,” she says for ZA.

However, not everything about journalism in Kosovo is rosy. There is a high number of media outlets, and there is not much supervision. Furthermore, the fierce competition for viewers and clickbait has turned the media environment into chaos. Rajmonda considers this as *“our defect”*.

“We're used to regarding only the bad news as newsworthy, but over time I've learned that we should bring also good news to people”.

That is why she says that she “always tries to have a scale, and apart from only providing people with news, sometimes she starts her TV program with something very good which has a positive influence on the citizens.”

At one point in her career, Rajmonda’s volume of work increased yet she narrowed the perimeter of her journalistic focus. It has been 12 years now that she deals exclusively with everything related to the capital of Kosovo, Pristina.

This specific choice to practice only Pristina-centered journalism wasn’t her choice in the first place.

When Klan Kosova started, there were insufficient logistics for all the journalists to make television news stories. There was a competition between them and the journalist with the best idea would get to have a cameraman and go on locations to make the news story. Rajmonda had a winning idea and she chose to cover the session of the Municipal Assembly of Pristina for the first time in her career.

“I was only 19 years of age and the representatives at the Municipal Assembly were all much older than me. Before I was headed for the municipality, at the newsroom I was told that I should bring something special to the table otherwise I weren’t to return there, and this had been a challenge for me to prove that I can bring something different,” she says.

During the session that lasted for a couple of hours, Rajmonda decided to focus on one agenda item which had to do with the removal of satellite antennas from apartment buildings.

Rajmonda had succeeded. She had noticed something that the other journalists who had also been present hadn’t. She managed to “bring something different”.

“It was defining for me to remain with the coverage of the Municipal Assembly and from 2009 I’ve covered local government.”

Journalists are often carried away by chasing sensationalism and “the big news”, but Rajmonda says that she took an alternative path. She likes to practice active journalism wherein her reports affect the citizens directly.

“There are so many journalists that do not want to report on sewages, for example. But not me. I never had a problem with it, on the contrary, I like it when I manage to help someone, be that by enabling them to get road and street lighting, or have the sewer lines repaired. I just love to facilitate these citizens’ lives,” she says.

women who tell the truth

After five years in a big TV network such as Klan Kosova, she switched to another major network, KTV. She has been working there ever since. Rajmonda works there as a producer, author, and host.

Unlike popular opinion, the main role within the media, according to Rajmonda, is that of the journalist. The leadership in media gives you privilege whereas that of the journalist offers you fulfillment. Whenever she has some spare time, she still goes herself on location and hears the problems of the citizens.

“There was this citizen with special needs who was not hired by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare despite meeting the criteria, so he felt discriminated against. I reported on this case and he now works at the Ministry. This is such a good feeling,” she says.

But, achieving something as a journalist – especially as a woman journalist – in Kosovo, is no easy feat. Even journalism is subjected to the standards of society. However, it is up to women themselves to refuse to give in to these predetermined circumstances, according to Rajmonda.

When Hillary Clinton visited Kosovo while serving as a Secretary of the United States of America in 2021, Klan Kosova had assigned a male colleague of hers to cover the conference. Unlike Rajmonda, he did not command the English language, and it felt odd to Rajmonda how he was chosen over her.

Well, these were the plans made at the newsroom. However, Rajmonda had different plans in mind.

“I told them that I was going to the Bill Clinton square, and luckily for me, she came there. I was the one who got to interview her. In the end, I managed to do what the newsroom did not believe that I was able to do. I was rewarded afterward but I did not feel well, because were it not for my insistence to prove that we women could do that and that gender should not be an issue when you appoint a journalist to cover an event, I wouldn’t have made it at all.”

According to her, it is not a matter of gender but it is a matter of professional skills. It is illogical to differentiate women and men in newsrooms and to assign ‘important tasks’ and ‘less important tasks’ based on gender.

“You cannot be a journalist if you don’t live like a journalist all the time,” claims Rajmonda.

“At least I can’t...for instance, I cannot get on a bus and not think [as a journalist].”

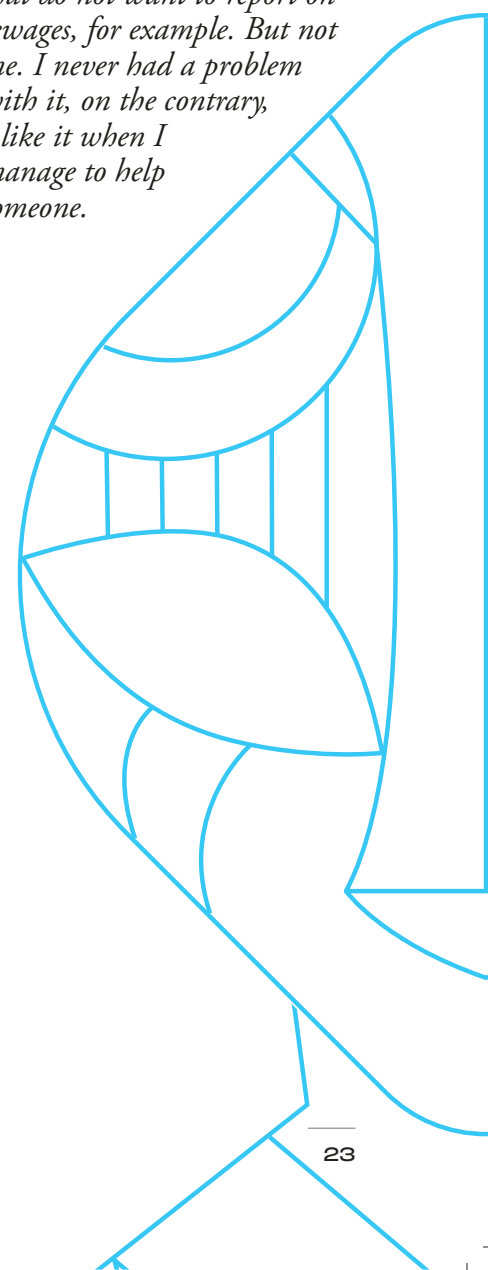
I listen. There have been situations that from the conversations that I have overheard on the bus, I learned that elders had not received their pensions in time, and I would then go to the newsroom and come up with a news story about it. Maybe it is a professional defect, but it is already a part of me,” she says.

Even now that Rajmonda is a mother to a six-year-old boy, and that her day has to be divided into motherhood and journalism, she still feels nostalgic about her field reporting days and about the emotions that she felt in her journalistic beginnings.

They are emotions that not every profession can offer. Journalism is one of the rarest jobs where the results of professional dedication appear rather quickly. That is why it is called a “noble profession” and that is why Rajmonda chose it.



There are so many journalists that do not want to report on sewages, for example. But not me. I never had a problem with it, on the contrary, I like it when I manage to help someone.



Emina's Voice

Radio, which works by transmitting and receiving electromagnetic waves, sends out merely sounds to the listener. Hence, the face of the one who is talking is often just a projection of the listener's imagination. However, the mystical aspect of it and the urge of people to attach a face to the voice that they are listening to on the radio make this medium irreplaceable.

However, some radio voices become so famous and widely recognizable, that the listeners simply cease trying to attach a face to them. Their voices suffice and are fulfilling.

This is the case with Emina Hyseni-Shala, a radio presenter at Radio KFOR, to whom we have listened for 23 years now at the 90.2 and 96.6 FM frequencies.

Emina, 39, has been working in Radio KFOR ever since she was a teenager, starting at only 16 years of age.

Radio KFOR, as it's common knowledge, stands for diversity, inclusion, and embracement of intercultural values, and her professional journey has been very much alike – an interesting journey of ethnic diversity.

Emina was born in Belgrade on the last day of 1982, and she spent the first 16 years of her life there with her parents and her two sisters.

"Sincerely speaking, and from the bottom of my heart, I am happy to say that not even for a moment was I differentiated from my classmates in elementary school nor high school on account of my nationality and ethnicity," Emina says for the ZA Magazine.

"On the contrary, I was my teacher's favorite and my friends too, because I was a bit playful, a bit more boisterous," she says.

Differences make the world more special to Emina, as they unite people and communities by making them learn from each other.

"I've been quite a noisy girl from the beginning; very curious girl; a girl who has challenged herself from an early age," she remembers while telling the moments which she classifies as the most beautiful from that period.

Language, dancing, and acting classes were part of Emina's daily life. In Belgrade, she finished acting school in one of the most famous and privileged theatres in the Serbian capital, Duško Radović.

"My first role was a monologue of a blabbering girl," she says and bursts into laughter.



Let's give each young girl the best example possible. Let them dream a lot because you never know. You can achieve anything if you possess ambitions and will.

As if everything was a master plan beyond her understanding, it is now in her job description to make long monologues in her radio program.

"Long but beautiful."

Artistic energy wasn't limited only to the dedicated spaces where art was practiced and created. She would find every corner where she would unravel her talent, including family environments and ceremonial gatherings.

"If we watch the videotapes that my cameraman uncle made, and whose custom was to bring his camera with him in each of his visits – in every recording you can find me singing, reciting, or acting."

Emina is and continues to be curious. Neither today does she fear the stage – on the contrary, she seeks it, because she tries to send out positivity and messages on the importance of love and inclusivity.

"When we came to Pristina from Belgrade, I spoke broken Albanian and every single person could notice that I had difficulty in expression, but without any insecurity, I considered it as something positive, I considered it to be cute."

Her family returned to Kosovo in July 1999. Those were difficult times but they had to be close to their family members who were in Kosovo. The youth, among them Emina, had to work during tense political, economic, and social circumstances.

"My sister was lucky to immediately find a job at the radio that was located in the building of Rilindja. I was very curious and went to visit her because I was very interested [to know] how things happen there. I met a Bosnian woman who was already working for Radio KFOR and she took a liking to my voice."

Luckily for Emina, radio stations were already looking for youngsters who were up to date with the news around the world, showbiz, music, and who were also eloquent orators.

She received an offer to work for Radio Galaxy which was part of the peacekeeping corps of KFOR and which later turned into Radio KFOR.

"The radio was situated in a military truck. I can never forget that feeling because I wasn't used to seeing the radio in that form. In Belgrade, I had the chance to participate in some television programs, to be a frequent guest, but the radio was something completely new to me. Especially when I saw that military truck, although I remember that the technical equipment was very good and innovative at the time."

On her first day at work, she sat by the mixing console and they tested her voice and her presentation skills as well.

Aside from possessing a beautiful voice, knowledge, and information, working on the radio means that one should also have the ability to improve the mood of the listeners. Thus, radio requires people who are capable of making others attentive, and happy as well.

And that's how Emina was in real life but was she going to manage to convert that same attitude into her radio persona as well?

"It was maybe due to my being young and a bit naïve, but I did not know what fear was. I did not have neither fear nor any emotion except for the beautiful ones," Emina says laughing as she remembers how relaxed she had been towards her new endeavor.

Emina began working at a time when life in Kosovo was just starting to recommence. War had destroyed almost everything. There was a dominion of sadness, paranoia, fear, and unclarity over the future. It was a colossal task to try spreading positivity through words and sounds.

Two languages were spoken in the shows that were always broadcast live, Albanian and English. The two hosts would ask and answer in both languages.

"It was something quite big at the time! It was the first radio in the country to do that. I remember quite beautifully my first day at work, and I am very grateful for it. When they ask me about my experience at KFOR, I always answer them that it is an extraordinary journey from the military truck to the modern studios that we have today."

Her first show on the radio was a morning show, starting at 5 A.M. She was only 16 years old. Emina evolved a lot professionally.

In 2017, she was promoted to staff manager and now she leads a team of 10 women and 7 men – whom she refers to as her second family.

Radio wasn't everything that she wanted to do. She would later enroll in the AAB University where she studied Journalism and Mass Communication. Her long radio experience had shaped her so much professionally that she was offered a job as an assistant professor there.

Her professorship - just like her work on the radio - fulfills Emina.

"It occurs very often to me that the ex-students of mine contact me and thank me. They're maybe working in various media outlets today but they still remember my advice...when they put them to practice, that's when they realized that my advice was good. My heart bursts with pride," she says.

Emina is a mother to two daughters, Tiara, 10, and Majda, 8. Balancing her motherly life with her professional life is a challenge for ambitious women who are quite dedicated to their careers.

"My husband supported me every step of the way for all these 11 years. Not even for a moment did he dampen my enthusiasm even though we're opposite types. I'm livelier, and more expressive whereas Lorik is quieter compared to me. But he has never ruined my dream nor my enthusiasm," she says about the emotional support that she has received from her husband while juggling her career ambitions with her desire to create a family.

However, her husband has not been the only crucial male presence in her life.

"It's not like I accidentally mention my dad. I deliberately mention him because he has been extraordinarily open-minded, maybe more than I am today. I admire his mentality and culture, because unfortunately, some girls may be very talented but they have to pay dearly for their parents' negligence or their oppression at home, and they get traumatized in childhood...that's when their dreams are broken."

Emina is aware that not many women enjoy the support from their family members of the opposite gender. She points out that she is happy that we see more and more women in journalism who are very professional, who respect journalism ethics and work code, who check the facts many times before presenting them to the audience, and who make sure that their messages raise awareness and transmit good values to the society.

"It overjoys me when I see how capable they are, how good of professionals they make, how good family members they make, how good of mothers they make, how good of friends they make. And this is what we should continuously promote."

On the other hand, Emina reminds her and her colleagues about their moral and professional burden when they sit by the mixing console, by the keyboard, by the camera, and by their microphones.

"Let's give each young girl the best example possible. Let's advise them, let's remind them that they should always receive an education and that they must chase their dreams. Let them dream a lot because you never know. You can achieve anything if you possess ambitions and will"

Now it's you the readers of ZA who can attach a personality to the voice that you've been hearing on the radio for over 20 years now, and you can understand better who is behind these positive and motivating messages, who encourages diversity and happiness with the little things in life.

She did not need a face to get her message across once again. She still needed merely her voice melted into letters in her interview for ZA.





Photo borrowed from the character herself

za | women who tell the truth

In pursuit of the truth

Tatjana Lazarević is a journalist born and raised in Kosovo during the 70s, just before the beginning of political tensions in the former autonomous republic of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Her childhood is filled with happy memories. When talking about the ZA Magazine she states that was raised to be proud of living in a multiethnic space referring to former Yugoslavia. She remembers how the now-disbanded federation was strong and enjoyed respect in the international arena.

Nevertheless, things would not be the same after 1981 when Kosovo Albanians started their first demonstrations seeking the Republic of Kosovo. It was the time when the lives of many trembled. For some of the communities, these demonstrations meant hope, but for others, it was unexpected and confusing.

“These were scenes opposite to what we were taught. Memories of high school were divided. It was a reformed Yugoslav secondary education and did not prove to be good in practice. On top of that, I have no fond memories of taking the trip from home up to school, or from one end of the town to another and what experienced The Gymnasium Economics school complex in the South Mitrovica.”

After graduating from high school, Tatjana continued her undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Philology in Pristina and did her postgraduate specialist studies in multimedia communications and Public Relations in the mid-2000s at the Faculty of Organizational Sciences, University of

Belgrade. She went further by starting her Ph.D. studies in communication at a private university in Belgrade but left them unfinished when she decided to establish KoSSev in 2014.

Before KoSSev, Tatjana worked for the major international agencies in Kosovo, such as OSCE and UNMIK, taught communications for four years at the International Business College in Mitrovica, and taught English for years in schools in northern Kosovo, and as a correspondent for several media outlets. Regardless of her professional engagement, she is a civil activist for many years now.

Tatjana fell in love with journalism when she was still very young.

She grew up on travelogues and stories from different parts of the world. As a little girl, she loved Oriana Fallaci - the well-known Italian journalist - a rebel against injustice and a fighter for the truth.

After a while spent working for the media, she somehow gave up on journalism to reunite with her first love many years later. And her love would be called KoSSev and how she describes it “it was accidental.”

Everything came suddenly, sideways. Tatjana’s female colleagues were the initiators, and little they knew about journalism at the time.

“So, are there coincidences in the world?”

It was a long way to go. It was very difficult, especially living in an

environment *“full of burdens, and a good part of that burden consists of prejudices, stereotypes, lack of education, primitivism, inaction, discord, lack of responsibility, enjoyment of privileges,”* as Tatjana herself says when describing the environment in which she lives in.

“Sometimes I feel like they gave me a space shuttle to roll it on a country road. To be clear, I never thought that we were doing something better or that we were something special, but I always wanted it to be special for all of us and that all of us be super, super, good.”

In a society composed of different groups, various interests are present. About journalism, people share different perspectives of what journalism’s mission should be, according to Tatjana. To some, it is an extended arm of power and propaganda. To them, it is quite understandable and desirable for journalism to be largely censored and self-censored. While some others see its dimension of fighting for the truth only when they attack the opposite side.

“In essence, they all see such journalism in the same way - that it should be in someone’s service, but not in the service of unconditional truth and the public. Very often, due to such terrible pressure, both the so-called little men and the journalists see journalism in the same way - that sooner or later it can work for an interest group. This is not journalism,” she states when elaborating her point of view.

Journalism is a world full of mixed events that might result in giving one happy and valuable moments, but tension and

pressure as well. As Tatjana explains, it is fulfilling for a journalist when reporting about positive change or serving as an accelerator for solving citizen's problems

that have arisen due to social injustice, or diseases.

However, there's always another side to the medal. Being a journalist, one should be prepared to go through a "fire" of challenges and serious threats that lead to life insecurities for media professionals. For some, these threats and attacks mean the end of a career, but for some others, these are the reason for becoming stronger and braver.

Tatjana lived a difficult story and became that 'stronger and braver journalist'. Years ago, she faced attacks. The editorial office of KoSSev was attacked, as well as herself personally and her family and colleagues.

"It was very difficult for me when, after they shot at our editorial office in the summer of 2015, they set fire to the car of my friend and our director in November same year. It was her super nice maintained private car that we used for work. A cousin called me at two in the morning to tell me that her car, parked on the main street was set on fire," remembers Tatjana.

At the time she was not present in Mitrovica but traveling to another part of Kosovo for private businesses. To her, the answer received from the authorities was unacceptable.

"We were on our way to the monastery feast that morning in Visoki Decani when the police said that the car self-combusted. Humiliating," said she, also highlighting the time *"on the eve of the early parliamentary elections in 2017"*.

"Someone threatened my family and the voice was sent via my brother. My father and daughter heard about being threatened," she explains.

Tatjana called on the police chiefs in the North Mitrovica to discuss with them and the Kosovo Serbian Deputy Minister of the Interior, who is the mayor today. They didn't answer the phone. The mayor does not communicate to KoSSev representatives not even today.

"In fact, the essence is that precisely for those beautiful and valuable moments of this job I experience all the time, I stored these events as a regular part of the job, but certainly these are not normal deeds! All this is and should be unacceptable for anyone."

The region we live in is not doing well in terms of media freedom. Even according to Reporters Without Borders latest report "World Press Freedom Index" launched in May, Media freedom remains a problem in many Balkan states, with journalists working in highly polarised political environments and encountering threats from criminal groups.

Despite all the threats and challenges, Tatjana never gave up on approaching the truth and vocally telling it.

"I received threatening letters, we received insults and threats via social networks, Srpska Lista officials in the Kosovo intuitions denied us access to any information for years now, our journalists were attacked for several times while reporting, there was a lot ...", sorrowly she says.

As an experienced journalist, Tatjana would like to share her experience and collaborate more with other media outlets in Kosovo, especially the Albanian ones. Even though she maintains private contacts with her Kosovan counterparts, on a professional level this collaboration does not happen as much as she would like to.

"Very often, Albanian newsrooms in Kosovo underestimate small independent Serb newsrooms. Very often they are uninterested in hardly any different tone but the mainstream majority narrative. Unfortunately, from our point of view it looks something like this: In the Serbian-Albanian issue, everything that comes from the Albanian side is good, everything that comes from the Serbian side is bad."

When elaborating her perception deeper, she emphasizes that the lack of collaboration between

Kosovan and Serbian journalists and media outlets are a result of not being able to learn each other's language.

"The first is the language barrier. It is often underestimated, and it is actually a huge problem. I am sure that if we spoke each other's languages, our understanding and communication would be much better."

The second barrier according to Tatjana is the difference in the lives of the Serbian and Albanian corps in Kosovo. There are specifics of the Serb community currently in Kosovo.

"It is also true that we all together have many, many common problems, not only in Kosovo, but throughout the Balkans, but even the same problems are even

more difficult in the Serb community in Kosovo. For example, the brain-drain. The Serbian people have been in a constant outflow from Kosovo for half a century. Especially since 1999 and 2004. The fleeing of people has caused a whole series of other problems."

When Tatjana talks about the sustainability of the Serbian media operating in Kosovo she states the issue of difficulty in financing. She says that Serbian media houses are not self-sustaining, and do not have their own market or big advertisers as Albanian newsrooms. They mostly depend on donations. Some use government grants from Belgrade and Pristina, and some, like KoSSev, only international ones.

"We have learned over the years to follow well everything that is happening regarding Kosovo, to open our senses and channels for information from many sides. Albanian newsrooms do not have to do that. They are focused mainly on Pristina, news from Belgrade is only a "necessary evil" and, as a rule, they are not even touched by the Serb community in Kosovo, partly because of the language barrier, partly because they perceive Kosovo Serbs only as an extension of Belgrade," she concludes.

Speaking further about the state of the media in Kosovo, she agrees that they have an important role and influence in creating a more positive atmosphere between the communities living in the country, especially the Albanian and Serb communities.

"I always emphasize that the job of the media is not to make peace and talk about peace and coexistence and reconciliation but to report the truth, whatever that truth might be, even if it is ugly. But I agree that the media play a huge role in public discourse. As such, they have a great responsibility to inform accurately, but also to educate, and not to destroy society with lies and unprofessionalism."

Tatjana is a follower of the truth. She will continue seeking it and telling it for the sake of herself and the society she lives in. She will continue to give her best, despite the outside pressure, challenges, and obstacles, but as she herself quotes a friend of hers *"they can't attack us as much as we can work."*

On the ZA Radar

“Is Edita Doli here?” asked a mother in need. Judging by her look, she appeared to be in her 30s. She had taken her daughter and had come to the studios of Radio Dukagjini. The lady was asking to meet one of the journalists who works there.

“We deal very often with these cases where people come asking for Edita from Radar’s help,” the radio receptionist tells us.

She was referring to Edita Doli, the journalist who hosts the show Radar which is broadcast on Radio Dukagjini. Edita has managed to change the lives of many indigent Kosovans by connecting them with her show listeners.

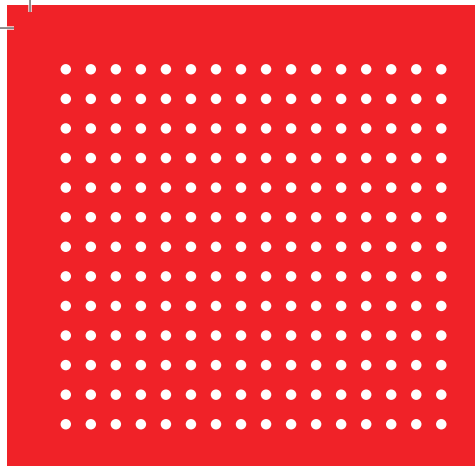
We get to know about Edita only through her radio presence, but we know little to nothing about her life away from the radio microphone.

Since little, she was doted upon by her grandfather who loved her dearly, whereas her parents tried to balance the pampering that she was receiving from her grandfather. Born in Gjakova, she lived there until she turned 18 but she had first set foot in a radio cabin four years before she reached that age mark.

It was the year 2003 when the 14-years old Edita had called into a local radio show in Gjakova. Phone-ins are a daily thing for radio shows, but hers that day would determine her youth.

“It was sheer coincidence. I called into the radio show to discuss a topic which I cannot remember! I don’t know what they had in mind but they invited me over to their studio as a guest. When I went to the radio, I knew from the first step that I set in radio that I wanted to become part of it. I even asked them: ‘Excuse me, are you hiring?’ she shares with ZA the moment that she had experienced the first sparkles of love for radio.





Top Radio in Gjakova had just opened and luckily for Edita, they were looking for young people to join the project. They invited her for an interview, and they gave her a chance to prove herself.

They first valued her distinctive voice and then for an entire week she had to open for the radio shows. However, Edita wasn't in the know that these were tests that she had to pass to get her job.

"They liked my voice and then I had to go every day for a whole week to open for their shows, record them, and then send them to Andi who was the radio director at the time. If there'd be one word that sounded the same as the ones that I had said in the previous days, then I was not going to get the job. But I did not know about that condition, and I went there by myself to record the radio intros. Luckily, I passed the second test as well and I got the job."

She worked various jobs on the radio. She served as a newscaster, field reporter, musical shows host, and also as a night show host. She worked passionately.

"My first salary was 50 euros, and when I was named the best employee, they raised my salary to 70 euros. But I loved that job so much, and it was there that I saw that I have to be part of a radio station."

She worked for Top Radio for around four years and during that period, Edita had molded herself into a host and radio journalist. Although it was just a local radio station, their job was demanding and it was of high importance that their products be qualitative.

"I started from there. I learned so much from Top Radio, and I carried that spirit when I came to the place that I am now. There were many strict rules. We had continuous tests and trainers from the BBC. They taught us diction. We

continuously had training that made us this good."

Training could have served Edita everything concerning the technical aspects of journalism, but they had not prepared them for the situations where she would have to deliver bad or sensitive news to the audience.

And when you're a journalist, you also have that share of news to relay.

During the time that she was working for Top Radio, Edita remembers how difficult it was for her to read out the names of the Kosovo *"War missing persons. The bones of many missing persons had been recovered and were being brought to Kosovo. And I had to start the news every day with the newflash where I had to read the names of everyone. I was very young, and it was very difficult."*

"Immediately after I started in the job, they began to bring back the bodies of the people [who had been reported] missing."

Her experience at Top Radio came to an end once she finished high school. Edita received an offer to work for Radio Dukagjini, and she had already decided to continue her journalism studies at AAB University. She was facing many dilemmas at that life's crossroads.

It was her father who was her greatest motivator, and Edita decided to take up on the offer and join Radio Dukagjini. Initially, as a collaborator, she made her debut for Radio Dukagjini on June 1, 2007.

"The beginnings were extremely difficult. I had to get on the bus from Gjakova, get to the studio, and present to an audience that was way bigger than the local audience of Gjakova," says Edita, adding that right after the show she had to rush and catch the bus back to Gjakova.

Her Gjakova-Pristina commute continued for three months until she began her studies in October of that year. Then, she moved to the capital where she lives ever since. Despite her professionalism, Edita found her beginnings at Radio Dukagjini to be difficult. She even had to modify her heavy Gjakovan accent until people could not notice it.

"I came to Radio Dukagjini and along with Albion Muhaxhiri, we started the weekend show, Pak Pas. Thanks to that show, I won a long-term contract on the condition that I get rid of my accent"

Working for Top Radio and Radio Dukagjini were two different worlds for Edita. She was from Gjakova, a town where everybody knew each other and which was way more smaller than the capital.

Living in a big city proved to be a challenge for the Gjakovan girl.

"I came to Dukagjini as a host and after the Pas Pak show, I was asked to work as a field reporter. Initially, I did not have any experience nor did I have any interest in field reporting. I had to do field reporting for six years. I worked six days a week, and Thursday was my day off, so I

couldn't wait to go to Gjakova that day," she shares details of what once was her daily news.

Six years later she was entrusted with hosting Radar – one of the most watched shows in Kosovo. Wait a minute! Wasn't Edita working on the radio?

Yes, she considers herself a radio person. However, when the company expanded into a television network RTV Dukagjini, she had to acquiesce in and transform Radar into a TV show.

It was the then-director of Dukagjini who ideated Edita Doli's Radar.



My first salary was 50 euros, and when I was named the best employee, they raised my salary to 70 euros. But I loved that job so much, and it was there that I saw that I have to be part of a radio station.

It started as a random radio show containing various segments, but the radio listeners gradually gave it the humanitarian character that it has now.

Taking into account the families in need and the willingness of her radio listeners to help them, she steered Radar in a new direction.

"Radar has come a long way. We have earned so much trust from the radio listener along this journey... that today, within 10-15 minutes, we managed to raise 10 thousand euros for leukemia-stricken children," Edita shares proudly.

Edita recounts the first case that prompted reactions from the listeners of Radar. It was about a little boy called Olti. From that moment on, her show wasn't just a random show on the radio. Olti was suffering from a serious illness, and his father had brought his medical report to the Dukagjini offices. The director had handed Edita the medical report for her to read on her show.

"I started Radar as usual. I took the papers and read them to the audience. I then moved on to another topic but someone called into the radio and asked about the boy saying that he wanted to help. I, again, tried to continue [with the show as usual]. The next morning, radio listeners expressed so much interest to help in various ways and we dealt with Olti's case for three months. And from Olti's case onward, Radar took a humanitarian direction."

Although she succeeded in helping a child through her show, she stopped doing it. She didn't do that because she did not like helping people, but it was something that happened and which broke her heart. Dealing personally with every humanitarian case became impossible for her.

"I stopped the fundraisers at Radar because of Olti's case. He received so much help, he was treated abroad, but unfortunately, his illness returned for the third time and he lost the battle. It was such bad news. I could barely cope with it. It was hard for the entire crew," she recounts with a tone of sadness.

We see only Edita on screen, but behind the glass of the studio is an entire team that produces Radar. They all work hard and give their best to ensure there are as fewer technical problems as possible.

"The most important two hours of my life regarding my job take place there. It gives me good energy, they're the people I love the most when I enter there and it shows on TV. The people who work with me should be as fanatics as I am about Radar," Edita says for ZA.

While Radar offers her the most qualitative time at work, it is her family that provides her with joy when she gets home. Despite her engagements at Dukagjini, Edita gets off work at three p.m. and goes to pick up her children from school and spend the afternoon with them.

"I have a special bond with my children. Every day at 3, I say 'no' to my job, and I go pick my kids from school. I pick them, take them home and then take them for after-school activities".

Afterward, depending on her work volume, it happens for her to return to

working later in the day. However, she spends her afternoons in the company of her children and works from home.

"And on weekends...well, weekends are blessed, they belong only to my kids."

A decade and a half have passed and Edita's voice is now the radio's voice. Speaking from a tiny box, she managed to become part of everyone's house. Nobody could see her but they all could listen to her. She now also serves as a board member of Radio Television Dukagjini.

We can see Edita every day now, though. We can see her hosting Radar where people call into the show for a brief chat with her, while others listen to the show from their home or their cars. It is a beautiful way to start the day with her.

Photos borrowed from the character herself



From Kosovo for Ukraine

The Easter of April 2022 found Ukraine at war. Instead of baskets of eggs decorated with pastel colors and ribbons, they received missile attacks and gunpowder instead.

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

Lyudmila Makey had worked as a journalist in Ukraine all her life until the moment she had to leave her war-torn country and come to Kosovo where she could report without endangering her life.

“While the Russian president Vladimir Putin was at church for the Easter prayers and celebrations, a rocket hit Odessa. It was my friend, a journalist, who died along with her three-months-old baby,” were the rancorous and emotion-ridden words of the Ukrainian journalist Lyudmila Makey for ZA before the interview began.

Lyudmila, 57, is from Kropivnicki. The unexpected war in Ukraine forced her and many of her colleagues to leave the country because they were not safe. As a part of the Journalists-in-Residence Kosovo program created by the European Center for Press and Media Freedom, the European Federation of Journalists, and sponsored and supported by the Kosovo Government, Lyudmila, and 19 other journalists came to Kosovo in April.

Life works in mysterious ways. Lyudmila had never thought that she would end up in the Balkans, let alone in Kosovo – not even for a short period. However, when she heard about the opportunity of coming to Kosovo and becoming a Pristina resident for six months, she decided to take that chance.

She was the first of the 20 Ukrainian journalists to land in Pristina. Kosovo left a good impression on her from the first moment. She was overwhelmed by the hospitality and the support that she received from Kosovan people and institutions from day one.





Illustration done by Lyudmila Makey

women who tell the truth

Women were previously regarded only as beautiful dolls whereas now they are equal participators in decision-making processes. Their opinions are taken into account.

"I noticed that it is a very illuminated, beautiful city where soft, big-hearted people live. After I was on some TV shows here, people stopped me and greeted me. It makes me so emotional and it almost makes me cry when this happens," says Lyudmila.

Kosovan people know very well how war affects the collective as people suffer from trauma and physical and spiritual losses long after the war ends. That is why it comes naturally to them to solidarize with Lyudmila, according to her.

She left a conflict that has resulted in many casualties but also economic damages, so her coming to Kosovo has offered Lyudmila some peace of mind.

Her country is at war. She has lost her best friend and for her compatriots, every day could be their last. Away from bombs and missiles, she has had time to reflect on the past, and she now shares it with ZA.

"When I look back at my childhood now, I realize how happy that period has been for me compared to the childhood of Ukrainian children now," she says.

Her dad, a lawyer, and her mother, a German language teacher, dedicated themselves to her upbringing and they tried to offer her everything that a child needs. They tried to introduce Lyudmila to the world by traveling with her to many countries. They also encouraged her to continue a parallel education at the music school.

"My mother's family who was based in Saint Petersburg would visit us every year. During summer we'd gather in my grandmother's yard and hang out together. I performed my first concerts during those gatherings," Lyudmila remembers as she quotes her uncle: *"We now invite to the stage, the talented musical artist, Lyudmila Makey,"* she remembers.

She lived her childhood thinking that the world was all that her parents had presented to her. Yet the full picture of the world was 'edited', toning down the harsh realities that pervade.

Ukrainian people were oppressed and isolated from the world during the Soviet Union era, according to Lyudmila. The Second World War devastated the country and traumatized its people.



“Ukraine faced an iron curtain which isolated it from the world. I was a child at that period and I did not fully comprehend the reality. I found modest joy in reading books and later on I realized how difficult that period had been.”

Lyudmila finished high school in 1982 and she had two options in front of her. She could study law just like her father, or she could follow in the footsteps of her mother by becoming a teacher. She chose music because she thought that she could fully commit to it.

“I finished my studies within four years and I began working as a pedagogue. I taught fortepiano and art history.”

One might find it surprising how Lyudmila switched from music teaching to journalism. She ended up as a journalist on account of her love for writing.

“This is quite an interesting story. I always liked to write poems and articles when I was a kid. I wrote articles for the local newspaper when I was in my studies. After completing my studies, it came naturally to me to work in this industry,” Lyudmila remembers her transition from art to journalism. She started writing weekly articles for the segment Good Morning, Oleksandriia Citizens.

Ukraine was going through a difficult economic period when Lyudmila became a journalist. She was paid 50 Ukrainian hryvnias a month, which was like winning the lottery for her because she was helping her family financially by doing what she loved.

“This situation was when Ukraine gained its independence after the fall of the Soviet Union. All the social and economic changes started in this period, 1992-1993. Ukraine lost the economic ties and its people suffered,” she tells pieces of her country's history.

The loss of political stability set back the social progress of Ukrainians. They weren't compensated regularly and many families suffered from these economic damages.

However, Lyudmila understood that through journalism she could express her creativity, tell the truth, and help the Ukrainian people with fair information. All the while, she could do that by bringing financial stability to her house.

She never moved away from journalism ever since. She has had quite the journey in 17 years.

Lyudmila started as a correspondent and evolved into an editor at the local newspaper. She served as an editor for five years, but the Covid-19 pandemic affected this industry too. The local newspaper closed, and she was now without a job.

“The closing of the newspaper was very difficult for us, especially during a period when we needed financial support. But, on the other hand, a new window opened for me where I could work with newspapers from bigger cities and even with international ones,” she says.

Lyudmila mainly covers culture, politics, and economics whereas gender equality is her concern as well. She has started to include the subject of gender equality more in her journalism, especially regarding politics.

It is her mission to deal with such a topic because Ukraine was lagging in this issue.

Ukraine reached a deal with the European Union in 2014 that aimed to bring this country closer to European values. However, the gender equality issue before had been more pronounced, according to Lyudmila.

“Politics were dominated by men. You could see only male faces in the parliament. After the implementation of the gender quota, the perception of women in leadership positions has changed drastically. Women were previously regarded only as beautiful dolls whereas now they are equal participators in decision-making processes. Their opinions are taken into account,” she says.

Issues related to gender equality are currently left out from the Ukrainian media's daily agendas. Now they are all covering the war against Russia.

Lyudmila is doing the same thing in Kosovo, by trying to inform the international audience about the violence and crimes that are being done in Ukraine and by reporting about the things that have happened to her family, friends, and colleagues.

“I am noticing a huge wave of respect and empathy in Kosovo concerning the issue of Ukraine, but I also notice that in many other countries in the world. However, there are many countries and many citizens from the other countries that are not being informed correctly,” she says.

Having observed the situation from her perspective as a journalist, she says that the asymmetry and the distortion of information on the Ukrainian War come as a result of Russian propaganda.

“Russian soldiers are killing my people and they are using violence against them. Russian soldiers have leveled every building to the ground. They've left no place alive. Rockets are flying from Russia to Ukrainian to cause destruction, meanwhile, my sister living in Belarus says that there should be no panic because it is just a military operation,” Lyudmilla says regretfully.

For the world to understand the truth of what is happening in Ukraine, Lyudmila suggests all international journalists keep in touch with their fellow Ukrainian colleagues. She has chosen to work from a place where her life is not in danger so that she does not risk her sacred journalistic mission.

The truth should be told, and she is trying to do that. When everything ends – hoping that day will come soon – she will return to her homeland.

“My place is there. I believe we can save Ukraine and work harder than ever for it,” says Lyudmila pridefully.

Lyudmila's routine in recent months has consisted of her starting and finishing every day praying for her family, for her people, and for the Ukrainian soldiers who are protecting the Ukrainian land and identity. She lives near the Dodona Theatre, but she has left her heart in Ukraine.

Photo retrieved from official page of Lyudmila Makey on Facebook

Mimoza

can



If you create equal spaces for everyone, then everyone will get their chance to advance.

On the main channel of the Radio Television of Kosovo, a show called Mimoza was being broadcast.

The show's name doesn't refer to mimosas but to Mimoza Gavrani, who began hosting this show in 2017. Everything in the show concerns people from the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities who live in Kosovo.

Mimoza is Romani herself and she wanted through public television to influence the change of status quo of the relations between the people of her community and Albanians who constitute the largest ethnic community in Kosovo.

She had great a professional experience and an interesting life experience as well before she debuted as a television host at RTK. She has lived in Kosovo all her life, but she was born in the capital of Serbia.

"I was born in Belgrade, and I grew up in Gjakova and lived there until the age of 19 when I began my studies in Pristina. Then I continued to live in Pristina, with some interruptions in between due to my studying abroad," she says for ZA.

She was the first child of the Gavrani family. The first joy – as Albanians say for a firstborn. Her parents had lost two children and Mimoza says that it happened due to the fragile health care system at the time in Kosovo. However, when her parents tried their luck in Belgrade, that resulted in Mimoza being born and with her now being among us.

She studied pharmacy at the medical high school in Gjakova. It didn't matter if she was going to study pharmacy afterward. She was always stubborn about succeeding in high school and having all Fives on her report card.

Mimoza was not going to stay long with pharmacy anyways. She was interested in something else that did not have much to do with chemical formulas, but with another aspect of human health. In 2006, she began her studies at the Department of Psychology at the University of Pristina.

"I chose this field because as a kid I was interested specifically in interpersonal relations, and I was very interested in understanding many ways of interpreting different behaviors. Then, normally my parents helped me a lot in shaping this interest, and thus it ended up being psychology for me," she says.

Mimoza was the only woman from the Gavrani family to have a university diploma. Her uncle had been the only one to finish university before she came along. She is among the few Romani girls to have completed her studies.

According to a report by the Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (VoRAE) organization and Finland's Development Cooperation in September 2018, 70 percent of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian girls who enroll in school, drop out. 40 percent of the interviewed girls had

declared that they could not financially afford school. The report showed that only 7 percent of the girls from these communities manage to enroll in universities.

Mimoza continued the journey of learning as passionately even after she graduated. Her first job would teach her so much about Kosovo, although she grew up here. When she began working for the Open Society Foundation, she started becoming familiar with the challenges that her community was facing.

"There were my beginnings. I had the chance to see up-close and to see the essence of the issues only when I started working and getting out there, when I started dealing with various fieldwork research, I mean, with the social aspects and so forth."

Mimoza was benefitting from the things that she had learned when she had studied psychology. She was participating in different activities, research, and training and during all this time she was both helping the community and evolving professionally.

"I worked for many different organizations that were undergoing development, and those were [organizations concerning] the communities and beyond, and at the same time I worked for both the local and central institutions."

She speaks Albanian and regards this language to be her first language.

Albanian is only one of the four languages that she commands. She is also fluent in English, Serbian, and Spanish.

Since 1.5 billion people ⁴ in the world speak English and 559 million people speak Spanish, Mimoza has not yet encountered language to be an obstacle in her communications. Furthermore, she speaks the two main languages in the region – Albanian and Serbian.

During her career in civil society and media, she has tried to find a way about advancing the people from her community, which is among the most marginalized communities in Kosovo.

“By working continuously, my feelings of empathy have increased, and they continue growing to this day, and they have grown to a whole different level, and you aim to affect [positively] and improve the lives of those [from your community and for those in need.]”

Even though Mimoza herself belongs to a non-majority community that has historically faced discrimination, her life has been completely different. She grew up and was educated around people who never made her feel different from others.

This differed quite a lot from the experiences of her parents who had encountered many social and economic obstacles. Not wanting their children to go through the same challenges, they decided to give their full support to Mimoza and her brother. She remembers that education was her parents’ top priority and everything else was less relevant.

“My parents have tried to meet all the conditions so that my brother and I could get an education. However, I can say that discipline, persuasion, and hard work are the basis of everything. If one of my coevals had to study for a certain topic, I had to prepare twice or thrice as much as others to prove myself, because I wanted to become the best version of myself.”

Discrimination? Mimoza had never felt it in her life. It did not happen to her to be treated differently from others, because as she says, she knew quite well where their limits were and where her space was.

“First off, I am very aware of my capabilities, choices, and rights. Secondly, I think I have created the conditions for further self-development and I continue to do so because every day is a possibility to learn something new.”

When she talks to ZA about her position as a Romani woman with a respected career and activism, she assesses that the marginalized communities in Kosovo are now in a better position than in the past.

“Things have changed,” she says.

“We now have the chance to see how the vulnerable communities are developing, how they are working, and how another form of recognition is taking place, and all this contributes to the changing of the narrative.”

When she started her television program, she intended to present the life of her community.

“The main intention of that program was in a way to raise our voices about some social topics that affect our community and beyond. Despite these topics, diversity and the integration of the community are very important elements – not leaning towards the aspect of social topics.”

Mimoza is optimistic that there will be progress of the condition of the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. According to her, members of these communities have invested systematically in education after the war and results have begun to show.

“I think that the majority of Albanians for the first time are having the chance to see different generations from what they used to see in the past, where in most of the cases – not to say always – the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians communities were regarded as a secondary society, and they weren’t [treated] equally which is a sad truth,” Mimoza explains.

Despite the progress of the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities in these two decades, this does not reflect by the general public. Mimoza blames the media for this.

The established narrative about the situation of these communities is static – quite rarely is it mobile. Speaking for ZA, she says that local media are not presenting positive development, especially those of the Romani community.

“Mainly, the general portrayal of the Romani community in the local media unfortunately does not correspond with the major development that they have marked in the actual reality. We still see photographs that are gloomy and that do not tell that there is a gradual development in this community.”

However, even though she has made this observation and had come to this conclusion, she still sees a light at the end of the tunnel and says that *“the mentality of media professionals has started to change.”*

Romani families, according to Mimoza, are doing a lot in their power to progress in school, politics, and other areas of life. They are using every opportunity from the domestic and international institutions, and this way creating positive models for the new generations.

“I don’t expect the Romani families to do more than they are doing, because Romani families today educate their sons and daughters equally. Romani families don’t need to do anything more than offer different values such as tolerance and positivity like they’ve done so far.”

Although she has an optimistic tone for the situation of the Romani families that live in Kosovo, there are still gaps. She thinks that there should be more opportunities for all the communities because they already have the quality to begin with.

“If you create equal spaces for everyone, then everyone will get their chance to advance. However, on the other hand, I always talk about those girls and women who offer quality. I am not in favor of creating opportunities for members of the communities just because they are members of those communities.”

Mimoza Gavrani currently counts 14 years of activism and based on the principle of lifelong learning, she is nearing the completion of her Master’s studies in National Security at the United Nations University in Belgrade. She enrolled in her Master’s while she was working in Belgrade during the pandemic.

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/soniathompson/2021/05/27/the-us-has-the-second-largest-population-of-spanish-speakers-hoè-to-equip-your-brand-to-serve-them/?sh=24d34698793a>



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.

Kult, a dream come true for Ardiana



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When I go back to the beginning of my journey, the passion I had when I started working, I often told myself: Ardiana, you still kept going enthusiastically, as energetic as you were many years ago without knowing if anyone would read it.



“Kosovo has numerous successful women in the field of art. There are many festivals and events which are led by women, thus this effort should be appreciated.”



In Prishtina, Ulpiana, there is a Fountain, which has become a cult to the city, not because of its beauty but its history. Nearby, perhaps by chance, is the office of a medium that has this word in its name – Kult (cult) Plus.

Kult Plus is an online publishing platform which exclusively discusses topics regarding culture and art. This medium is shaped by the devotion, courage and passion of one person - Ardianë Pajaziti. She, speaking to ZA, recalls how the media house was born from her fondness for art and passion for writing.

“Not a day has passed by that I didn't buy a newspaper, the same way grocery shopping is a necessity to many, buying a copy of "Rilindja" newspaper has been to me”, she tells.

Ardiana recalls that one of her daily tasks, which couldn't be skipped at any cost, was making sure to always get the newspaper so that in the afternoons,

when her father would come home from work, they would read it together. The newspaper accompanied her everywhere, just like smart phones do these days.

“I bought the newspaper and went to school, I took it with me, and when my father came home from work and I returned from school, a newspaper was always in my hands”.

Ardiana was studying Albanian Literature and Language. At that time, education in Kosovo was operating in a parallel system. The challenges the students faced during that period, didn't leave much space for them to enjoy the various reading materials included in the semester syllabus.

She had chosen Albanian literature as she was a passionate reader, no more. Back then, no one dared to declare dreams to the world. This way, those dreams were repressed and packed somewhere within the conscious desire.

“In the times we lived, we did not have much space to dream big. I started my studies because I loved reading, I loved literature – but I didn't know what the future would bring. While today when I hear children aged 13 dreaming of their future, it brings me joy because in my time dreams were taken away from us”, she reminisces.

However, Ardiana had already started to publish writings and poetry in elementary school newspapers such as "Pioneri" (Pioneer) and later on in student newspapers.

Her first job, not surprisingly, was at a newspaper. Together with some other young people from Gjilan, they had come together to found the newspaper "Era Rinore" (the Youth Era) which was voluntary, since the sales of an issue paid for the next one.

She continued her career in Koha Ditore (The Daily Times) and Zëri (Voice) until she started thinking of a medium of her

own, dedicated exclusively to culture and art. From previous experience, she knew that other mediums dedicate little or no content at all to culture. Even when they did, art would only fill the last pages of the newspapers. It was left behind and newspapers only paid lip service to art.

“As a culture journalist I’ve noticed the gaps and the lack of space when writing about culture, and this made me really think about my ability to do something”, she tells determinedly.

Few believed that a woman’s initiative to start from scratch would succeed, especially in a specific profile as she wanted. Art that usually wasn’t covered enough in newspapers didn’t seem enough to dedicate an entire medium to it. People around her started to project the failure of this initiative before it even started.

“Many people were sceptical about my idea, including relatives and distant ones. They would say to me that within 5 days you’ll update your site because you won’t have any news”, she narrates smilingly, letting us know that those words didn’t matter to her.

Nonetheless, Ardiana’s dream was much more stubborn than the nihilistic speeches of her friends. She wasn’t delusional. She was aware of the challenge she had to overcome. But, dreams cannot be forged without climbing a mountain of challenges.

In September 2013, she launched KultPlus without having any idea what awaits her, but convinced she was doing the right thing.

“In other mediums, where I worked previously, I noticed that the only way cinematographers and academics would make it to the front page would be through death, otherwise their work or topics they reviewed would not appear there. This was the main reason I founded Kultplus”.

Hence the name – Kult (Cult)

“As ‘kult’ (cult) is something unique, and relates to culture. In addition ‘plus’ refers to the fact that we are open to give more than we already do”

Certainly, a medium established by a woman will focus more on addressing women included in culture and art. Regardless, the space devoted to successful women in art, in Ardiana’s media, isn’t just because they are women.



Photos borrowed from the character herself

“I could say that maybe it was intentional, but, on the other hand Kosovo has numerous successful women in the field of art. There are many festivals and events which are led by women, thus this effort should be appreciated”, she declares cheerfully.

Ardiana is the editor-in-chief of the medium she established, with a small staff in numbers, yet doing splendid work.

Only two years ago, within the framework of Kultplus, she opened KultGallery. In addition to being a cafe, it also serves as a space where Kultplus organizes activities such as “KultStrofa” (Kult verse) which is an international poetry competition. Another one is “Ta Zbardhim Fytyrën” (Make one proud) where successful artists living abroad are invited and through their work promote their country.

KultPlus has been in operation for 9 years in Kosovo, and never in so many years has shifted gears. Although, many times this must have been a high price to pay, taking into consideration the financial burden this medium bears.

“I have stated that as long as KultPlus exists, it will without being influenced by other media which change their standpoint to reach more clicks, relying of bombastic news titles and lies”, she tells resolutely.

Today, KultPlus, which was faced with distrust without even starting, has scope even in Albania, as the only medium dedicated to culture. She started KultPlus when her eldest daughter was 2 and half years old and her younger daughter was only 6 months old.

She raised the medium and her daughters simultaneously.

“Everybody knows that media requires sacrifice. I often found myself awake at 2 am

in the midnight managing the newspaper and at the same time changing diapers or breastfeeding my little one – simultaneously working two jobs”.

“When I go back to the beginning of my journey, the passion I had when I started working, I often told myself: Ardiana, you still kept going enthusiastically, as energetic as you were many years ago without knowing if anyone would read it”.

By Ardiana’s side and her two daughters always stood her husband, which was the first one to believe that Ardiana will make her dream come true. He supported her before she pitched her idea to donators.

“My partner was my right hand. We understood that if you have a project only on paper, no donator will believe in your dreams – we had to invest our family savings so people would know what we had to give”.

Now, Ardiana is living the dream. To her surprise KultPlus exceeded every expectation she had in the beginning. Through KultPlus she realized that poetry is still loved in Kosovo. In KultPlus various artists meet with each other and talk about books, works of art, films and theatre plays.

For Ardiana this is a great success. She is overjoyed every time she is inside the spaces of her “Kult” house.

“I am very pleased with the achievements of KultPlus, where it stands right now. It is the best part of the dreams that I’ve dreamt, but it was deeply hidden as I was scared to voice it”, she says.

Now she dares express it out loud, because it is no longer just a dream that floats between the possible and impossible in her head. Today it is a medium, an entire organization. Today it is Kult, but much more than that. It is Kult Plus.

za | starting from scratch

Jovana's Initiative



Photos borrowed from the character herself

Jovana Radosavljevic was born and raised in Leposavic, North of Kosova. This municipality has only 13,200 residents.⁵

She was still an adolescent in high school when she started seeking more from life. She searched, explored, and decided on the United States of America, a continent across the ocean, to see what new possibilities can be offered to a girl as ambitious as her.

She found a school and won a scholarship through the school's financial aid program. Most of her classmates were of international background, not only Americans.

"I have graduated high school in the USA and this was a result of my desire to explore and see more, considering I grew up in a small town and a monotonous setting, especially when it comes to diversity, I wanted more. I wanted to learn the language as well. I went to a boarding school in the USA, where I attended the first and last year", she tells ZA.

For Jovana, community activism originates from this experience. She is the founder and executive director of the New Social Initiative – NSI.

When she returned from the USA to Leposavic, she immediately started her studies at the University of Belgrade, department of political sciences, majoring in international politics. With

a bachelor's degree, she returned to her homeland, Kosova. She had various jobs until the time to leave here again came.

"I returned to Kosova, worked in media and for the civil society, where I was part of the election monitoring staff and got the chance to earn a scholarship from the TLP program for my master studies. I studied at the Joseph Korbel School of International Studies, at the University of Denver in the USA. I majored in conflict resolutions and international development".

She moved back to Kosova in 2016 after graduating. Many new graduates may have not defined what they want to do after, but Jovana had made up her mind and she already had started working on that direction during her studies.

"I knew where I wanted to be and what I wanted to work on. I wanted to work on inter-communal relations and reconciliation. I realized the best way to do so is through civil society. Therefore, I and a group of friends and colleagues decided to establish the New Social Initiative, an NGO based in North Mitrovica", she recounts.

America had given her all the education needed and opened her eyes to diversity. Born and raised in a multi-ethnic setting, Jovana firmly believed that a harmonious living between communities is one of the key factors leading to development.

"I learned a lot about myself there, especially being accepting and tolerant in terms of the differences we have. America helped me grow and shape me into what I am today. Maybe I would attach stigma to the other communities if I hadn't had this experience. It was a learning process which lent me a hand by making me more open and appreciative of the differences I may have with others", she describes her living in the USA.

Although she might have been tempted to continue living in a developed Western country overflowing with career opportunities, Jovana grabbed her passport and made her way back to Kosova. Behind this decision lies a powerful and patriotic argument.

"I happened to be in a place where I was lucky enough to receive a high-quality education that qualifies you for work anywhere in the world. Then I thought to myself: there are hundreds of Jovanas, and the world won't miss out on anything. There weren't many people like me that returned to Kosova and wanted to improve the lives of the people in their community", she tells.

She founded the organization on her own. She started working on her idea while she was a student. As NSI wasn't as structured as it is today, the first cellular structures of the organization were built by her and her friends. Born and raised in a multi-ethnic place, Jovana really knew the

importance of a harmonious coexistence between communities, and she wanted to work exactly in this direction.

“We were discussing this and when I came back, we started working on it with some of my friends who had also studied abroad. However, I was the only one on the field, experiencing things firsthand. After I returned, we finalized the whole plan, strategy, and the idea of the project”.

With her idea in hand, she met with dozens of potential partners and donors. Everything that she and her friends wanted had to be thoroughly explained. The journey of presenting the idea to those who had the power to support it lasted around 8 months. In 2017 she managed to get the first fund.

“Afterwards, things started to get better”, she expresses with optimism.

In the beginning, NSI started working in a small office, which they shared with another non-governmental organization, as there were no funds to cover rent. Jovana was the only employee, later they became three and now they are 10.

“I was just back from my studies, and I needed a job. I would often tell myself to be patient. Even though, I used to do other things back then, such as translations to cover my expenses”, she recalls, among other experiences, the difficulties of the beginning.

As if financial instability wasn't already taking a toll on animating her ideas, another challenge was that she was both young and a woman. Jovana didn't even think that her gender could impact her career advancement and the establishment of a huge and robust organization as it is today. Nevertheless, being a woman at the end of the day would become an obstacle along the way!

“I never wanted to look at it from that perspective, but somehow it always ended up being an issue. Being a young woman, short and with a baby face – making it is hard, people never take you seriously, considering that even the sphere of civil society is dominated by men”, says Jovana for ZA, referring to the gender inequalities that reign even in the civil society sector.

“It seems like being a tall man in a suit is somehow taken more seriously than being a young woman”, she voices ironically.

Now, a 34-year-old woman, she was only 29 when she started tenaciously trying to build her organization and shares: *“being a woman, I can say it with absolute*

certainty that I had to double my efforts, compared to a man”.

Her doubled efforts were rewarded. She managed to establish an organization from scratch, one which now gathers around itself a considerable number of people and implements projects that bring communities closer together. Jovana has even managed to bring together Albanians and Serbians as colleagues within her offices.

“We continuously encourage young people to work and so far we have had more Albanian applicants than Serbian ones. Currently, we have two Albanian interns from South Mitrovica. They cross the bridge every day to come to the office. They've been questioned by friends and families about the fact that they work in an organization built by a Kosovan-Serbian”, she elaborates some of the challenges she faces at work.

Currently, New Social Initiative is working on improving relations between communities living in Kosovo, focusing on issues related to the rights of minority communities and transitional justice.

“We are closely following the dialogue in Brussels, political events while offering analysis, as well as a space for discussion among communities, especially reactions to certain situations. Due to the ongoing dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, it is important for us to also focus on the rights of Serbs”.

Jovana unfolds for ZA that she was part of the team of experts, who worked on the compilation of the documentation for the initiative to create the Truth and Reconciliation commission, launched in 2017 by the then President Hashim Thaçi.

“Unfortunately, this initiative wasn't successful even though we, the team of experts, did our work by issuing the normative act. Now, I am part of the working group for the development of the National Strategy for Transitional Justice and dealing with the Past. This process takes time, but I hope that the government will be more focused on finalizing this strategy”, she explains.

New Social Initiative of Jovana, on top of everything, is also fun. They have carried out an interesting campaign on social networks which aims to inform Albanians and Serbs about each other's daily life.

“We have a Serbian woman from the North, who is a fashion blogger and popular on Instagram. She recorded a shopping trip around Prishtina. To you this might sound pointless. But for her this was the first time she stepped in Prishtina since the conflict. She faced the stereotypes she had about Prishtina and came to the conclusion that it is a safe place”, she shares.

The blogger from the North does her job by introducing her followers to a part of Kosovo, which they do not visit for different reasons, meanwhile Jovana is adding to it through her organization. Being professionally close to Albanian civil society organizations, she believes that the iron barriers that separate communities will soon melt.

“The strength of NSI lies in partnership. Since the beginning I wanted us to connect with each other, because we cannot live isolated, in a bubble, and deny the existence of one another. It was important to us to build such cooperation. We have a strong network of Albanian organizations”.

Politics lacks the capacity to bring communities together. High Levels of Decision Making can also make mistakes when it comes to the lives of the people they are supposed to represent. What politics can't do, Jovana does with NSI as she is closer to the communities and helps them to understand that they have more in common than the differences that separate them.

⁵ Kosovo Statistics Agency (2020) ASSESSMENT: Population of Kosovo, accessible in: <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/6202/vler%C3%ABsimi-i-popullsis%C3%AB-2020.pdf>



PURPLEMUSE

by Cana Sisters

The five sisters of the Cana family, although they live in different parts of the world, have a strong bond. Dafina, Zana, Donika, Dorina and Mimoza from Gjakova often talk on the phone with their mother Burbuqe.

In one of their joint phone calls, they touched on a subject which wasn't part of their daily conversations. One of the sisters who lives in Norway, was talking about how much the people of this country appreciated handmade products and how there was a lack of such things, which aren't mass produced or part of the industrial fashion.

Saddened, she was comparing how in Gjakova, the city she was born and raised, there is enormous potential in this field, which is underutilized and fading away as an artisanal handicraft.

While reminiscing about an experience that impressed her in the country she lived in, little did the Cana family women know - that conversation would change their lives.

This is how "Purple Muse" was born, a brand exclusive to knitwear, without the touch of the machines. Focused on the magic of handwork.

This whole story is told by Zana for the ZA magazine, the fourth daughter of the family, who was dedicated to developing the business since the beginning.

"This conversation was the beginning, the first foundation that gave us an AHA moment, when we realized that something can be done", she expresses.

"When I think back to how much praise Purple Muse got, I get goose bumps thinking of the emotion it brought. It's not like we were known for doing business in the fashion sector - we started from zero", she recalls, while her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

The name "Purple Muse" comes from the fact that Cana sisters have this in common – they all like this colour.



The word Muse is derived from Greek mythology; it portrays one of the daughters of God Zeus who ruled art and science. In modern times it conveys someone who inspires others to create art or write; it expresses the sisters' desire for their business to serve as an inspiration to continue with this craft.

None of the six members of the Cana family had an affinity for making the clothes they do now. They had studied sociology, philosophy and psychology – all of these fields belonging to social sciences that had nothing to do with fashion. Yet, this was an insignificant variable.

The Cana sisters might've not known how to work with knitting needles, but they had the knowledge to run a business. They knew how digital marketing works and how to manage finances. A few bits of passion for fashion and the mosaic was almost complete. The last few bits would be added by the women they would hire and guide.

"In the beginning we hesitated slightly, because we didn't have the expertise and thought how credible a business that connects fashion and artisanal craft can be, without credible people. However, we solved all of these. We cooperated fully with artisans", she tells.

"This is how we started Purple Muse, because we have assessed this as a problem that in Kosovo, the long-standing traditions are dying out due to the fact that we didn't know how to restore and adapt them to the present trends", she explains further.

The girls found the right experts to start their business and revive a craft that had long remained in the drawers of the townspeople where they grew up. Purple Muse for the women of the Cana family was not only a business that would bring

financial benefits, but something that would empower a category of society which had already given up involvement with the labour market.

The Cana sisters restored hope to a group of women from Gjakova, they turned their lives around for the better. In order to recruit them, they didn't require an extensive CV, only that they have knitting skills. Finding women with these skills was easy, as there were plenty of them in Gjakova.

"Now, we have a group of 6 employed women, 4 of them work full-time and the other 2 work on request. These women had an organization where they spent their free time. We identified and offered them jobs", she narrates the meeting with the employees of their company.

For women who were in their 50s and had never been employed, this offer from the girls was far from anything they could've dreamt or desired for themselves. On top of that, they were being offered to be paid for something they'd done for free their entire lives. The investment to hone those skills would eventually pay off.

"These women simply couldn't believe that ever in their lives, they would be able to monetize something they did without compensation. It was a passion of theirs, which helped them spend their free time and maybe in a way aided in healing the traumas of war", declares Zana.

The employment of these women was a tremendous fulfilment for the sisters of the Cana family. They witnessed the days of these women become colourful as a result of employment, and how they began to live a life they had never imagined.

"I remember when they received their first salary; they told us – we're only here out

of desire to work. It seemed to them that being paid was something illegal. They told us that it is recreational, and we did it for years, without knowing this could ever be monetized.", recalls Zana.

A typical work day always started with coffee. Dusk would often find them in the company of each other. After this sacred ritual between colleagues, they started knitting.

Burbuqe, the mother of the Cana sisters, designed the sweaters. Every model that came out of her hands was unique. This distinguishes the Purple Muse brand not only in Kosovo, but also in the region.

Purple Muse, started by a casual phone call between sisters, is a successful business today. Currently, it is only available online, while very soon it will be re-located to one of the neighbourhoods of Gjakova, where the inspiration for its creation came from.

The Cana sisters have found the market for the Purple Muse products even outside the Albanian-speaking borders. Moreover, in a store in Antwerp, Belgium called "Home on Earth" which is owned by a Kosovan woman, the sweaters made in Kosovo are displayed with the label "Made in Kosovo".

To be identified by a store located in such a dynamic city like Antwerp, for the girls was both extraordinary and challenging. Kosovo is not a country that exports a great deal, much less clothing. For this reason, customers found it difficult to trust the quality of the products with the tag - made in Kosovo.

Nonetheless, the owners and the women who made the sweaters believed in their product. In addition to the quality materials, they had also invested devotion to those clothes. Meanwhile, time would do its thing and clients would understand that products labelled "Made in Kosovo" were worth every penny.

"I think we need to put more effort in representing Kosovo in the best way, when exporting, so that prejudice disappears and we reach a point when something is labelled 'Made in Kosovo' people by default will acknowledge that Kosovo is a country that only produces quality", states Zana.

Photos retrieved from official page of PurpleMuse on Facebook



If you click on Purple Muse's website, the first impression you get of this brand has nothing to do with Kosovo. In fact, you will think it has nothing to do with any country in the world at all. You will not find any Albanian, English or French culture. It has a completely international identity.

This is because Purple Muse sweaters, made for display are worn by; not only Kosovans but other nationalities also. The brand extends and offers itself to everyone. Additionally, this was a smart marketing strategy to reach the European market.

"We wanted to focus on the European market and when you see our products to automatically compare them with any other brand in Europe".

Various international magazines have written about the flair of their brand, where each of the sisters has had the opportunity to talk about Purple Muse, through which their bond has become stronger. Each of the sisters already has another primary profession, which they practice on a daily basis. Nevertheless, they carefully managed to coordinate with one another and share the responsibilities in the business they started. Together with their mother, who according to the sisters is the pillar of the business's success, the other sisters have taken on managerial, financial and promotional responsibilities.

All five sisters are tied to sectors such as social entrepreneurship, sales and digital marketing, therefore even the managerial part of the business, although they had

no experience with artisanal craft, was something familiar to them.

"It's something that each of one of us is passionate about and don't look at it as a burden. We can't wait to work for Purple Muse", she expresses with a smile.

Until you take the first step, many things seem impossible. The Cana sisters were just having a conversation on the phone together and if they hadn't acted, those words would have gone with the wind as soon as the "off" button on the phone was pressed and the line disconnected.

Purple Muse exists because they fostered the belief and set in motion the engine of passion to make something valuable, something that would have a greater impact than just the commercial earning of the founders.



When I think back to how much praise Purple Muse got, I get goose bumps thinking of the emotion it brought. It's not like we were known for doing business in the fashion sector - we started from zero



za |

women who challenged gender stereotypes

When we meet someone for the first time, the first impressions can relate to their body language or eye colour. We can see what they are wearing or hear their tone of voice. All of these have the verb 'can' in front. Yet, when we see someone, one thing is for sure: we will notice their gender immediately. This plays a key role in our development as humans. We are raised by differentiating people by gender and setting expectations for girls and boys or women and men - the way they should behave. Such perception of gender roles has limited both sides regarding their abilities – why they cannot do what they are capable of doing. Influenced by this, women have historically been discerned as more emotional and weak and the only area they can perform is at home doing chores and taking care of their children. Later on, the only professions accepted were teaching and nursing. Restricted, they didn't practice other professions, particularly those dominated by men. Although deeply ingrained culturally, gender stereotypes are flexible and have changed, they still do. Gender does not predetermine what you are capable of. You could be a woman and become an auto mechanic, be into car racing or drive a giant bus...



Blerta behind the wheel

Like every other day, she had started her day early in the morning. Her routine was simple – finish household chores, then grab her car keys and straight to the car, a place where she would sit all day long. Obviously, in her favourite seat, the driver's.

There was nothing else she loved more than the wheel, the magical gear lever, and of course the accelerator. Blerta Bytyqi turned her passion into a career.

Not even a year has passed since Blerta started car racing professionally. Recently, she completed a professional school at Tempulli College to become a driving instructor.

Blerta never put her dolls aside to play with cars, since cars as toys were not that impressive. She considered that car toys belonged to her brothers, while she would play "dress" with her dolls.

When she turned 12, her interest in dolls and their dresses started to go away. She did not spend her time playing with them. Out of a sudden, she took an interest in cars – but not her brothers' car toys, instead, the real ones.

"Starting from the age of 12, I started liking driving. I was really interested. I was so small that my feet couldn't reach the pedals as I was shorter", she shares for ZA.

Cars sparked her curiosity when she started going out for rides with her family. When the key was inserted and turned to start the car of her father, the sound of the engine made her tingle with excitement.

“Indescribable joy”, she says today.

The moment Blerta's father started driving; she couldn't take her eyes off of his hands and feet, studying every movement. Thus, as an attentive spectator of her father's performance, she learned how to drive by memorizing the whole technique.

“My father taught me how to drive. When he noticed how excited I was, he told me if I could I would register you for driving lessons at 16. The moment I turned 18, I immediately registered in merit”, she tells smilingly.

Blerta would drive for her own needs. She would enjoy this process as she adored it. However, making driving part of her career wasn't on her life's to do list. Her career plans included nursing – something she never pursued.

She is married and a mother of three. For ZA, she tells that when she was 32 years old, on a Sunday afternoon together with her husband and kids they decided to go out and watch a men's car race in Prizren, near their neighbourhood.

While observing the cars in the racing circuit, she experienced the same thrill as when her father started the car. Her childhood memories stayed with her during the race. That completely random decision – to follow car racing – only a few months later would get her adrenaline going in her daily life.

“I really enjoyed watching them race. I couldn't wait for a race in the women's category”, she expresses full of emotion.

Her husband believed in her skills and passion for driving, more than Blerta herself. He saw her taking the wheel and was impressed by her driving technique; the way she would take control of situations in traffic during rush hours.

Noticing Blerta's interest, he took care to make his wife's wish come true the first chance he got. Only a few months after the men's car race, an open call for women racers was announced, which was planned to take place on the international day of women. Upon seeing the open call her husband registered Blerta without her knowledge.

“My first race happened in honour of March the 8th, in Prizren. I was truly interested but I didn't have the confidence I would make it”, she tells, while emphasizing that her husband was the one who gave her the push she needed to succeed.

On March 8, 2017, Blerta would not receive flowers nor other material things as it usually happens. That day, her husband invited her to grab a coffee in Shadërvan, in the center of Prizren. They would go out to mark the day, that's all she knew.

“We went in Shadërvan, and my husband was entering the car. I said to him where are you going, we don't have a special permit? He replied: come on, today on the 8th of March they won't say anything to us. Getting closer, I saw people signing up for racing and my husband said come on Blerta, sign up here. I said, why? When I got closer, I realized he had registered me in the race”, she recounts in detail the first day when she tried herself as a car racer.

In such situations, you are overwhelmed with enthusiasm and that is all you need. Without contemplating further, she took her husband's seat in the car and entered the race.

Self esteem was absent; still this did not penalize her from being placed on a pedestal in her first race, ranking first among the other participating racers.

Joyful from the many cheers of her family members and fellow citizens, she returned home with a thousand thoughts. What happened was extraordinary. She couldn't take in all that had happened.

Blerta is a devout practitioner of the Islamic religion and wears hijab. In the eyes of the world what she had done on that Wednesday, March, 2017; a woman wearing hijab participating in a car race? It sounded strange. Blerta hadn't even dreamt about such thing.

“During the race I heard the commentator saying: it appears that the fastest racer is number 17, she is Blerta Bytyqi and she is leading first! I got a big round of applause and right there I realized I truly am a good racer and won over the audience”, she further narrates that day.

Since March 8, 2017, not a race has passed without her participation. Her husband, starting from that day still takes care of the required procedures to participate in car races. In exchange, she brings home medals which hang in the room of her three sons.

Immediately after the first race she joined the 'Auto Moto Touring Club – AMTC' group, and seeks to motivate other women, who are passionate drivers, to participate in car racing.

Although she was fulfilled and had found her passion, during the races, especially the first ones, Blerta did not feel that comfortable. In every race she attends, negative comments are thrown at her by individuals that are part of the audience, due to the fact that she wears hijab.

“There were many prejudices, especially when they saw me peaking higher and higher. They started saying, you are not allowed to be seen because you wear hijab! Did you ask an imam before coming here? Are you from Arabia or Turkey? And many other things”, reveals Blerta.

What does not kill us makes us stronger. So wrote the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his book, *Twilight of the Idols*, in 1889. This is exactly what happened to Blerta. Prejudice fuelled her self-confidence, something she did not have in the beginning, to continue even stronger and be present in each race.

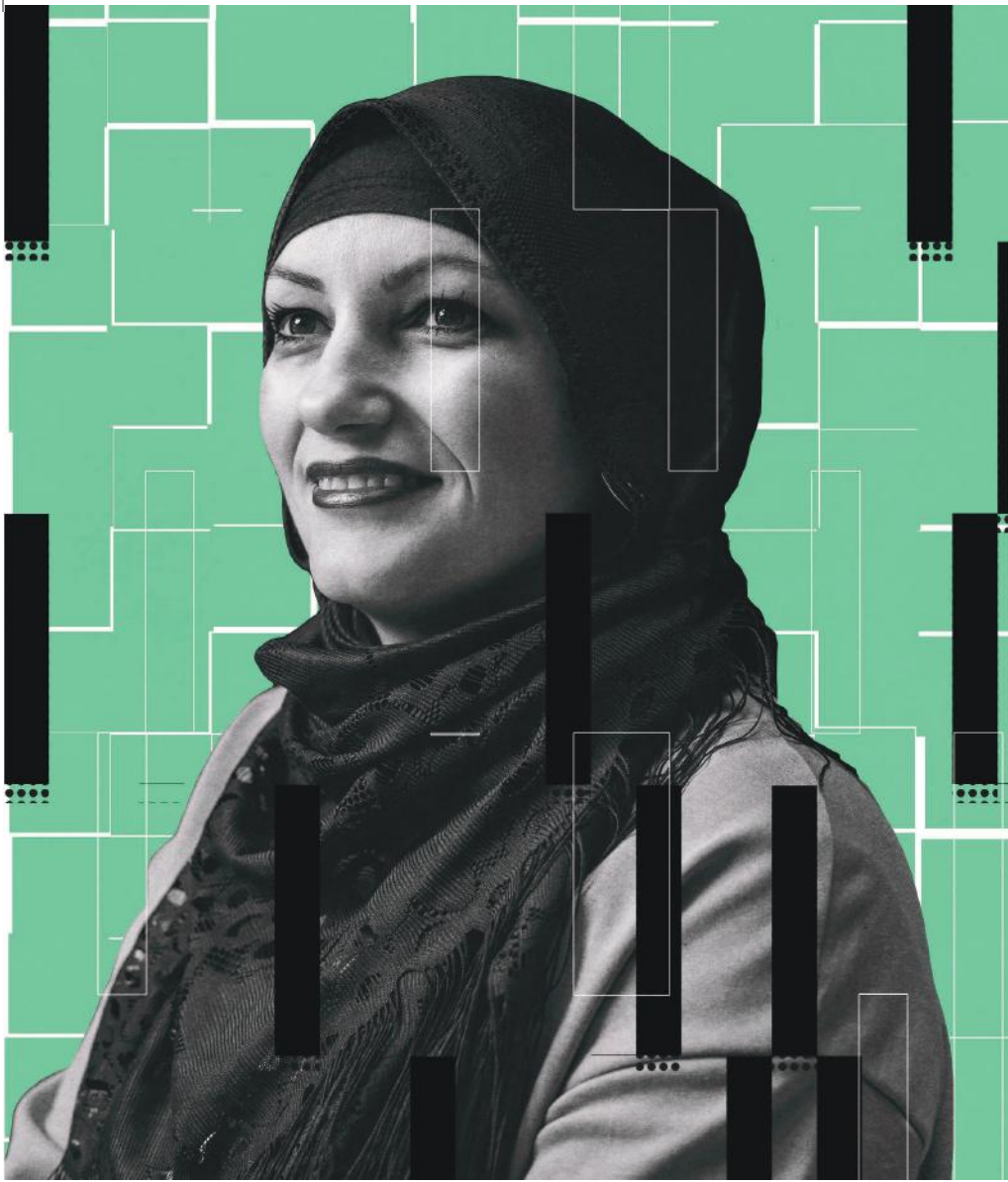
So far, she has participated in 16 races in the second category, which includes cars of 1.4 to 1.6 cubic engines, of which she has received the first place medal often. Races in which she didn't place first were few and always with a reason behind.

Even though the roads in car racing are safe, accidents are inevitable. In some cases, Blerta had an accident as a result of a car breakdown, which got her disqualified from some races.

The circumstances got the best of her ability. However, Blerta was not discouraged.

Going over the list of the races she participated, one of them remained in her memory as the most special. It was the year 2019 where the former President of the country Atifete Jahjaga opened the race in the city of Ferizaj for all racers around Kosovo.

That day, together with six other family members, Blerta had travelled from Prizren to Ferizaj in the car she was going to race with, the Opel Zafira. Since President Jahjaga was opening that race, the emotions were grater and due to the large number of participants she felt insecure in her skills and had doubts about her car's performance.



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MY FATHER TAUGHT ME HOW TO DRIVE. WHEN HE NOTICED HOW EXCITED I WAS, HE TOLD ME IF I COULD I WOULD REGISTER YOU FOR DRIVING LESSONS AT 16. THE MOMENT I TURNED 18, I IMMEDIATELY REGISTERED IN MERIT.

She remembers herself being confused while observing the cars with which other women participants would race.

“I was sitting next to my mother-in-law, looking at other cars and saying to myself: look at these cars, they’ll probably win. But my mother-in-law came near me and put her arm on my shoulders, and said to me: don’t worry at all, it is not about the car, it’s about the driver”, reminisces Blerta.

It was those words that boosted Blerta’s morale to start the race. In the end together with Zafira, her car, she placed first, leaving behind Range Rovers, Mercedes and many other sports cars which gave the impression they would outshine her car.

Blerta’s self-confidence was nourished each race she emerged victorious. Therefore, she never wanted to miss any race organized in Kosovo or in any other country in the region. Since the races fulfilled her to a great extent, she never allowed any situation intervene in her participation.

When a race was organized in the village of Sllatina, Blerta was 7 months pregnant and set out to race.

This decisions of hers was not welcomed by her parents-in-law and other family members, as they were concerned about her and her baby’s health. However, her husband stood by her side, as he always did.

“The in- laws told me, why are you going out to race? Aren’t you scared for the baby? What if something happens? What will you do then? But then my husband solved the problem. He told them: she won’t have to do anything; she’ll just stay seated and turn the wheel”, she starts laughing recollecting how her husband minimized the hard work of driving a car in a race.

“I’m ashamed to say, but my belly touched the steering wheel. When I tried to get out of the car, they opened the door for me and I could hardly get out as I had a really big bump”, she shares her light-hearted experience.

Meanwhile, recently when she participates in a race, her three sons who grew up watching their mother become a champion several times, are also in the audience. They expect nothing less than victory from their mother.

Apart from enjoying the races of Blerta as a spectator, the eldest son who is her number one fan, has asked to get his driver’s license when he turns 18 and start racing but on one condition.

“He told me: when I start racing, you have to retire, and I will continue this path for us”, shares Blerta.

However, with the enthusiasm she holds for racing, it is unlikely that Blerta will retire early. From what we heard, it doesn’t look like Blerta is retiring at all. On the wall where she had hung all of her medals, there was still some room left, and she felt obliged to fill that remaining empty space.

Photos borrowed from the character herself



za | women who challenged gender stereotypes

A girl auto mechanic in Kosovo



People were taken by surprise when I started working there, other staff members. They kind of didn't fully believe that I am capable of this occupation. However, they respected me very much.

In the right corner of the repair shop Eurogoma Company in Shkabaj, Dorentina Qerimi was immersed in one of the computers there. Behind her was standing an Audi Q5 which had a problem.

Dorentina isn't the owner of the automobile, if only anyone would think of this right away when seeing a girl in a repair shop filled with male auto mechanics. Wearing a dark gray uniform, she is a part of the company's staff. To the surprise of many, Dorentina is an auto mechanic.

"I took my first steps with my father and I was his assistant. My father was an auto mechanic. I worked with my father. I also have 2 brothers. They weren't interested in this occupation at all, but I was."

The 26 year old girl from Ferizaj, travels to the outskirts of the capital everyday in pursuit of her dream and professional growth as an auto mechanic. She started learning this trade as her father worked entirely alone and she wanted to help him.

"I saw that it was hard for him to get work done. When you are an auto mechanic it is tough. You either need for someone to hold a tool or anything you need. I'd go there and help him. I noticed that it went smooth. While helping my father, I realized I had skills for this trade and he encouraged me non-stop by teaching", recounts Dorentina for ZA, the support she received from her father.



A woman can perform the job of an auto mechanic without a problem. It's not as physical as it is considered.

"I received the release form and left. If I could do it all over again today, I would have reported the injustice. Back then, I felt alone and I thought people would infringe my rights".

She says that even if she would have attended school like the other students, she would be on top of this trade.

"I have not reported the discrimination. But if I had continued school, I would have been more prepared professionally. It was different with my father, we worked on older cars and I didn't have the chance to learn new systems".

Disheartened, but not discouraged by the behaviour of the professor of "Pjetër Bogdani", Dorentina went to the "Zenel Hajdini" school, where she attended agriculture courses. She finished but her gained knowledge was not utilized as she worked in the repair shop with her father.

Three years ago, in the halls of the Eurogoma Company, an event was organized for girls that practice professions uncommon for women, common for men. Dorentina was invited.

From the status of "a guest" she became an employee of the company.

Going to the workshop managed by her father, strengthened her idea that this was her future career. The trade of auto mechanics requires a range of knowledge about the function of an automobile. She wanted to gain more knowledge about this trade, not only from working in the workshop but from books as well.

She began to offer assistance to her father when she was 15 years old. When she completed elementary education, she did not aim for economics nor a medical high school like other girls of her age would. At the technical school "Pjetër Bogdani" in Ferizaj, 8 years ago, an uncommon application with the name of Dorentina was received, who wanted to enrol in the auto mechanics programme.

"I attended technical high school. I was accepted and registered as the only girl", says she for ZA, while further explaining that her presence wasn't perceived as normal by the professors and students.

"I was teased by students and professors. They used to tell me that girls in their right mind do not enrol in this school. I felt embarrassed. Our society is immensely prejudiced. I dropped out by choice, but in a way I was forced to".

One of the professors, whose name she doesn't want to mention, since a lot of time has passed and it is not worth bringing that situation up, said to her "go back home and clean up your kitchen or something".

"They made these kinds of senseless comments", says Dorentina thinking back to her high school days.

Her patience would last only for 30 days. Entering the classroom turned into sheer laziness. The motivation to stay there has reached negative levels, and she simply left school, not telling anyone about the discrimination encountered in an environment where things like this are supposed to be fought back.

In Kosovo, a girl cannot know each automotive part because no one teaches them.



“When I went there, I met with the owner Ismet Rexhepi. He offered me the position. He told me that I could further enhance my skills and progress. He told me his company would be my home. I tried several fields and I found myself in geometry”, she says.

Dorentina among dozens of men? A strange fact, even for the staff who got used to each other’s company and maybe haven’t even given it a thought that one day a girl will be one of their colleagues.

“People were taken by surprise when I started working there, other staff members. They kind of didn’t fully believe that I am capable of this occupation. However, they respected me very much. They looked at me funny! They wanted to teach me basic stuff I already knew. They observed how I worked and if I actually know anything”, she says smilingly.

“In Kosovo, a girl cannot know each automotive part because no one teaches them. When I used to tell them this part goes here and this goes there, they were surprised”, unfolds the auto mechanic.

While she had earned the respect of her colleagues with her proficiency in mechanics and functions of automobiles, clients were still a challenge— although now, that she has worked there for a while, these challenges have faded.

One day, she was alone at the “sector of geometry” as she calls it.

“Often I am left alone. My colleague, who is older in this trade, knows how I work, how I tighten bolts and everything else. He has gained trust in me, I won’t disappoint him”, states Dorentina.

“A client asks: where did Sherif go? I told him, he just needed to take care of something and he’ll be right back. I asked him if I could assist him by getting his car in the workshop, but he answered: no it’s okay, I’ll wait for Sherif”, she continues further.

The client in question didn’t believe that Dorentina could take care of his car – his material possession – as well as Sherif could, only because she was a girl.

“I asked him if there are any women in his home. He said yes. I said to him: never crush their dreams as you did with mine by not believing in my skills to drive a car. If I had been a boy the same wouldn’t have happened”, she recalls.

“Many similar situations have happened”, she concludes her story and glances her phone, just to keep track of time, since she had to get back to work.

Historically, automotive industry is dominated by men. This is proven by the fact that Dorentina is the only female at the automobile repair shop. Although she has other colleagues who work for the same company, but in positions that have nothing to do with auto mechanics.

This industry has a large gender gap in the number of employees. In the United States of America, for example, according to the 2020 Bureau of Labour Statistics, only 9% of those employed in the auto repair industry are women⁶.

In this field there is a much lower number of women compared to men. The reasons behind it can be various but among them is the idea that women do not possess the required physical strength for this job. According to Dorentina, this isn’t a valid reason.

“A woman can perform the job of an auto mechanic without a problem. It’s not as physical as it is considered. There are parts of the job where a lot of strength is required, but on the other hand there are men who do not possess the strength I do. There is nothing my male colleagues in Eurogoma did that I didn’t. It happens to them as well to not have the strength to do a task”, she expresses.

Additionally, in auto mechanics it is not always required to lift a car up, especially with the advancement of technology.

“There are all kinds of ways you can work on a car. Car painting, technical diagnostic test through a computer, recharge AC system and many other tasks”, explains Dorentina, who mainly deals with the automotive suspension geometry check that is the wheel alignment, wheel balancing and general axle inspection.

According to Dorentina, the reason there are not more women like Dorentina in this profession stands in their fear of prejudice. In Kosovo, only 14.2% of women are employed. Although, there are plenty of jobs in the automotive industry, women do not consider such a career, as Dorentina emphasizes *“you can do just fine working this job”*.

For now, she is the only woman among dozens of men. However, do not be surprised if one day you stop at an automobile repair shop and run into Dorentina and her staff – all women!

“I want to open a repair shop of my own and be surrounded by women. I will empower many people because there are many who would like to do this job. Many Albanian women can be an auto mechanic, if they want”, she declares.

According to a study conducted by Northwestern University in the United States of America, women pay more than men for the same auto repair services. This happens because by default they expect higher prices for the services they receive and do not completely understand the problem with their car⁷.

Meanwhile, Dorentina shares that repair shops are not visited by women because *“there were cases of harassment”*.

Her future plans are going through her mind, while she still works to fully master this trade. Dorentina is the ‘living proof’ that no occupation has gender limitations.

“Sherif, I’m back”, she told her colleague, who was getting ready to leave for his lunch break.

From that moment, Dorentina would face her customers on her own, and it would be random if they would prejudice the auto mechanic by gender!

Photos borrowed from the character herself

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). “Automotive Services Technicians and Mechanics” <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18.htm>

⁷ Busse, Meghan R. & Israeli, Ayelet & Zettelmeyer, Florian (2012). “Damage Repair: The Effect of Price Expectations on Auto Repair offers” – available at: file:///C:/Users/Twin/Downloads/BusseIsraeliZettelmeyer_AutoRepair.pdf

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It is my passion. Obviously, I am privileged to be the first one.

za | women who challenged gender stereotypes

The driver of the 1A line

Whenever you leave the gates of the international airport of Prishtina “Adem Jashari”, you can notice the yellow bus of the public transportation parked right outside.

The 1A line offers transportation to the bus station in Prishtina, from where you can continue to your desired destination.

When you enter the bus, you will get the impression that you are in a Western country. Inside, the smile of a woman, who is the driver, awaits you. A woman in the driver’s seat of a category D vehicle is uncommon in Kosovo. Women do not drive buses!

The driver is called Laura Mirena and she is the first bus driver employed by the public transportation of Prishtina. With her calmness, the journey becomes more pleasant in a congested city.

Born in Prishtina, Laura has primarily lived in the village of Hade in the municipality of Obiliq. After a short time, the land their home was built on was bought by the Kosovo Energy Corporation, and Laura’s family moved to Obiliq.

She was raised with her sisters and her older brother. Her parents worked, thus as the eldest daughter she had to take more responsibilities at home. Yet, she made time to play with her favourite toys – cars.

“When I was little, I played around with cars, motorbikes, I even drove a tractor. Dad taught me how to drive it. I was his right hand”, she shares for ZA.

In 2009, Laura started her studies in Albanian Language and Literature at the University of Prishtina. However, she did not become a linguist. She didn’t graduate from the college she started because her focus was directed elsewhere.

She withdrew from Albanian language studies, but Laura did not let her passion for motoring and heavy-duty vehicles diminish. She used to drive a tractor and already had a knack of driving such vehicles. Fine technique, precision and spatial orientation skills.

These were the required components and Laura had them all. All she needed, was to see was a job advertisement and that’s it, here she is today

"I had a passion for driving heavy vehicles. Since, the opportunity was not present; I didn't delve deeply into this. When I saw through the media that the public transportation was constantly looking for female drivers, I immediately applied for a driver's license."

For several weeks, Laura took bus driving training, starting from the practical training in the parking in Fushë Kosovë, then in the main bus station, and later out on the road, in the city. After finishing these trainings, she took a theoretical test and a practical driving test, which she successfully completed on the first try.

"I passed both tests in a short amount of time. It was financially expensive. My father gave me the money immediately, knowing how dedicated and how inclined I am to do this job"

Without wasting too much time, she expressed her interest in joining the public transportation in Prishtina by writing an e-mail. She received an answer that they would notify her in case of a vacancy. There was not much hope that they would invite her.

"They told me if there's a vacancy we will call you. I thought to myself - everyone says that. I lost hope. However, it turned out it was true, after one month they invited me for a chat"

When she went to the administrative offices of the public transportation, in addition to the document proving that she was licensed to drive a bus, Laura was invited to various tests. Starting with a theoretical test and then some other driving tests.

"I entered the theoretical test; it had mechanical questions, quite difficult. Afterwards they invited me to take a driving test, since they had prejudices. I get it, they were afraid, I was the first female. This job holds a lot of responsibilities. You don't have one passenger, in some cases up to 100. We also did some on-road driving around the city. Within 3 months, they invited me to take different tests, until they gave me the job", recounts Laura the saga she experienced until she earned the position.

On May 22, 2019, Laura was hired as a bus driver in the public transportation of Prishtina, thus becoming the first woman driver in this company.

"It is my passion. Obviously, I am privileged to be the first one. Not being the first one

with a driving license, because I am sure a lot of women have it. But due to the fact that I am the first one to work here, in the public transportation", she adds.

To train for demanding lines, on routes which are jam-packed, Laura started with a line of the public transportation that is not a city centre line or overloaded. Initially, she even worked alongside a colleague who was much more experienced in this job.

"I started with a line to Keqekollë, which is a less occupied line. I was in the bus with an experienced driver and he was the best. Sometimes I worked as a driver and sometimes as a ticket collector during those 3 months. Then, they appointed me as a driver for the Fushë Kosovë line, afterwards for other lines as well"

The colleagues within the company welcomed Laura. Besides, the passengers even though surprised by her presence, were delighted.

"First of all, it was really interesting to me and a pleasure as well. Everyone looked astounded when they noticed me, some smiled, and some complimented me 'Kudos to your courage' and so on. It is obvious that in these circumstances, in Kosovo, it isn't that easy considering the heavy traffic. Numerous passengers gifted flowers to me"

In her first day as a bus driver, she had mixed feelings. She was happy and afraid. The public transportation of Prishtina serves as the main operator by which citizens travel from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and the dynamic is massive. How she would drive depended on the safety of the passengers, thus the burden of responsibility fell on her shoulder.

"The feeling toward the passengers was great and it was fascinating having all those passengers. It was also hard"

Laura works two shifts, the morning and the afternoon one. Her routine starts with the arrival at the depot. Several times during the day she makes her run through the same route of the capital, behind the wheel.

"I get in the bus and start it. Afterwards, I take the shift-order at the dispatcher where I write down my information, such as the buses, kilometres, departure, when I finish the shift, basically everything. Then the dispatcher signs it. You take the bus and the ticket collector joins, you head out of the depot and the shift begins, depending from where it starts. I usually start from the

main bus station and when I'm finished, we fuel up and deliver the bus at the depot altogether with the shift-order"

Meanwhile, Laura is not the only woman in the team that runs the 1A line. Together with her is Arbnora Gashi, who works as a ticket collector. Nevertheless, she worked in a team with men, who are employees of the public transport bus company.

"Currently, in my line is a team of women since it is a bit easier, with less stations and passengers. For now, I am working with a pregnant woman. To make it easier for her, the line to the airport was assigned to us. I run the bus with guys also. Male colleagues are very understanding"

Seeing women behind the wheel of a bus brings us a step closer to gender equality and marks an important progress for the company and the city of Prishtina. Laura is proud that she was able to break a taboo and for this she receives countless compliments from the passengers.

"When people entered and saw me driving, they complimented me, gave me courage and will. They told me that this is so nice, as they've seen women driving a bus 30 years ago in Croatia and Germany. And now the day has come to see them in Kosovo. This might not be a great achievement, but I'm beyond happy I broke this taboo"

Prishtina is the center of Kosovo. At any time of the day, the traffic is heavy. The horns of drivers in hurry never stop.

In addition to pleasant and motivating situations, Laura encounters frustrating situations; most of are the result of congested routes. As much as Laura goes along with the passengers inside the bus, outside it's often chaos.

"First of all, traffic is not in order, because our culture and mentality is sometimes very shallow. We have a particular lane for buses in many roads in the city, still it isn't respected. Instead it's used for car parking. At the moment, there is a lack of bus stops, for example Fushë Kosova is the busiest line", points out Laura one of the key problems in running a public transportation bus.

Besides the problems that come as a result of drivers not respecting traffic rules, there are cases when the drivers make inappropriate gestures and make Laura's job even more difficult, which is de-motivating.

“Sometimes the gestures of car drivers and taxi drivers are inappropriate. In some cases I feel belittled, I feel bad for the passengers. Sometimes this behaviour affects me, leading me to feel sorry that I live here”, she says disappointed.

The responsibility of driving a bus is huge, hence courage is needed. Still, Laura has already overcome many challenges and feels confident. This has been made possible by her will and great desire to work. She tries to be as punctual as possible and arrive at all stations on time. However, in rare cases, delays also occur.

“95% we make it on time, but there are cases when we are late, mainly in the afternoon when people leave work, somewhere around 16 to 18 o'clock. In some cases we are 10 minutes late, but not more. Sometimes accidents happen, they obviously cause delays”.

The municipality of Prishtina is implementing the mobility plan to reduce the number of cars on the road with the purpose to stimulate the utilization of public transportation.

“I suggest using public transportation to everyone. At present, there is a lack of buses, but soon 30 more buses will be provided. Some of them are hybrid electric buses, and I believe that there'll be an addition of lines to different places”.

Laura puts on her uniform everyday and with great dedication avoids the dangers in Prishtina, along with swearing and insults in traffic. At 1 o'clock in the afternoon or 9 o'clock in the evening, depending on her daily schedule, she delivers back the bus to the public transportation depot and in the absence of a line to Obiliq, goes home with her car.

Tomorrow finds her again behind the wheel, challenging stereotypes.

Photos borrowed from the character herself

When people entered and saw me driving, they complimented me, gave me courage and will.





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.



Fadil Berisha's shots

"I have to cancel the interview, could we please postpone it for a few days, I am travelling", he said via a WhatsApp text message.

It was the second time we were trying to get in touch with Fadil Berisha, the well-known Albanian photographer in New York. He cancelled for the second time as he was travelling to Miami to accept the most important award of his career as a photographer.



Always, I would tell my mother that when I grow up I will expose the beauty of Albanians so the whole world will love them

On April 11, the 'New You Media' media house awarded Fadil Berisha with the "Lifetime Achievement Award". At the award announcement ceremony, a video was prepared by the organizers displayed on the big screen of the stage, which the photographer himself shared with his followers on Instagram.

While narrating his life, he mentioned that he had left Kosovo for the West in search of new opportunities in life. Leaving his hometown produced an unusual and tough childhood.

He was only 8 years old when he, together with his family faced a challenge that would determine the fate of each member of the Berisha family. In 1968 they were given an order by the then President of the former Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, to either stay where they are, without monthly income and state aid, or leave the country on a one-way ticket.

For Fadil's father, any decision he would make was bitter. He weighed it in the balance and decided that it is more worthwhile to leave rather than to continue to stay; therefore he booked the ticket to the United States of America, where he built his nest.

"My parents come from Tropoja, and at the time of communism regime in Albania in 1953, Tito gave emigrants in Albania two options: a one-way ticket or the house they had decided to give without any additional aid – luckily, my father chose the ticket to America with his family".

So, how did an Albanian become one of the most famous photographers in New York?

His story as a photographer is specifically related to being Albanian. Fadil had experienced firsthand the discriminatory treatment that had been given to Albanians by continuous regimes in different political systems.

When he talks about his starting point as a photographer, he recalls a certain moment - the great pain he felt when he saw the Albanian youth suffering and being excluded from the world as an outcome of the political circumstance, he made a promise to his mother in-between tears.

"Always, I would tell my mother that when I grow up I will expose the beauty of Albanians so the whole world will love them", he quotes himself while talking to ZA.



Fadil wasn't always passionate about photography. Perhaps he did not even think of himself as a person behind the camera. Nevertheless, the profession he chose to study was closely intertwined with photography.

He had decided to study Menswear Design. Meanwhile, his family wasn't supportive of this dream. Although he acted against his family's preferences, he wasn't fulfilled with the programme he had chosen.

Passion was lacking, along with enthusiasm and vision to complete a fashion design project. Therefore, Fadil isn't known for his fashion collections.

In 1982, he left for Italy to discover himself and escape the prejudice and obstacles he was facing in his family. He hoped that in Italy, the country where Prada, Versace, Armani and Valentino were born, he would find his muse and create.

"I went to Italy and left my family because I understood I couldn't grow in New York, since they didn't let me. I needed to leave, to see a different world, to find myself", he indicates the reasons of going to Europe.

He did not go to Italy alone. He went in the company of Donna Demari, who is "the one to blame" for his success. Donna was a photographer and staying close to her in Milan ignited some sparks of passion for photography in Fadil.

"I fell in love with her work. I couldn't wait to hang around her and observe what she did; how she took a photograph; how she talked and how she approached the models", he recounts.

Fadil took note of her every move with the camera and memorized the technique. Every "click" of Donna's camera was an added beat to his heart. A strong bond was forged between him and photography, which will be further explained by him.

"I was standing behind her in a photo shoot and every time she clicked I thought I missed the most beautiful moment. It nearly drove me crazy as I thought that not a single beautiful photograph was captured. I told her, if I had the camera I would have taken the photos myself. After saying that, I stopped and asked myself: 'do I want to become a photographer?'".

On one of his ordinary days in the studio, he was about to do something extraordinary. He asked Donna for the camera. He wanted to see how the world looked through the photographic lenses. That day he shot his first photograph.



Certainly, it seems insane that he took his first photograph at that age, as a camera back then wasn't a mass-produced device that everyone owned, as it is now.

"After that shot, my whole life opened up. I was excited I found the path where I wanted to go. I'm not a stylist anymore, I'll be a photographer. I was at the design school and taking a course in photography", he happily talks about that moment even today.

The next day he packed everything and left Italy.

After a stint as a photographer in New Jersey, he had decided to move to Manhattan in New York and confront a more challenging market. Getting a studio there cost a fortune and he couldn't start his business right away. Therefore, after a while he asked his sister for help to pay the first rent.

"She gave me the money. But I wasn't able to return it on time, so I avoided her as I was ashamed. One day she called and said to me: if I'd known I'd lose my brother over 5 thousand dollars, I would have never lent it to you", he shares and laughs.

Until the moment he opened his studio, he seldom reminisced about Kosovo in his daily life; possibly, because he left very young and had dim memories. He had heard stories by his parents, but he had not lived them.

It was like that until the late 90s, when one day a group of Albanian students knocked on the door of his studio in Manhattan. The war in Kosovo had started, the tension was intense. They had come to visit with a purpose – they had a package to give to Fadil. Inside it were photographs of massacred Kosovans. They asked Fadil to show the world what was happening in Kosovo.

"When I looked at those photographs, I almost went crazy, my life changed. I wasn't the same! I only thought about what if I was the person in the photograph", he thinks back to that day in detail.

Hopeless that he could be of any help to the young Albanians, he returned home and started telling his mother what he had seen and heard that day. The conversation with his mother helped him believe that even though it had nothing to do with the work he does, he was capable of helping the young men and his country of birth.

"I called the students back and told them: you have troubled my life. I can't eat and I can't sleep anymore! I keep having nightmares. I don't know how, but I will help you", Fadil recalls.



And he really meant it.

After a while, together with many Albanian and foreign friends they opened a fund that would help Kosovo. Besides, they decided to unfold to Americans the situation of Kosovo, while distributing those photos and organizing various peaceful protests.

On a Wednesday, over 20 thousand Albanians decided to march towards the White House in Washington D.C. in protest. That day, the

leader of the group, Avni Mustafaj was welcomed inside the White House to show the purpose of that massive protest.

"When Avni came out of the meeting, he had a look on his face like he had seen God. I said to him: what happened? He replied: President Clinton came, met us personally and told us he stands on our side".

"God, I'm getting goose bumps now that these memories are coming back to me", he concludes.

The knock of the Kosovan students in the studio made him an activist of the national issue. In the end he was a photographer and that is what he did best. Thus, he decided to use it to tell the world about himself and his country.

Since Fadil took Donna's camera, he has photographed hundreds of people from all over the world, mainly women. Since 2002, he is the lead photographer of Miss Universe and has photographed participants from 96 countries of the world.

However, Albanian women were not present in his portfolio until 2008, when Zana Krasniqi the eye-grabbing model from Prishtina caught his attention. He supported Zana on her journey to represent Kosova in Miss Universe 2008.

"When Zana came out as a look-alike of Angelina Jolie, my heart was full as I heard the audience shouting her name. Such a pretty girl, with a perfect outfit and walk, and I said this girl here is our image. I was glad I could shut down the negative comments of many of my friends about the Albanian beauty", he explains.

Only a year later, he brought in the same beauty pageant the Kosovan Marigona Dragusha, who placed as the second most beautiful woman in the universe.

"When she appeared so beautiful, like Audrey Hepburn, everyone was shouting Kosovo-Kosovo, and I knew that was gracious, it gladdened my heart and I started crying tears of joy".

“To me, Albanian women were always important. I cannot hand talent to people, but I can boost their confidence a little. I try to do this through photography”.

Fadil Berisha has not sent any Albanian speaker back from his studio without doing a photo shoot for them, whether it is a model, politician or businessman, because helping his people fulfils him to a great extent.

“I work passionately; without passion you have nothing. When I take a photograph of someone, I give my maximum and I want the best out of the figure. I want to give strength to make them feel good about themselves”, he brings to light.

In so many years of experience, his camera has captured countless photographs. If they were printed, there might not be enough drawers to fit all of those images on paper. Dozens of well-known figures of the American music and movie industry have posed in his studio. People

who have probably dedicated their entire life to appearance!

However in Fadil's eyes, only a few details are needed for an eternal image like a photograph.

“The eyes, heart and smile are what make a beautiful photograph”, he reveals the magical recipe of photography.

Upon these words, the staff in the studio started knocking on his office where he was giving the interview.

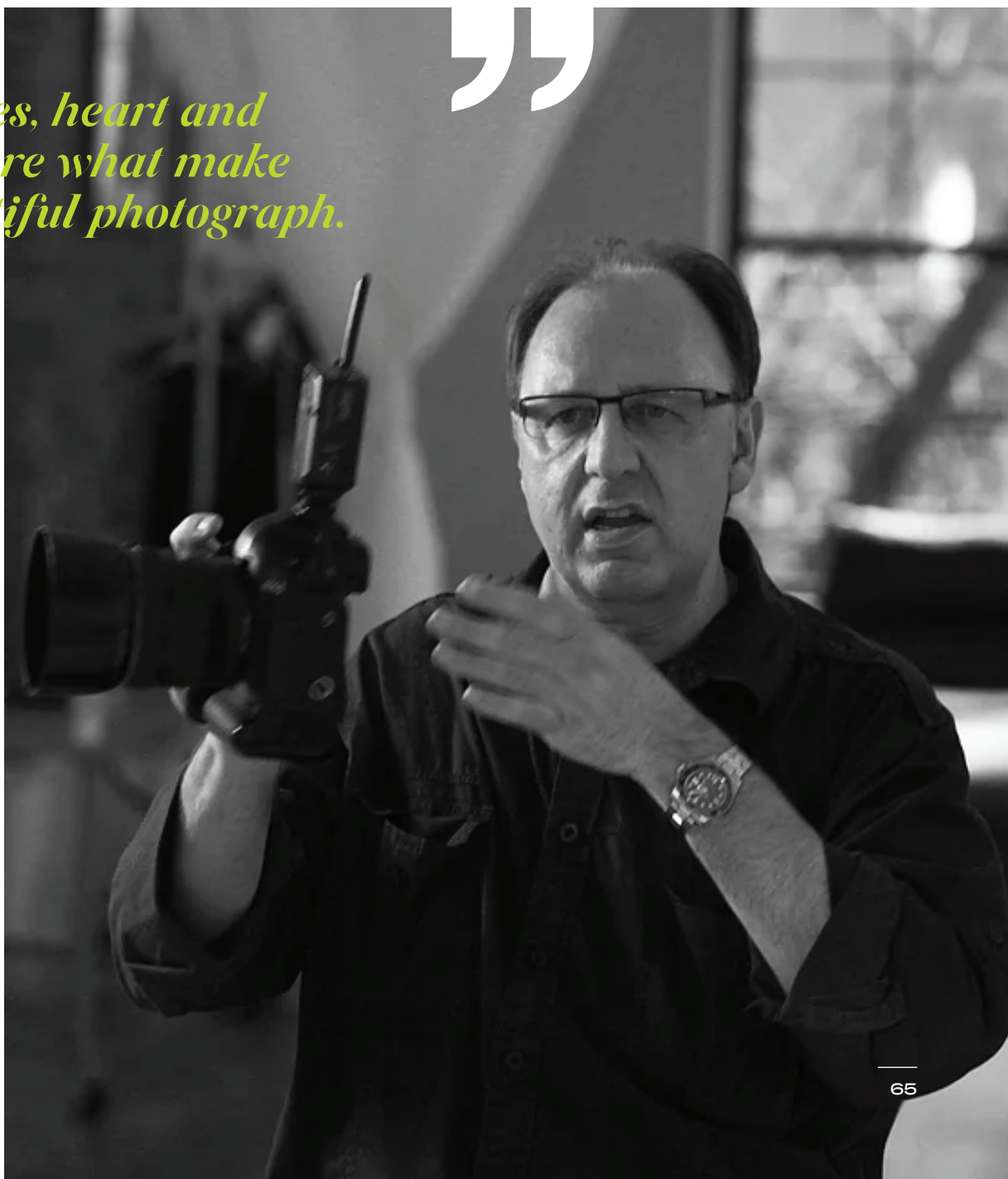
“Everything is ready”, a voice from the back was heard.

The photo shoot was all set up and the only thing missing was Fadil behind the camera.

“I love all of you in Kosovo, from the bottom of my heart”, he said and clicked on the “leave the meeting” button.

Photos borrowed from the character himself

The eyes, heart and smile are what make a beautiful photograph.



The fight for equality beyond gender

The flag of Kosovo has six stars; they represent equality between ethnicities that live in Kosovo. According to the Constitution, the state is multi-ethnic.

However, experience has revealed that it takes much more than drawing stars and letters in the constitutional book to achieve the reality of equality in the field.



Photo borrowed from the character himself

Isak Skenderi, Executive Director of the Organization of “Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians” (VoRAE) demonstrates this better than anyone else.

Isak was born in a family of the Roma community, village of Ceratovicë, municipality of Obiliq in 1982. Surrounded by members of the Albanian, Serbian and Ashkali communities, Isak internalized a moral and ethical code which he follows throughout his life.

“Somehow we managed to coexist together. I was raised in a working class family, so was the rest of the neighbourhood” he tells for ZA.

The neighbourhood, as Isak remembers, had a proportionally larger number of Roma compared to other ethnicities. In his family only his father worked. However, he recalls being financially stable.

“With the salary of my father, received from KEK (KEC), where he used to work, we had an average lifestyle but we followed a social cohesion”. The cohesion that Isak was proud of in his neighbourhood crumbled in 1998-1999, when the political tensions between Kosovo and Serbia rose.

After completing the primary school in the village he was born, he attended a part of economic high school in Prishtina, and the remaining part was completed in Kurshumli, Serbia. He continued his academic journey by attending university classes in the Economics programme in Mitrovica, studying in Serbian language throughout the journey. Familiarization with other communities made Isak adaptable and able to speak several languages.

“During the first few post-war years, I began getting involved in activism, but mostly I worked as a translator from Serbian to English. I signed my first contract with the Ombudsperson of Kosovo”.

As a translator, he also worked for KFOR and EULEX until, 2011, when he began his full and uninterrupted commitment to the VoRAE organization.

“To be able to experience more delicate work firsthand, I was at a crossroad when it came to making a decision about my career. I decided to devote the professional part of my life to foster equality in our society”, he explains the reasons behind the shift in his career

path from a certified translator to an advocate in the field of human rights and collective social development.

The VoRAE mission is to facilitate and develop opportunities for involvement of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians communities in the Kosovan society.

The organization has targeted several main areas, which are covered as fundamentals in terms of improving the life of the communities. Programs developed for education, employment and housing have had positive outcomes in eliminating the void, in which the members of the communities do not share the same privileges as the majority.

VoRAE has a scholarship scheme to encourage youth to pursue education.

Since women are positioned to earn less than men, the scholarship scheme is arranged to give females beneficial priority.

“When we built the national scholarship program for high school students, we set criteria through which girls who apply earn additional points by default and are candidates for winning a scholarship”.

Since the criteria leads to positive discrimination, it appears that throughout the years more girls than boys benefit from the scholarship scheme and continue attending university.

“These girls serve as a ‘role model’ to the whole community regarding the achievements a girl can reach despite the challenges”, declares Isak.

One of the side effects of disrupting education is the path that the girls of these communities often take - early marriage. Based on his experience, Isak blames the parents, but also the institutions and society for their negligence to face this issue.

“It is much easier to turn our heads rather than face the problem in front of us”, he expresses with frustration.

Isak explains that the decision parents make to push their children into marriage at such a young age stems from the low socioeconomic status of these communities.

“Patriarchy is powerful in Roma families, where the father mostly out of fear that their daughter can, as the expression goes ‘ruin the family’s image’; therefore they sacrifice their daughter and send her off to a husband”.

Institutions, informs Isak, do not take measures under the pretext that early marriages are a tradition of RAE communities and do not believe they should intervene in a cultural phenomenon.

“We have an interesting situation. It goes like this, when we don’t want to be discriminated against and want to be treated equally, we are discriminated against, such is the case of early marriages. The institutional response should be immediate and clear-cut, instead they tell us ‘it’s your tradition, so we’ll settle and not react’. Whereas in cases when we want positive discrimination, their response is ‘everyone is equal and should be treated the same’”, elaborates Isak explaining the paradox between institutions and their approach to communities.

“In principle, all of them are stigmatized as gypsies in our society. Support by institutions for the establishment of policies and advocacy of such policies which address these challenges would make a difference”, he indicates.

It is not only the social institutions that discriminate and stigmatize the community. It is society itself and members of the majority who do this.

In the labour market, communities are drastically underrepresented.

Institutions and employers declare they cannot find qualified individuals from the communities; meanwhile Isak claims that many young girls and boys are graduates lacking access to the labour market.

Isak shares for ZA magazine that the organization has a close cooperation with some businesses. Still, even those that support the cause are reluctant to show their support openly.

“As a society we have sent wrong messages regarding the participation of these communities in the labour market. In most cases they offer positions where they remain inconspicuous or something where they aren’t seen at all, because if they are exposed or face the costumers they fear that the business would suffer”.

He further claims that the issue of involvement is intricate in essence, since *“no matter how much someone wants to be involved, if the other side is not ready to accept their involvement, the whole effort goes to waste”.*

Communities have shown and proved they want and are all set to be an equal part of society. They want to contribute to the country they live in and to not be treated as a burden or underestimated based on their identity.

In a research done by the organization, on the presence of anti-Gypsyism in Kosovo, shocking information is revealed which illustrates the factual situation of the lack of will from the majority to involve the minorities.

According to this study, 70 percent of the population in Kosovo, mostly Albanians, have never had direct interaction with a member of the communities.

“Everything they know about the communities is from platforms, media or rumours which in a way distorts the reflection and the idea of who the communities really are”, states Isak.

This kind of approach must be changed as soon as possible and work must be done to eradicate the hate and the discrimination tendencies which

prevail in society, it is unfounded and illogical, he asserts.

True equality and establishment of a just society are accomplished when all communities live in harmony and interact with each other.

He believes that the conditions in Kosovo can be fulfilled, as well as in other countries of the world, for communities to live a genuine life and engage equally.

“None of the communities want to live in the present conditions, nor with the challenges they face”, he declares.

Together we can aim to perceive diversity as an added value, not as an attribute to marginalize.



When we built the national scholarship program for high school students, we set criteria through which girls who apply earn additional points by default and are candidates for winning a scholarship.

In memoriam

To the queen of tears, Melihate Ajeti

For years I've tried to turn the clock back to that generation of colossi who took the first steps towards the artistic creativity of our country, so the past of this of this country's soul will not evanesce.

I look back to my childhood, nostalgic I reminisce about my childhood spent in the magical and fabulous world of theatre, since my parents Melihate Ajeti and Muharrem Qena worked there. All the actors felt like family. It seemed as if the plays were taking place in the living room of my home.

My mother was one of the first actresses. At that time it was not encouraging to be an actor. Yet, she took courage to bring her dream to life regardless of prejudices and problems. On the wooden floor of the theatre, my mother earned the respect of the audience. As an actress, there wasn't a gift more precious.

Back then, even the female acting roles in theatre were performed by men. Men were everywhere and you can't even imagine the difficult position in which my mother and her colleagues Meribane Shala, Katarina Josipi, Hyrije Hana, Hazbije Kovaçi, Nexhmije Pagarusha, Vera Balaj, Meserete Cavolli, Melihate Ajeti, Mysherefe Preka, Adelaide Sopi, Naxhije Deva, Leze Spaqi Qena and Belgjzare Fejza put themselves in.

I am mentioning them, as I feel obliged. I knew all of them; they are the reason behind the woman I am.

My mother, Melihate, became an actress at the age of 16. She set foot in a theatre for the first time in 1951. She had a fragile childhood, that was the fate that befell her. She grew up in the orphanage of Peja where the scouts of young actors for the newly formed provincial, now national, theatre discovered her talent.

Muharrem Qena was also a scout who became a teacher and guide of the profession, and later her husband and

my father. Together with my father, for 16 years - as long as their marriage lasted, as two young, fervent, passionate about the play, acting, theatre and art, they created the most beautiful works on the stage of the Theatre of Prishtina.

My mother travelled everywhere showcasing her art. She presented Kosovo at theatre festivals and together with my father won awards in countries that didn't even know where Kosovo was and how Albanian language sounded. I admired her at home and I admired her on stage. I believe I was her most devoted fan.

She performed in the most beautiful plays. Every interpretation of hers, be it "Zullumqari", "Besë", "Sikur të isha djalë", "Bashkëshortët", "Zonja me kamelië" and even "Erveheja", live with me still.

Meli devoted her entire life to the stage and audience, hence the audience connected with her. A woman in an ambiance where women didn't cherish freedom or equal opportunities, my mother had the chance to perform heroines with a tragic fate. While performing she embodied their lives and wished for Albanian women to not suffer such grim fates.

As it was in her hands, with sacrifice, she paved the way for young actresses who reached onto the theatre stage more easily than my mother and her friends.

Meli has played 180 roles, mainly starring roles, in theatre and film. Embedded in each protagonist, she melted herself to the core. She spoke, suffered and shed real tears in front of the audience. She cried in the roles of Dije, Old woman Nicë, Anna Karenina, Erveheja and Desdemona every time she played them. Possibly only the applause of the audience dried the tears off her cheeks.

Her creativity has been highly appreciated by critics. The awards she had won by performing in theatre, placed on her shelves, are proof of it.

My mother gave me life and a joyous childhood. She was the most important person in my life. Moreover, she was the role model of a woman who was persevering and accomplished her goals. What could I give her in return? Nothing close to the value of what she gave me.

Although, I did a symbolic gesture. In 2011, I made a documentary about Meli as part of the "Pa skenar" shows that I broadcasted in Radio Television of Kosovo, where I presented the creative colossi of that time, who had been forgotten with time and attempted to introduce them to the young generation.

Precisely 9 years later, in 2020, with the help of the publishing house KOHA, I set myself a mission which would require my absolute dedication, not an easy task. I classified the large archive my mother had entrusted me as part of her will, to write "Monografinë e primadonës së Teatrit Melihate Ajeti". Although it is difficult to strip off emotions when talking about your own mother, I have tried to stay objective. To present readers with facts and the true story behind her creations.

I did so little for my mother, but what I did helps me sleep soundly, knowing I managed to leave behind a testament of her sensational existence. Many young actresses have and will continue to come to the wooden floor of the theatre and film sets after her. Each line written on that book will remind them of the legacy Meli and her friends left behind.

With love, your daughter

Antigona Qena



ZA Magazine started from an idea – to create a novel platform to tell the stories of women and men who work zealously for our country so we can inspire the young generations to follow their pathways. This idea came to life thanks to a team that knitted each story with love and professionalism. This team strongly believes in the cause of ZA and after each edition launching, it gains more hearts and deepens the trust of people in the magazine.

The team of ZA is led by Donika Lamaxhema, who invested all her experience in journalism in the magazine. With an incomparable will, Donika writes some of the articles by herself and edits others written with passion and love by Diona, Nora, and Valentina, so that each story is told in the unique and inspiring style of ZA.

In this edition, the 6th in the row, we celebrate a lot of women who have proved themselves in journalism, and others who are new to the profession but possess a lot of potential to initiate change for better through their words.

Among the initiatives in the field of journalism, we celebrate ZA on the 6th and has reserved more space for many more stories to be told.

Brikena Avdyli

Executive Director of Jahjaga Foundation



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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!