

# Beyond the East Side of Addiction: Addressing Issues of Substance Use and Addiction in Albania

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**Abstract:** This paper is an account of our recent trip to Albania, a small country in Southeastern Europe's Balkan Peninsula, to study substance use in the country. The purpose of our exploratory research was to gain a deeper understanding of the prevalence of substance use in Albania, its impact, and Albania's response to these issues. In contrast to interventional and associational styles of research, we decided to present our findings ethnographically, through immersion in the population. This paper is a narrative reflection of our trip, its qualitative method fortified by the incredible opportunity to learn up close and personal the challenges faced by the Albanian people and their culture regarding substance use and dependence. The valuable insight we gained regarding their history and traditions was made possible only by the openness and willingness of the Albanian people to share their most intimate reflections on their beloved country.

**Keywords:** substance use disorders, dependence, ethnographic research

It is not an everyday occurrence that childhood friends make national headlines, and it is even more infrequent and unlikely for them to appear on the front page of five of the most influential newspapers in the country, even if it may be a small country called Albania. The *Gazetta Dita*, the *Gazetta Liberale*, the *Tirana Post*, *Panorama*, and the *Gazetta Tema* all featured our open letter—from recent first-time visitors Dr. James DiReda and Jack Maroney, the authors of the book *The East Side of Addiction*—which suggested a pathway for dialogue to stem the rising tide of drug use in Albania. The striking similarities between the events of the book to what was (and is) happening in Albania proved to be the spark for our invitation and subsequent popularity.

The saga began after a Worcester Public Library event, where we spoke to the library staff about stigma and the need for empathy when interacting with individuals affected by substance use and dependence. We, along with our childhood friend Hank Grosse (now deceased), had written *The East Side of Addiction* (DiReda, et al., 2016). Chronicling the drug use among a group of neighborhood friends in the city's East Side from the 1960s, this book was initially written to offer hope to families impacted by substance use. However, another purpose soon came: Worcester librarian Rezarta Rezo, who had attended the presentation, was moved by the uncanny similarity of our book to the current situation in her home country of Albania.

Rezo volunteered to translate the book into her native language in the hope of creating awareness about the dangers of early use of alcohol and drugs in her country. Thus, *Në Lojë Me Djallin* (*In the Game with the Devil*) was born.

Rezo's efforts were recognized and rewarded in Albania by the Dituria Publishing Co., who agreed to publish and promote the book. Following the translation, Rezarta presented the book at

a publisher's book fair and provided interviews to various news outlets in Tirana. This set the stage for our upcoming visit, as many people had now read *Në Lojë Me Djallin* and knew who we were. Soon, we had invitations—not only from Rezo but from a University of Tirana professor and the executive director of the Albanian Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

When presented with the opportunity to visit Albania, we did not hesitate; but our journey to a foreign country was not without trepidation. We wondered how the Albanian people would receive us, especially since we were traveling to the country to speak openly about alcohol and drug use. The language barrier, the currency, the culture, and the civil unrest, fueled by economic insecurity that resulted in fiery protests destroying a parliamentary entrance adjacent to the Airbnb where we were scheduled to stay, all added additional layers of concern and might have dissuaded less enthusiastic travelers. The French philosopher Albert Camus (1991) once said:

What gives value to travel is fear. It is the fact that, at a certain moment, when we are so far from our own country...we are seized by a vague fear, and an instinctive desire to go back to the protection of old habits. (pp. 33–34)

His words resonated in our psyches as we flew to our destination.

We spent a week in Albania, a country steeped in traditions and equally troubled by the rising tide of drugs and their associated ills, and tried to develop an understanding of the challenges encountered by those impacted by substance use and addiction. In our interactions with members of the YWCA, local drug coalitions, the medical staff at Mother Teresa Hospital, news reporters, police officers, university faculty, drug treatment providers, and youth workers, we learned firsthand that Albanians possessed a level of compassion and empathy toward their fellow countrymen that left a lasting impression.

The following section is a detailed account of our days in Albania: our conversations, our interviews, our impressions, documentary data, and our observations—what transpired and what we learned that academically resulted in a detailed and comprehensive account of the social phenomena regarding substance use and recovery in Albania.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, this ethnographic research uses a “cultural lens” to study people's lives within their communities (Atkinson, 2007), and it is intended to provide firsthand insight into the Albanian people's perceptions and perspectives regarding substance use disorders (SUDs). This research is characterized by our in-depth conversations and interviews with several groups of individuals; our immersion in the Albanian culture; our burgeoning interpersonal relationships; and engaging fully in the language, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the participants in their natural environment (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

### **Day One**

We entered Albania as complete strangers to the country, accompanied by caution and concern

for what might be in store for us. We were met at the airport by two of our gracious hosts: Dona, the executive director of the YWCA, and her husband Tony, the owner of a local bistro. Although we had several communications prior to our arrival, this was the first time we'd met in person. Tony and Dona would be instrumental in the coordination of our itinerary and provided much of the transportation for us throughout the week. Rezo, our contact in America, had connected us with Dona. Long before we arrived in Albania, we and Dona had been using a group chat to speak about her work with local drug coalitions and political leaders to address the issues of substance use, especially at the high school and college level.

We headed to Tirana, the capital of Albania, and our concerns began to fade as our conversation with Tony and Dona about their country, the issues they faced, and what we hoped to accomplish took greater precedence.

As we began our immersion into Albania, our hosts provided us with as much background information and detail about their culture and country as we could absorb on the ride from the airport to our Airbnb. Tony and Dona answered any questions we posed; their knowledge of the country's history, geography, and culture helped us immensely. Additional insight into this country—with an estimated population slightly over three million people—was provided by one of our Albanian cab drivers who sarcastically told us, “Only half of the people live in Albania at any given time. The other half are out of the country trying to make money.”

Tirana, the eventual home for the family of the visibly celebrated Saint Teresa of Calcutta, was chaotic. Cars with seemingly no regard for personal safety darted about and around us with reckless abandon. Despite the apparent bedlam, the city possessed an eerie, timeless, and nostalgic past. Tirana has the feel of an old European city, quite similar to those one would see in Italy or France, with the beauty of the old world, and the deterioration of economically poor communities as well. It is busy and crowded but vibrant and active with many businesses and cultural opportunities to enjoy. It is a beautiful and charming city, surrounded by a gorgeous landscape as one heads out of the city limits and known for its pastel buildings that border Skanderbeg Square, a focal point where cosmopolitan and small-town feelings are intertwined with a rich cultural history. Skanderbeg Square included plenty of entertainment but also, at the time of our visit, a great deal of political unrest. The pain and suffering from Albania's storied history and centuries of conquests were at times very palpable, a strange dichotomy from the rising energy of a new way of thinking and living in a free society, different from the totalitarianism of communist government.

When we arrived at our living quarters, we immediately felt the true hospitality of the Albanian people. Our hosts had furnished our rooms with foods, fruits, drinks, and even a homemade cake, which reinforced our initial welcomed feelings. We would soon become fast friends with our gracious hosts. We unpacked our suitcases and settled in for a brief rest to unwind from our trans-Atlantic journey.

Before long, we found ourselves walking on the streets of Tirana accompanied by Dona and her good friend Kristina, a faculty member at the University of Tirana and the chairperson of the board of directors at the YWCA. Our stroll took us alongside Skanderbeg Square and past an

incendiary-scarred government building, the only remaining evidence of a violent protest that had taken place a few nights before. Our destination was an outdoor café in Park Rina, a small park in the heart of Tirana that features a large fountain and a pavilion with several restaurants. Over dinner, we received a two-hour crash course in the history and culture of Albania from our hosts, complete with their assessment of substance use problems in Albania and the lack of treatment and resources to address them. It was quite eye-opening for us, and highly informative for our deeper understanding of how their culture and people have been affected by substance use of all types—especially the youth. We also received a localized view on the history of political corruption in Albania and gained some insight as to why there were extremely limited resources available for research, education, and treatment regarding SUDs.

It seemed, according to our hosts, that a lot of corrupt practices still existed in Albania—an undesirable leftover from a communist political system that ended in 1990. Resources were diverted from the issues of substance use to other “more important” initiatives. To make matters worse, Albania serves as a port of entry for many of the drug imports destined for distribution to other parts of Europe, creating a perfect storm for a country in the midst of uncertain economic development. As a result, there is an underground economy that preys upon the poor communities in Albania by providing illegal drugs; this, in turn, increases the rate of crimes committed by those dependent on substances.

We were later joined by Kristina’s son Marin, a young man in his late twenties who was born and raised in Albania but lived in New York and graduated from the University of Massachusetts before returning to his native country. He brought a different perspective to the conversation. He spoke of “apathy” among the Albanian people that, he said, “has blocked any progress” around the issue. He told us, “People are still experiencing the mindset they held under communism, and they lack trust in their elected government officials and leaders to make change.”

“Therefore,” he said, “the status quo continues.”

Our friends informed us that few people in their country are willing to talk openly about the issues they face. It was against this very same tight-lipped backdrop that we had told our story of substance use and recovery within *The East Side of Addiction*.

## **Day Two**

Our second day in Albania began with an early morning walk to the corner coffee shop—no drive-through Dunkin Donuts shops here—where we were treated to an unexpected act of kindness and hospitality. Before we had the opportunity to convert any of our American money into Albanian *Lek*, a colorful currency with an exchange rate of over one hundred to one, we were cordially offered a cup of the country’s rich espresso after we promised to come back to pay.

Our newly acquainted friends Kristina and Dona were waiting outside our Airbnb at 9 a.m. to chauffeur us to Mother Teresa Hospital, where we would visit Tirana’s only inpatient SUD

treatment program. The hospital had a familiar look comparable to other institutional settings one might see in the United States, but older: We saw a large maze-like campus and a conglomeration of differently sized and shaped buildings. The detoxification unit, housed in the basement of the hospital's Toxicology Services, had the aura of a program on the decline. The dusty jalousies, yellowed windows, stagnant air, and moribund smell of chemicals did little to alter the sense of despair.

We were escorted to a makeshift conference room. There was a perceptible shift in the mood as word spread about the meeting with the implied "treatment experts" from North America. Ultimately the entire staff of doctors, psychologists, nurses, and clinicians joined us in this small, cramped room to discuss the issues they faced in treating individuals with SUDs—and their hope for a miracle cure.

As we talked, it became quite evident that resources for treatment of SUDs were minimal to nonexistent. The chief medical officer, who facilitated the meeting, informed us that they run an understaffed program approximately two weeks in length where individuals are detoxed and provided with basic education around SUDs. Two major issues cited by the staff were a lack of post-discharge resources to refer to their patients for follow-up care and a lack of medication needed to treat this population. The staff cited multiple instances when they had simply run out of methadone—a medication integral to their detox protocol, without which many patients suffered undue distress and often opted to return to using illicit street drugs to alleviate the pain of withdrawal. Not having a continuum of care or follow-up treatment, including an absence of mutual aid support groups (such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous), makes successful recovery from SUDs even more difficult for patients. Relapse is made almost inevitable.

Despite the challenges of minimal research funding and lack of needed supplies, we left the meeting with a firm conviction that the entire toxicology staff was working hard to improve the treatment of SUDs. Annual conferences and published research articles created awareness for the need to help those with SUDs. Our time with this group left us empathetic to the struggles and challenges faced by these dedicated professionals; it made us reconsider the treatment resources and understanding of SUDs that we have in the United States. We stand hopeful that this group will usher in the needed change to create a more robust and effective treatment system.

Following our time at Mother Teresa Hospital, we were met by Dituria Publishing House, who was responsible for scheduling some of the events and public relations work for our visit. The team from Dituria was young, energetic, and fun to be around—and was truly invested in helping us spread the message about SUDs and recovery. They escorted us to the next stop on our itinerary, a meeting with the students, teachers, and administrators of the Partizani High School in Tirana. It was one of the many highlights of our trip.

We were impressed by the reception we received from the students and teachers. They had all read our book and had extremely insightful and probing questions about substance use and its impact on their friends, neighborhoods, and community. They were honestly interested in

learning how to change attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors around substance use and dependence. What became unmistakably clear was their enthusiasm and appreciation for having us there, as our scheduled one-hour meeting turned into a two-hour interchange with questions, personal accounts, a photography shoot, and a personalized book signing for each student and teacher as well as their principal.

As we debriefed after the meeting, it was obvious that a fair amount of hope for the prevention and treatment of substance use problems in Albania lay with these students. They eloquently expressed their concern for the negative impact of substance use, including tobacco and gambling, on their friends, family, and country. There was an intensity to this group of students that was undeniable, which was further fueled by their frustration, fear, and lack of confidence in their elected leaders. These students wanted to change the status quo and actively pursued the knowledge they needed to do it. These precocious youth are the country's future; that alone makes it imperative we help them understand the complexity of these issues and work with them to develop initiatives and programs to bring about the change they desire and deserve.

After lunch, we met with the director of public affairs from the U.S. Embassy. We shared parallel ideas and kindred hopes for how, together, we might help the Albanian people continue their work toward change. We were united in our perspective that education and open dialogue among the people of Albania were key ingredients to success, and we agreed that avoidance and denial were not working. We further concurred that to change the issues, we would need to tackle them head-on, and that collaboration with other influential groups would help bring the issue of SUDs to the public's attention. This conversation validated our (the authors') concerns and reinforced our hope that our ideas were well received and shared. The unequivocal takeaway from this meeting was that the Embassy's Public Affairs Office was supportive of the work done by the local YWCA, as well as the drug coalitions which consisted primarily of high school and college-age students, to address the issues surrounding substance use in Albania.

Our evening itinerary included an interview with Mustafa Nano, the host of one of the most-watched news shows in Albania, *Provokacija* (Provocation). The show, which has a far-reaching audience headlined by its popular host, facilitated an informed dialogue complete with insightful questions designed to "provoke" gut-level responses to substance use and the impact it has on those affected. A well-deserved credit goes out to our wonderful translator Kalia Musha, who helped us understand the questions asked by our host and convey our responses in the spirit intended. This appearance coincided nicely with our main goal of getting the word out and conducting an open dialogue about substance use.

As this second day came to an end, we were tired and emotionally drained; but at the same time, we felt excited and thankful for the opportunity to meet such wonderful people, learn about their culture, and share ideas and hopes for the future. We felt grateful for our reception and for how amenable folks were to speak with us about the issues of substance use and dependence. We understood that progress would be slow, but it was possible, and our visit might be just a small step in that hoped-for change. We retired that evening with the words of St. Francis de Sales echoing in our heads: "What we need is a cup of understanding, a barrel of love, and an ocean of patience" (Missionaries of St. Francis De Sales Southeast India, 2020, p. 2).

### Day Three

Day three of our trip was markedly different from the previous two. We traveled with Dona and Kristina to the city of Shkoder, which is about ninety minutes north of Tirana. The purpose of our trip was to attend a “kickoff” celebration of a local drug coalition comprised of students, school administrators, local police, and political officials held at the “28 Nentori” High School.

This engagement resulted in one of the five national headlines in the *Panorama*: “*Dy amerikanë nisin fushatë sensibilizuese. Përdorimi i drogës prek adoleshentët, nis fushata sensibilizuese,*” a caption amateurishly translated to “Two Americans launch an awareness campaign. Teenagers launch awareness campaigns on the effects of drug use” (published after our arrival in May 2019). The headline itself illustrated the novelty and the burgeoning awareness of substance misuse in Albania.

The article went on to describe the city that had become our destination, as Shkoder was one of many cities that were back in the news as hot spots for drug users—the number of users was in the thousands. As the story reported, a youth-led drug coalition of 35 young high school students had banded together to offer a helping hand in the battle to remove drugs from their schools and invited two American authors to participate in their event. The authors of the translated book *In the Game with the Devil* were asked by the youth to talk about their book and share their professional and personal knowledge on drug abuse.

Astrit Beci, Regional Director of Public Health, was included as an interviewee. Within the article he stated that drug use was everywhere and that he wanted to make teenagers aware of the dangers of drugs. He supported the project, citing worries of more and more drug users in the region and the consequences for families. According to the Director, drug users and their families should clearly have services in the municipality where they are living. Coalitions for Communities Troubleshooting against Drug and Alcohol Abuse launched this project and is expected to create special groups and find accurate data to further understand drug use and what can be done to help people in need.

What the newspaper article failed to mention were some of the challenges we encountered along the way. As one might expect, there were some “matter of convenience” discrepancies, which, to be truthful, we had not anticipated either. The first challenge we faced was the limited internet access in the school auditorium. To be fair, while not as archaic as the once-ubiquitous delay and anticipation of AOL’s “You got mail” era, the lack of high-speed connection did require us to depart from our scripted and translated presentation into a more improvisational role. In a room with an audience far greater than the 35 students reported in the *Panorama* article, we tried to bridge the cultural and linguistic gap. In Albania, we encountered many English-speaking citizens with varying degrees of fluency; Shkoder was to be no different. There was a wide range in English ability, and in this particular school there was a preponderance of English-speaking students. Despite this, the challenges for connection were further complicated by the presence of officials, administrators, and the media, which slightly inhibited a smooth and open dialogue between us and the students during our presentation and the subsequent question-and-answer segment. The conversation felt strained, and the need for translation made it even more

challenging for us. The students appeared invested in the work of the Drug Coalition and genuinely interested in our presentation, but we could detect a distance between us.

The overarching message from our presentation was to recognize the great work being done by the students' coalition—to have hope that change can happen. The most rewarding and fruitful conversation took place afterward, outside of the school and out of earshot of adults, with a small group of students who spoke English. Without the presence of school administrators, police, and political figures, students were quite open and candid about what they were experiencing with regard to substance use among their peers. It was not that different from what we had previously heard in conversations with American students. They spoke about the prevalence and availability of drugs in their community and the devastation caused by SUDs among friends, family, and peers. The hardest question for us to answer was, "What can we do about this problem?" We could hear the fear and frustration in their voices and the heartbreak of seeing their friends and others struggle and often succumb to substance use, especially while the majority of leaders of their city and country, in the students' words, "do nothing to help."

We must note that much of the frustration we heard came from students who were disproportionately affected by substance misuse among their peers or adults who were still suspicious of the sincerity of officials from a young, still-developing democracy. In fairness, there were many coalition members and officials offering their time and expertise to work toward change. Understandably, it is difficult and exasperating to watch family members and friends consumed by SUDs. It is hard to have patience for systems-wide change, which is what the coalition was and is trying to accomplish. Their work is challenging, and to be effective, the breadth needs to be wide, including multiple constituencies and time. We made sure to convey the students' sentiments and feelings to a local TV crew during an interview after the meeting—they must be heard. But for the young students of Shkoder, being patient while watching and feeling the devastation caused by substance use is painful. They are anxious for change to happen. Despite a history of inaction based on their country's lack of initiatives, they remain hopeful and eager to mobilize themselves and their community.

Nowhere was this more evident than at the local Qendra Rinore Atelie Youth Center in Shkoder, which we visited after the Coalition meeting. Housed in a renovated building, easily accessible to the young people who frequent it, the youth center occupies two entire floors of what looks like an office building in the center of town.

The director is a young man who could easily be mistaken for one of the kids attending the program. During our visit, he was incredibly sensitive to the youth's needs and challenges, as well as their gifts and talents. He moved about the center interacting with every young person there, calling them by name, knowing what they like, what they were working on, and how to connect with those struggling to help them along. He no doubt spoke the youth's language, and it was rather obvious that they appreciated and respected him and his position. Simply put, they trusted him.

The center provides opportunities that others simply talk about, including spaces for music: writing, composing, and playing it. We listened to a beautiful rendition of a Beethoven piece

played by the young folks at the center, which was quite moving to say the least. In another area, kids were preparing food in a cooking class and, of course, we had to sample the wares—which were delicious—before we could move on to see the rest of the center. Other young folks were involved in computer classes and various other skill-building activities designed to help them become employable. The energy in the room was palpable, and the members were made to adhere to the rules and policies of the center or risk not being allowed in.

Relying on students who spoke English, we were able to learn that the youth felt it was vital to have this place to go to in order to avoid being lured into drugs, gangs, and unhealthy behavior like so many of their peers. They saw the value in learning job skills, improving their academic abilities, and preparing for college. As we left this wonderfully energetic environment, we were taken by both the hope and excitement demonstrated by the youth we met and by thoughts of how to replicate this model to make it available to all young people faced with similar challenges. It felt somewhat magical, but meeting and talking with the director showed us that all it really takes is having some love, compassion, and understanding for the young people who show up there. (And, of course, resources.) It is not overly complicated, but no doubt hard to achieve. With minimal investment, however, it is hard to witness any meaningful gains. The young people of Shkoder, Tirana, and anywhere else on the globe deserve to have options in life—opportunities to develop whatever talents and skills they have—lest they risk falling victim to the temptations they are surrounded by.

After a long day in Shkoder, Kristina and Dona nurtured our bodies and spirits with a late lunch at a wonderful restaurant called *Mrizi i Zanave* in Fishte Lezha. Located somewhere between Shkoder and Tirana, this hidden little farm somehow attracted a patronage that included tour buses. Everything served there is produced on the grounds and prepared only with the farm's own ingredients. In what we would come to understand as typical Albanian style, we were treated to multiple courses of wonderfully fresh foods, including bread, various cheeses and olives, meats, and other rare (to us) meals. Thanks to the food, the scenery, and great company, we began to feel like honorary Albanians, with shared hopes and visions of a brighter future for the citizens of their beautiful country—especially their youth.

### **Day Four**

We entered the weekend not totally abandoning our expressed research methodology to capture the depth and breadth of the SUD problem in Albania, but with our pace slowed and our focus shifted. Our research turned more personal in nature as we attempted to further understand the impediments Albanians face and the struggles they experience. We endeavored to understand treatment options for those with SUDs while we engaged in more intimate and detailed conversations with a variety of individuals experiencing them. One of those people was Tony's cousin, Adi, a former drug user who stated that he became dependent on drugs to help him cope with life but found himself unable to stop when things spiraled out of control. He informed us that he'd entered a detox program, but upon completion, there was "nowhere" for him to go. His only choice was to go back to the streets and eventually back to using drugs. He informed us that there are no mutual-aid support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous in Albania, and no resources for continued care such as Sober Living or Halfway Houses, leaving

individuals to recover alone. Those with SUDs often recover best in community, not isolation; Adi reported that in his experience users trying to recover on their own are generally unsuccessful.

Without supports or professional guidance, Adi resorted to alcohol to help him cope with life, and he hung on to the hope that drinking would not lead him back to narcotics—a fine line to walk for anyone who has an SUD. We were able to provide information to Adi about how to start a 12-step support group and hoped he would follow up with our recommendations. We offered our support or guidance if needed. Seeing how the lack of supports affected Adi, we realized that we had taken for granted the vast number of resources we have in the United States until we experienced them so conspicuously missing in Albania.

To carry a message of hope and recovery in a country where extraordinarily little of these things exist required a network. Thankfully, this came in the form of the media, newspapers, and television news programs, which seemed eager to share in spreading it. Our next item on the itinerary came from *Vitrina e Librit*, a television program part of the National Library network called Top Channel. We were fittingly interviewed in the National Library about the book and the work we were doing in Albania. Within the country there was and is an escalating interest in learning about SUDs and recovery, especially among those who witness the devastation caused by alcohol and drugs personally. Within our small window of time to affect change, television and news media outlets offered a pathway to reach a much greater audience than any of the events we attended in person—and beyond that, a population largely uninformed on the social implications of their burgeoning alcohol and drug problems.

We had made some inroads with local agencies before we arrived in Albania—the YWCA, University of Tirana, and a few local high schools—which helped fill our itinerary and provide various audiences for us. One we connected with while in America was the Stephen Center, located in downtown Tirana, which works with disadvantaged Albanians. Our connection was established through a local church and its pastor, Sokol, in Massachusetts who founded the center in Albania and now lives there. We had multiple email exchanges and met with him and some church affiliates in the state before we left for Albania, so they knew of us when we arrived.

Sokol and his wife Melani could not have been more welcoming and generous with their time, showing us around the center, treating us to dinner, and spending hours in deep conversation about the challenges their country has experienced throughout history, including current times, which they are deeply familiar with. Much of Sokol and Melani's work through the Stephen Center is to help families struggling with poverty and substance use, especially in those cases where the parent or parents are incarcerated. They work with the children, helping them stay in school and function amid the turmoil, and they do so on extremely limited funding. Their work is truly honorable, and they are humble individuals whose only mission is to help those less fortunate. Sokol and Melani toured us around Tirana, giving us an in-depth education of the history and politics of the country they love. It was a lesson in humility, and spending time with them felt like a very spiritual experience for us.

## **Day Five**

Our lessons in the culture and history of Albania continued as we joined our friends and hosts Sunday morning for a trip out of Tirana for a day of leisure and sightseeing. Kristina and Marin, our “tour guides,” picked us up at our apartment and drove us out to the seaside, where we stopped to see Durres, a seaside town many Albanians spend summers in. We had coffee and conversation at a scenic café on the beach behind Kristina’s summer apartment and learned more about the beauty of the area.

We traveled on to Berat, an ancient United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage city that offered a unique opportunity to step back in time through the preservation of its buildings complete with its storied history. As planned, we met up with our other friends Dona and Tony and their son Kester, and with the help of a hired tour guide and input from our hosts, we learned not only about the history of the city but about our friends. Our connection to each other became deeper and our conversations more personal. The rides to and from Berat allowed us to learn more about their personal experiences and what it was like to live through their country’s tumultuous history. These hours of togetherness gave our ethnographic research methods a richness and color that can only be accomplished by total immersion in a culture and native population.

As we concluded our tour of Berat, we could not leave without meeting and having coffee with friends of our hosts who owned a café and wanted to meet us and talk. On our return trip back to Tirana, our hosts insisted we stop for a dinner of incredibly wonderful food and conversation at another hidden gem of a restaurant off the main road. We talked here for several hours before we headed back to the city, much richer in our knowledge of the country.

## **Day Six**

As the days blended into one another, it was difficult to recall all the people we had met, the conversations we had engaged in, and of all we had learned. Propitiously, we debriefed and processed each day and wrote notes about the experience. Our journal notes allowed for memory-saving documentation of each day before we retired to bed. It was difficult to quantify the impact or result of our work. Qualitatively, however, the comments and questions we recorded from people we met gave us the confidence to know that we were on the right track. One of those interchanges came from the café owner next to our apartment, Tim. Through a heavy accent and strained English, he asked, “Do you think we have a problem with drugs in our country?” He motioned to the newspaper on the table, the familiar *Panorama*. There on the front page of the paper was the story and the unmistakable visages of two Americans. We responded in the affirmative and thanked him for the cappuccino before heading out the door, on our way to speak to another group of students at the University of Tirana’s Faculty of Social Sciences.

The meeting was arranged by the publishing staff and, as we entered the school, there was a buzz in the halls about having “visitors from America” coming to speak. Soon the classroom filled and, before long, there was standing room only. Outside the classroom, the whirring continued, and students kept coming until there was no room left. The welcome response was

heartwarming, but the interest and interaction from the students was even more impressive as it further emphasized their eagerness for open discussion around substance use and for accurate information about the issues. Their questions were thoughtful and relevant, and their desire to learn about SUDs felt genuine. They, too, spoke of the losses they had experienced of friends and family due to substance use and dependence, and of their frustration with the lack of resources to help. Any differences between high school and college students were bridged by their fear and fatigue of losing loved ones and peers to substance use—and the desire for change. As we processed our visit afterward, following another visit to Tony and Dona’s son Kester’s high school, it became clear as ever to us that if change is to come regarding substance use, it will be driven by the youth of Albania.

The day ended with more touring of Tirana and dinner with our friend Marin, who was raised in Tirana and knows the city, including the great dining spots. We talk about Albania, the people, and the problems, but also share personal stories of life experiences, allowing our relationships to deepen even more—another benefit of spending lots of time together. Our evening ended with us feeling tired and having some mixed feelings about nearing the end of our visit. We had one more day before we were scheduled to return to America and, for many reasons, did not want our trip to end.

### **Day Seven**

Our last day began with a brief meeting over coffee with the staff from Dituria Publishing House before heading to the University of Tirana again, this time to speak with a group of students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages about substance use and dependence. This presentation took place in a large amphitheater-shaped room; it was markedly different from our previous appearance at the University. Perhaps the success of our first presentation prompted school officials to take an active role as we were invited to take seats on a panel consisting of university faculty and department heads. The room was already packed with students and continued to fill as we were formally introduced. Our PowerPoint presentation made translation a bit cumbersome, but we managed to get our message across to this group of curious students and exchange ideas during a question-and-answer session moderated by the panel leader at the end of the talk.

In the beginning, there was a bit of reluctance or shyness on the part of students, possibly because the dean and other college administrators were in the room. The students were genuinely interested, showed utmost respect, asked thoughtful questions—they wanted to know more about us and our story. We shared a few humorous experiences as we reminisced about our crazy behavior and that of the other characters described in the book. We wrapped up our formal presentation but remained in the amphitheater to talk and sign books for students. Not only were they extremely appreciative of the more intimate interchange, but they were also more open about what they were experiencing regarding substance use and dependence. The concerns they shared with us were similar to the ones shared by fellow college and high school peers: the fear and frustration of watching friends and family suffer from using drugs and alcohol, and not knowing what to do to help them.

Their willingness to engage with us underscored the need for a safe place to talk openly about their concerns and fears with people who will listen and understand them. It was frustrating not having “the answer” for them, and we tried to encourage them to keep the momentum created that day alive and to educate others about the seriousness of the problems facing the Albanian community and its youth.

We left feeling energized and hopeful that they would continue to speak out to address the issues and not turn their heads while friends, family, and fellow Albanians die by the hand of substance use and dependence.

Our last scheduled stop was to the only methadone treatment clinic in Tirana. Upon our arrival, we immediately noticed a stark contrast in their philosophy and design, which turned out to be one of the biggest surprises for us on this trip. We were familiar with many of the methadone clinics in America—how they operate, their philosophy, and the public perception of methadone clinics and the people who frequent them. Generally, they are sited in less-than-desirable areas in an attempt to shield the community or surrounding “nice” neighborhoods from the consumers of these services. The phenomenon is a strange one where the clientele is often treated with disdain and contempt due to their diagnosis and associated lifestyle. The use of shame or punitive measures as a way of managing the population still exists to some degree today. Support is minimal, and the system often functions from a base of dishonesty and distrust.

However, the clinic we visited was nothing like what we were accustomed to. From the time we arrived, there was a different feel to the environment. The clinic was located directly across the street from a row of embassy houses, frequented by diplomats and visitors from all over the world. We were impressed by the bright aesthetic appeal of the building as we entered the grounds: its cleanliness and the warm, welcoming feel that did not stop with the structural design. We were greeted by the director who, from the moment we met him, was also warm and welcoming and more than happy to show us around the facility and enthusiastically talk about the work done there. During the tour, our conversation turned to the philosophy and guiding principles of the clinic. The staff approaches the work with a positive, trusting, and supportive mindset rather than a punitive, distrusting, and negative one. Although staff members have limited resources that reduce the amount of help they can offer clients, they do their best to accommodate families in times of distress; for example, the staff allows parents or spouses to pick up medications for loved ones if they are unable to come to the clinic.

Rather than simply dispensing methadone to those who show up daily, the clinic provides wrap-around services to support and encourage recovery using a holistic approach. The demand is often too great on this only methadone clinic in Tirana—but even when the staff run out of methadone, services are provided with genuine care and in an environment that welcomes clients and respects their dignity. We learned a lot from that experience. We began to understand what Ian McEwan meant when he said, “Cruelty is a failure of imagination” (Kellaway, 2001, para. 11) —that it is possible to provide this necessary service in a humane way where clients feel less ashamed and stigmatized, where help is easily accessible and quite possibly even more effective. It was a great way to close out our visit to Albania, reinforcing our belief that the fundamentals of effective treatment require love, compassion, empathy, and understanding as the cornerstones

upon which to build effective programs. Before leaving the clinic, Jack took a picture of a poster on the wall that sums up the clinic's approach to treatment: "Support, Don't Shame."

As one could probably surmise by now, our method of decompressing from the intense and emotional week in Albania involved food. We were treated to lunch by our fabulous new friends Kristina and Dona at a beautiful restaurant, Artiste. We recapped many of the important and hopeful things we had heard and seen, and we talked about all the dedicated and caring people we met, especially our lunchmates. We discussed our ideas for continuing this work together—how to collaborate on initiatives to educate others, raise awareness of SUDs, and hopefully host them on a visit to America in the future.

It was the end of a long, full week we had spent doing things we never imagined. We initially thought we would meet some folks, talk about *The East Side of Addiction*, and learn some things about the Albanian culture and experience. We never imagined that we would do and learn so much and meet such wonderfully warm and welcoming friends. The connections we developed felt real, and we hoped the people of Albania would continue the work we started.

Between the heritage and the natural beauty of Albania, it was hard to leave, but it was the hospitable nature of the people that really made us want to return to continue to help. We feel the brightest hope lies within the youth of the country who exhibited a level of curiosity, understanding, and engagement around the topic of substance use that would be the envy of our local community health workers back home.

### **Lessons Learned**

Substance use and dependence presents itself as an equal opportunity condition, wreaking havoc, fear, devastation, destruction, and death on those who fall victim to it—regardless of ethnicity, social standing, or geography. It imposes the same damage to all who stand in its path. As a result of our research, we learned some remarkably interesting and hopeful lessons regarding the implications of substance use, its impact, and the appetite for change driven by the youth of Albania. Although we still face many problems related to substance use in the United States, we have increased our understanding of SUDs and have the resources to develop and implement innovative treatment programs and intervention techniques that may help the people of Albania. However, one of the most important bits of knowledge gained from our research is the compassionate approach with which the Tirana clinic treated individuals and families affected by substance use. Although their resources were scarce and drained, they taught us a lesson in providing services rooted in compassion and respect for human dignity, regardless of the diagnosis or condition. Even though we share the same fears and frustration around substance use as anyone, we learned from our Albanian counterparts that treatment for substance use disorders can be provided in a kinder and more respectful manner—which, in the long run, helps minimize the shame and stigma that often scares people away from treatment. It also drives the way substance use is understood and how treatment is designed and delivered. It was definitely a model in humility for us to see how treatment providers in a poor country like Albania subscribe to a mindset of "Support, Don't Shame." This was probably the greatest lesson we learned from our research and time in Albania, but it was not the only one for sure. We also gained a deeper

understanding of the Albanian people's experience of substance use in their country and the challenges they face in trying to curtail or mitigate its devastating impact on their country, especially among their youth—and it is precisely with the young people of Albania where the greatest hope for change lies.

We also saw and felt how badly youth want to see change when it comes to substance use disorders education and treatment. Maybe the greatest lesson we learned from these young, courageous Albanians is that the change they are demanding and working toward will more than likely not come from the top down. They have impatiently waited to no avail. What seems to be the natural course of change in Albania with regard to substance use issues will unquestionably come from the bottom up, driven by the youth of Albania who are fed up with the status quo. It might not come today, or even this year, but the youth are organizing and getting educated about what they can do and how to do it. The young people are accustomed to a hardline approach: Either they tolerate problems, ignoring them and letting them fester, or they voice concerns to only have their worry dismissed, often through violence. We learned that the tide is turning with respect to that approach to their public health and social issues, leaning further toward a non-punitive, kinder, more open, and more respectful approach to treating their fellow citizens victimized by substance use. And this is an especially important lesson for all of us to learn, regardless of country. Armed with the lessons learned from our trip to Albania and the research we conducted, we have returned to the U.S. with a new perspective regarding treatment for SUDs. As designers and providers of treatment services, we are grateful that the insights from our Albanian friends have helped us design our own day treatment program for those struggling with substance use. We have incorporated many of the learned lessons into our treatment philosophy and delivery. Mostly, though, those lessons have helped us to approach those who seek treatment services for addiction in a much more humane and compassionate manner. We have come to believe, with the help of our Albanian friends, that our treatment should reflect how we ourselves would want to be treated if we were seeking help.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

From the start, the purpose of our research was guided and driven by our interest in the following areas of exploration: How much of a problem is substance use in Albania; what impact does it have; and how is Albania responding to it?

Studies reviewed during our trip revealed some startling statistics for us to use as a baseline, reporting that Albania is one of the largest providers of cannabis to the European Union and since the 1990s has been viewed as a center of drug trade (Daragahi, 2019). According to both U.S. and European law enforcement officials, it is also known as a “transit point” for heroin and cocaine, as well as the narcotics trafficking headquarters of the continent (Daragahi, 2019). *Newsweek* reports Albania was the “world’s highest per-capita cocaine consumer” from 2016 to 2017 (Nicoll & Triest, 2017, para. 4). Data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) lists Albania as first in the world for cocaine consumption in 2017, with 2.5 percent of the population using the drug (Smith, 2017). This is reported alongside data naming Albanian gangs the world’s number one heroin and cannabis smugglers—and number three in cocaine trafficking—in the UNODC 2017 World Drug Report. Many individuals and organization

representatives we met and spoke with support the above claims and data; they state that poverty and corruption are what drive the prevalence of drug use and distribution in Albania, making the fast money and lifestyle very appealing to the youth of the country.

Throughout our stay in Albania, and in nearly every conversation we had, especially with the youth, a common fear expressed by the people was the rapid erosion of their values, where money and the aforementioned fast lifestyle become more important than honest work and family. The Albanian people we spoke with also regularly mentioned the fear of watching friends and family members fall prey to a lifestyle of drug dependence and often death, with extraordinarily little or no resources to help.

Eager to be instrumental in raising awareness—and having the ability to see what is happening around them with an unfiltered view—Albanian youth clearly recognize the impact substance use has on their friends, family, and community, and want to be a part of making it better. The young Albanian people we met and spoke with are bright and determined, insightful, and proud of their heritage. They do not want to see it damaged any further than it has already been at the hands of Albania's history. They are the hope for change and the hope for the future, but they alone cannot carry the entire burden of change. They need our help. As foreigners with little or no influence on the government, we are not exactly sure how to help them other than to continue to express our own experiences, strength, and hope. We want to show them that it is okay to talk about the issues they face, and that change takes time. To quote the famous American author James Baldwin (1962), "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced" (p. 148). Issues like substance use and dependence must be faced, and understood, if we ever hope to change them.

Once upon a time, a similar environment existed here in America, and to some extent it still does. We are faced with the sad truth that our country and culture are often called the "Addicted Society," dedicated almost entirely to the celebration of the ego with all its sad fantasies about success and power. It celebrates those very forces of greed and ignorance which are not only destroying our planet but contributing to the endless suffering endured by our most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Complex social determinants such as these—coupled with the denial, shame, and stigma that accompany alcohol or drug dependence—perpetuate confusion and make it difficult to engage in meaningful solutions. Against this backdrop the situation only worsens, and more individuals, especially the youth, and their families, struggle in silence. We are quite familiar with this phenomenon, a situation remarkably similar to the U.S. many years ago. The "War on Drugs"—or, more accurately, the persecution of people who use drugs—is nothing new. Issues around drug and alcohol use filled the nation's headlines in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, when most people were afraid or reluctant to talk about substance use and the options for seeking help were minimal. It has taken a long time, and we have paid an enormous price, for treatment and support resources to be available to those afflicted. It is difficult to gauge whether we made an impact on the folks we met and spoke to, or if what we did made sense to them. If our experience back home is any indication, there is much more work that needs to be done and we know that a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. We believe that we made that first step.

A subject worthy of additional study is that Albania, with its notorious worst in the world per-capita drug consumption, was not the target of a pharmaceutical conspiracy nor the avarice of capitalism but the victim of economic disparities as suggested in research done by the Nobel Prize winner James Heckman, the Director of the Center for the Economics of Human Development (RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America, 2009). One of this article's authors, Maroney, writes after Heckman:

We find that in today's world one's zip code rather than one's genetic code is a more reliable determinant for having a safe healthy life. Trauma and its antecedent social ills such as poverty, discrimination, violence, poor housing, community disruption and lack of opportunity are seen to be the major contributors of the epidemic. (2018)

Our feedback loop during this trip was composed of only anecdotes, making it difficult to get unbiased opinions from those we met. Parsing out the signals required a great deal of qualified interpretations—but in the end, we were confident the messages we received clearly indicated the results of our efforts. The best example of this came on our last day in Albania. While waiting for our ride to the airport, we stopped in to see Tim for a last cappuccino at the little café on the corner. In a parting gesture, as unlikely as the two kids from Shrewsbury St. making their way to one of Europe's smallest nations, the stoic proprietor's farewell was this: "Thank you for helping my country."

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