

You can email Richard and Linda at :
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Please pray for :

- ◆ Klodiana's continued safety.
- ◆ Jorgo's in-laws, Gezim & Vjollca, as they put their destroyed home back together.
- ◆ our churches in Saranda, Cuke and Metoq, that they continue to grow and mature in the care of our local leaders.

Albania *focus*

THE WORK OF RICHARD AND LINDA WELCH IN ALBANIA

NEAR MISS OR SAFE ALL THE TIME?

Many of you will have followed Klodiana's story from childhood poverty, falling into the hands of a human trafficker, through to sanctuary and relative safety.

After moving permanently away from the warm environment of the home run by our friends at the charity, Eagles Wings, upon reaching the age when she wanted to taste secure independence, Klodi found employment working as a kitchen assistant in a Tirana restaurant. She enjoyed her work and also settled into a shared apartment, making life generally good for the twenty year old. The charity's staff kept in touch, offering friendship and spiritual support as she made the transition into independent living within a very uncertain world. Visits to her family in Cuke were made every few months, and during one of them there was talk of her having found a boyfriend.

Everyone was pleased that she had found stability in life and seemed happy.

Then, a few weeks ago, the success of her story appeared to come to an abrupt end one Sunday morning. Her mother, Bardha, and husband, Kujtim, appealed for prayers during our Saranda church service. Never one to hide her emotions, Bardha's tears flowed freely as she blurted out her concerns. "Klodi disappeared. We don't know where she is. We think she's been taken to another country by her boyfriend."

On hearing those words, standing just a few feet away, my blood ran cold. After all the time, prayers, effort and expense invested by so many people over the past seven years to keep her secure, could she really have fallen into the trap set by another trafficker? The regular line of communication between Klodi in Tirana and her family back in Cuke had been quiet for several days. "Please Lord, protect Klodiana, wherever she is at the moment."

After the church service, several of us talked on the steps outside. Bardha and Kujtim should go to the Police Station, raise the alarm, ask the Border Police to keep an eye out for her, should she still be in Albania and attempt to leave under duress. Despite being terribly upset, Bardha showed unusual calmness in turning to me and asking that I lead them in a further word of prayer. With that, they headed for the Police Station.

Some fifteen minutes later I joined them, delighted to see that Eli, the leader of our Saranda young people, had gone to give his support. His presence spoke volumes, since getting personally involved in another family's crisis is a rarity.

SUPPORTING The work of RICHARD & LINDA



If you would like to support the work of Richard and Linda on a regular basis we can send you out a standing order and gift aid forms. Address and contact details are shown below.

Direct payments can be made to the following bank account:

Lloyds TSB Sort code:30-92-33
Account: 05629646
Reference :

- "Albanian Support" to support the general work of Richard and Linda or
- "Richard & Linda" to support Richard and Linda's living costs or
- "Jorg and Lena" to support them as church leaders in Cuke

Cheques should be made payable to Mosaic Church and marked on the reverse with the reference above.

.....Continued overleaf!

NEAR MISS OR SAFE ALL THE TIME? (continued)

Unfortunately the first policeman they saw was rudely dismissive of them, treating them with contempt. He was surprised that on my arrival I went immediately to them and began talking. "Are you with them?" the man in the uniform asked with a smirk. When I said, "Yes", things changed. Maybe the colour of Bardha and Kujtim's skin, together with their poor looking appearance stirred prejudice within this particular policeman. As we all stood in the unwelcoming entrance to the police station, he continued, "Did you once live in Borsh, driving a white Land Rover?" When I said that he had a good memory his expression changed - to the good. He said with a smile, "I'll find someone who will help you, please wait here."

A short time later, a senior officer arrived. On inviting us all to take a seat in a room inside, he shook hands with us all. He couldn't have been more helpful. After politely asking questions about Klodi's recent history, to build a picture, he made several phone calls. One of them was to an off duty worker from the office that would have issued her passport. Given that this was a Sunday lunchtime, and the person answering the call wasn't at work, she was remarkably helpful. I privately thought about the unlikelihood of such a conversation taking place back home in the U.K. The upshot was that Klodi had not been issued with a passport, so we knew that she was still in the country. This came as a huge relief.

The officer made further phone calls, narrowing down her whereabouts with the help of the connections related by Kujtim.

Ultimately we found her safe and well! Once the officer made initial telephone contact, he handed his mobile phone to me, in order to confirm that it was Klodi at the other end of the line. I then handed the phone to Bardha, who in turn hurriedly passed the phone to Kujtim.

It transpired that Klodi was visiting her boyfriend's family in his hometown of Elbasan. He was planning on travelling to Greece to find work, whilst leaving her with his family. She said that she had no intention of travelling overseas.

"If you have any suspicions about Klodiana's wellbeing please get in touch with me," the kind officer said with a smile as he shook our hands again. He wrote his name and number on a piece of paper and handed it to me.

On getting home, I immediately contacted Eagles Wings, asking the executive director to keep a particularly close eye on Klodi as she negotiated the next week or so. In turn, he and his deputy met up with her and her boyfriend a few days later, in Tirana. The boyfriend's plan to travel to Greece had been delayed, with Klodi preferring to return to distant Saranda or Cuke, where she hoped to stay whenever he made his move. He made a favourable decision on the Eagles Wings staff, who felt he was genuine, unlikely to wish her any harm.

Kujtim subsequently told me that in further telephone conversations with Klodiana, she was angry that her family had involved the police when they couldn't trace her: "I was quite safe" she'd protested.

My own conclusion was that at the very least, our helpful policeman's involvement gave a strong signal to both Klodi and those close to her, whatever their intentions, that the long arm of Albanian law, even if roughly administered at times, was on Klodi's side. Even more importantly, as we left the police station that Sunday afternoon, with great relief, we took a moment to give a prayer of thanks to God for her safety.

Even though it is rarely talked about, the vulnerability of Klodi, and thousands of girls like her, became very apparent, so please keep her safety in your minds as a matter of prayer.

BLESSED

Unfortunately, the water infection that began troubling me in late September refuses to go away. To get the problem resolved, I am, of course, in the privileged position of being able to travel back to the UK, to enjoy the services of our relatively superb health care system.

Various hospital tests are now underway, which means my stay is longer than expected. That's leaving me a little restless, as I want to fulfil my duties on the ground in Albania, "Is all going well?"

Regular communications back and forth confirm that our churches continue to meet - and hopefully flourish under local leadership (always the long term objective).

Some duties can be carried out whilst in the UK, such as co-ordinating an appeal for aid following winter flooding. Jorgo's in-laws, who once provided a home for Klodiana for an extended period when she particularly needed it, have been flooded out. Losing all possessions, they had to sleep in their car for several days, together with their youngest two children.

I've sent some funds to help get them set up again.

One day, whilst visiting Leeds library, I saw an illustration by the painter George Baxter. He depicted the arrival of a missionary, the Reverend J. Williams, in Tanna, New Hebrides, South Pacific, in November 1839. His mission was to take the people living there the Christian gospel. It looked as though he was given a friendly reception when his boat touched the shore, but the following day he was killed and eaten by cannibals.

Such a sobering story reminded me once again that my own life is hugely blessed, despite this current disruption to my plans.

Linda and I send our love and thanks to you all.

Richard