

SUCCESS STORIES

2005 - 2007

October 2008
Kosovo

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People with intellectual disabilities vote for the first time in Kosovo

In an effort to continue to build upon the self-advocacy movement of persons with disabilities in Kosovo, Kosovo Mental Disability Rights Initiative (K-MDRI) recently assisted “Ne Per Ne” peer support group members in fully understanding and participating in Kosovo’s historic winter elections to choose national and municipal assembly members and mayors. “Ne Per Ne,” which means “We for Ourselves” is Eastern Europe’s largest peer support group for persons with intellectual disabilities, started by MDRI.

In preparation for Kosovo’s November elections, the peer support groups invited and welcomed representatives of the major political parties to discuss the importance of the elections, the work of the parties, and the issues that would affect them. Participants were able to ask questions of candidates such as “what are you going to do regarding jobs for people with disabilities?”

For the first time in their lives, approximately 90% of the peer support group members voted in Kosovo’s elections.

“My vote made a difference, I thought it wouldn’t count, but it obviously counted, I’m very happy MDRI helped me realize that” – Avni (Kacaniku Peer Support Group)

“I thought I couldn’t vote because I don’t know how to read, I didn’t know I could bring people with me who could help me” – Laura (Peja Peer Support Group)

“I would get so upset at my peers during the peer support group meetings when they would say that they don’t know how to go to the voting place, it’s very easy, think ahead and plan transportation before hand, I asked my father to take me and he was happy to do that, they could ask someone too, I don’t know how is not a valid excuse” – Gazi (Kamenica Peer Support Group)

Kosovo Mental Disability Rights Initiative (K-MDRI) is an initiative of Mental Disability Rights International as a result of our 2002 report, “Not on the Agenda: Human Rights of People with Mental Disabilities in Kosovo.” To find out more about the work in Kosovo or to read more about MDRI, please visit www.mdri.org



Zamira Hyseni Duraku
Prishtina

Foreword

Mental Disability Rights International, MDRI is an international organization dedicated to promoting human rights and full participation of people with mental disabilities in the society worldwide. MDRI's involvement in Kosovo has started in 2000 and continues today as well. Since the beginning of its work in Kosovo, MDRI continuously has advocated and promoted human rights of people with mental disabilities while always cooperating with local and international institutions in Kosovo.

With MDRI's assistance, a local non-governmental organization has been established, Kosovo Mental Disability Rights Initiative, K-MDRI, also dedicated to promoting human rights of people with mental disabilities and to assist in full participation of children and adults with mental disabilities in the Kosovo society.

Even though K-MDRI is a newly established organization its staff has been a part of MDRI, who because of the lack of adequate services, has seen it as necessary to start an inclusive initiative for improving the situation of people labeled with mental disabilities in Kosovo.

Therefore, through this initiative MDRI together with K-MDRI

work towards creation of a model for protection of human rights of people labeled with mental disabilities, a model which can serve as an example for other places in the region as well.

Within the MDRI's project "Initiative for Inclusion", respectively in the process of integration of people labeled with mental disabilities in Kosovo, have also been established peer support groups for and by people labeled with mental disabilities. MDRI in Kosovo, through a joint initiative with Handikos, carried out through year 2005/2006 has established three peer support groups for and by people labeled with intellectual disabilities, in Kaçanik, Kamenicë, and Pejë.

Also, MDRI during the implementation of the project has continued with the establishment of other peer support groups for and by people labeled with intellectual disabilities in Prishtina, and establishment of a peer support group for and by people labeled with psychiatric disabilities in Prizren.

Members of peer support groups for and by people labeled with intellectual disabilities with very little support from others, except for group achievements, friends that they have gained, empowerment, integration in the community, inclusion in vocational training programs, until now have succeeded in registering their on organization. The organization is named "Ne per Ne" (We for Ourselves) and is led by people labeled with developmental disabilities. This organization has for a goal promotion of human rights of people with developmental disabilities in Kosovo. After long and powerful work, the peer support group for and by people labeled with psychiatric disabilities also succeeded in registering the first organization of that sort in Kosovo named "Surviving Together" which has for a goal promotion of human rights of people labeled with psychiatric disabilities. Peer support group members have chosen that through the success stories collected in this book, to show their achievements in groups and the experience they have gained through this process.

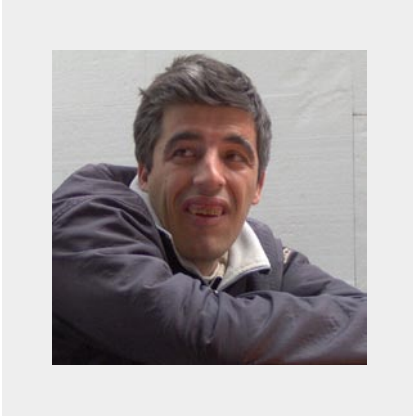
Therefore, in this volume you will have a chance to read stories from the peer support group members, their families, Handikos, MDRI and K-MDRI employees and stories from the students of University of Prishtina, Psychology Department who are currently involved in the peer support groups and also stories from other volunteers involved in the project.

MDRI is very grateful to everyone who has contributed with their support in accomplishing the “Initiative for Inclusion” project in Kosovo, and especially United States Agency for International Development, USAID and Open Society Institute, OSI.

Also, K-MDRI and MDRI is grateful to all who helped in establishing the peer support groups for and by people labeled with mental disabilities in Kosovo. We believe that this initiative will be continued by recently established organizations “Ne per Ne” (We for Ourselves) and “Surviving Together”.

Let us use this positive example to help our society to become aware regarding human rights of people with mental disabilities and to inform the community of people with mental disabilities who have not yet had the opportunity to become a part of peer support groups and community programs for activities of peer support groups.

With this achievement we want to prove to the society that we shall all be equal and that people with mental disabilities can help each other and live independently.



*Avni Elezi
Kaçanik*

I started coming to the meetings two years ago. I like coming here a lot. I don't work but I help my family with house work, I cut wood, go to the mountain with my father, I watch TV; I like to watch soccer especially when our national team plays but I also like Milano. Sometimes I house sit for my parents. I also go to my brother's store. In group meetings we learn how to write, draw and we also meet with our group friends.



*Egzon Preloukaj
Peja*

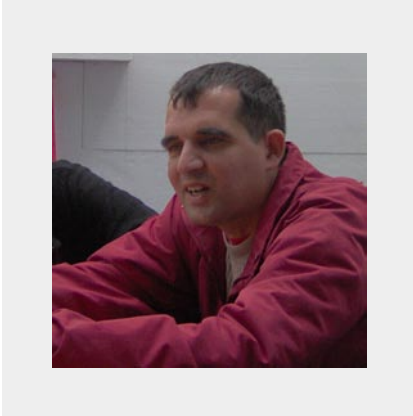
My name is Egzon Preloukaj from Peja. I come regularly to the meetings for over a year. I finished half of primary school, but I couldn't complete it all because everyone was making fun of me in school. For this reason, I never left my home, and only worked in the back yard of my house. I used to have few friends. I would go out with them sometimes, but this happened very rarely.

Initially when I came to the meetings, I was very shy, but now I've made many friends in the meetings.

My family allowed me to come here. I continue to attend the group. I would like to work. I would like to get married later in life.

I have a message for all my friends:

- Come to the meetings, because we have a very good time here. Together we are friends, we talk about many things and we help each other.



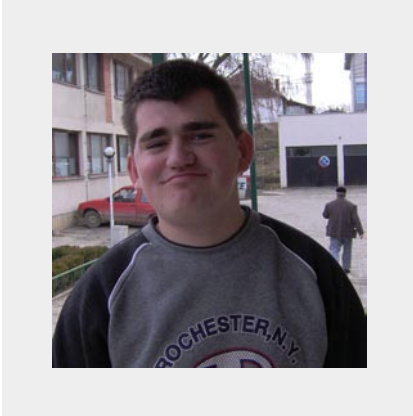
*Avni Bajramaliu
Kaçanik*

I started coming to the group meetings two years ago. I like to come here very much. About these meetings I have been informed by Elmihane, who works for Handikos in Kaçanik. I do not have a job but I like working in the garden, as well as doing other house work. I also like to work on the computer. I know how to type on the computer and I often communicate with Elmihane on the internet. I'm married but I don't have any children. I would like to have as many friends in our group and I'm ready to help in establishing new peer support groups.



*Haqif Selishta
Kamenica*

I started coming to the meetings since summer. I like it very much here, therefore I would recommend all my friends to come. At home I live with my brother and sister in law. I like to work. I know how to clean well, but I would like to learn something else, too.



*Labinot Spahiu
Kamenica*

I started coming to the group meetings two years ago. About the start of peer support group here in Kamenica I heard from Hyrmete, who works in Handikos. I liked the group from the first day because I like having many friends.

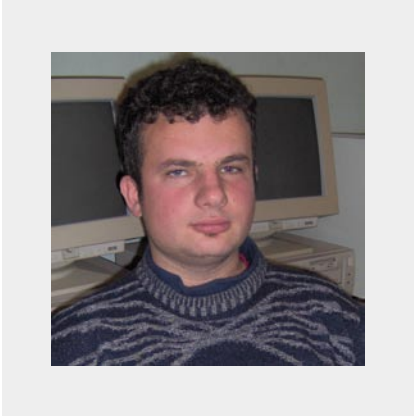
We often attend trainings. That is where we meet with other members. It would be great if others would join us at the meetings and not just sit at home.

I work at home; I help my father and mother in house work. I like to listen to music, sometimes I go visit Gazi and Gazi comes and visits me, and we have coffee together.



*Vildane Koxha
Kaçanik*

I do house work. I live with my mother and my father. I make them coffee, tea, I do dishes and clean up the house. I started coming to the group two years ago. I like the group meetings very much. Here I learn the letters and then I practice them at home. I like meeting Valbona because we can talk about different things.



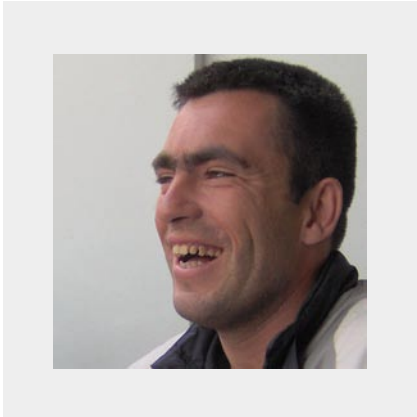
*Gazmend Bojku
Kamenica*

My name is Gazmend Bojku and I have been coming to the meetings for two years now. Since I started coming to the meetings I met many friends. I would like to meet even more friends. I like work very much. I would like to work as a guard.

My message for people with developmental disabilities is:

We have the right to work, we have the right to go out, and others don't have to ask us about where we are going and what we are doing.

Also, I tell them that: - The group is very good, don't stay at home but go out, come and let's make friends.



*Lutfi Shehu
Kaçanik*

I come to the meetings regularly. I like coming here very much because we learn to write, we learn to read and we learn many other things. I do not have a job at the moment but I help my brothers' in house work. I like to have as many friends in the group. I often invite other members to the peer support group meetings. Currently I can only invite the ones who live near me because I do not have a car to go further and invite the ones who live farther away such as in Hani i Elezit.

*Lumnije Bojku
Kamenica*

I am Lumnije Bojku, Gazmend Bojku's mother. I, as a mother, feel very happy that my son got engaged in this precise activity, in the peer support group. In the peer support group meetings my son meets with friends. They talk about their problems because they too are a part of this society. I as a mother also attend the Kamenica peer support group meetings regularly. I would like to go and visit other children with developmental disabilities, talk to them, invite them to join us as well and not sit at home locked. Those children too need to enjoy their rights. Everybody needs to work and can work. I would be very happy, as a mother, that these children find themselves in some activity in the community.



*Bajram Spahiu
Kamenica*

I like coming to the meetings because we meet with friends here. I like to go for walks, to go downtown. Very often I go to Handikos, too. I like to visit my family very much. At home I help a lot. I prepare the wood for heating, I chop them and I lay them. I would really like to work. I could clean since that is what I know best.



*Mjellma Luma
Prishtina*

Before I started working for Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI), I have worked with people with mental disabilities, however never in the role of the support person. It is difficult to know and understand that there are still places of the world where people with mental disabilities are considered as weak and unable to speak for themselves. Therefore, the work we do here is very rewarding to us because helping them become empowered and aware of their abilities is one thing that a person can only wish for. When you help people help themselves, when you assist a person in finding tools that aid them in being more self-reliant and less dependent upon others, you help create a situation where that person feels more in control and less helpless. What could be more rewarding?

People with mental disabilities deserve their rights and are increasingly speaking up for themselves about what they want. Let us listen to them, let us help people with mental disabilities by respecting them, respecting their wishes, by supporting them the way they want us to support them and by treating people like they are our sister, niece, or other family member. Our respect is the key to their success.



I don't like for people to live in Mental Health Institutions

I come from a middle class family. I come from beautiful Prizren. I have been a member of "Surviving Together" organization for a year and a half now. I like to socialize with all the members here. I live with my family and I'm happy with the life that I have.

I don't like for people to live in mental health institutions because they can live by themselves and can visit their families. They need to go out, go for a walk in the nature, and to socialize with friends.



*Laurie Ahern
Washington DC*

My name is Laurie Ahern and I am the Chief Operating Officer of Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI) headquartered in Washington, DC. MDRI is an advocacy organization dedicated to the human rights and full participation in society of people with mental disabilities worldwide. MDRI documents human rights abuses, supports the development mental disability rights advocacy and promotes international awareness and oversight of the rights of people with mental disabilities. MDRI advises governments and non-governmental organizations to plan strategies to bring about effective rights enforcement and service system reform. Drawing on the skills and experience of attorneys, mental health professionals and people with disabilities and their families, MDRI challenges the discrimination and abuse faced by people with mental disabilities worldwide.

In addition to its Washington, DC office, MDRI has an office in Prishtina, Kosovo, which was opened following the 2002 release of our report, Not on the Agenda: Human Rights of People with Mental Disabilities in Kosovo.

I have been working for MDRI now for just over five years, but my commitment to this work is rooted in my early life experiences which occurred over 30 years ago. As a child, I had experienced both physical and sexual abuse. At the age of 19, I experienced a breakdown and was diagnosed with mental illness. I have come to believe that under the right circumstances anyone can experience emotional distress or what is called mental illness. As human beings, we all have our breaking point. And a breakdown can become a breakthrough. I know that now, but at the time I was frightened and afraid of the stigma and discrimination and felt hopeless. And at that time in the United States, there were no public role models of people diagnosed with mental illness who were successful or who had achieved significant recovery.

Since then much has changed. People labeled with mental illness and people labeled with intellectual or developmental disabilities now are integrated into the community and are no longer segregated or a source of shame to their families. Regardless of the disability, children and adults have access to an education – including university if they wish – they work, own property, get married, are actors on television and have the right to do anything that people without disabilities have the right to do.

But it was not that long ago that the situation in the US was similar to that of Kosovo. That is why it is so important to have started Surviving Together and Ne per Ne. In the US, it was people with disabilities themselves and their family members who organized together and demanded that they be included in community life and decisions and laws that affected them. The rallying cry for the disability movement became: Nothing about Us without US. And most of the groups that started out as peer support groups eventually morphed into advocacy and self-advocacy groups, just as is happe-

ning in Kosovo. And there is much work to be done. Many people still languish in Shtime institutions and still more are forced to hide inside their homes. All people have a right to live in the community, to make decisions about their own lives and live the most self-determined life possible. This is a basic human right that if it is not given to you, you must fight for.

It is my hope that the groups will continue to grow, that they will fight for their rights and the rights of others and that their voices will not be silenced.



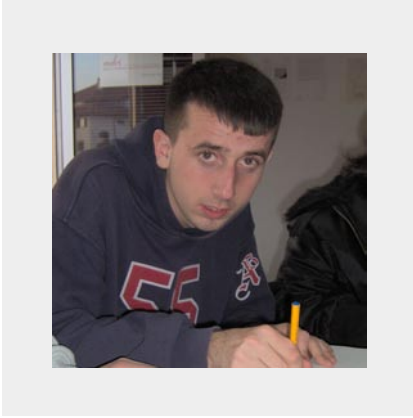
*Halit Ferizi
Prishtina*

I am Halit Ferizi, President of Handikos organization. It's been a long time since I have put my work and myself in the service of promotion of human rights and integration of people with disabilities in social life in Kosovo.

Beginning of support groups by and for people with intellectual disabilities in Kosovo has proven to all that people with disabilities can and want to live independently. We all search just for one open path to continue the course of life, conscious and powerful to overcome the challenges we might run into. Each achievement of all people depends on the family, social and institutional support. Therefore, a better life for all can be achieved only when we support each other and together we eliminate the barriers.

I think it is time for the discrimination of people to end, and it is time when we all should make decisions for ourselves.

People can be different, but they should have same opportunities.



*Hisen Ahmeti
Prishtina*

My name is Hisen Ahmeti. I know how to use the computer therefore, I will teach other members how to use it. Now that I am a group member, I have many more friends than I had earlier. I will also invite two friends of mine, Adrian and Gent, to join the group.



*Rasim Berisha
Kaçanik*

I'm Rasim Berisha from Hani i Elezit. It's been eight months since I joined this group. I found out about group meetings in Kaçanik while attending a picnic organized for members of peer support groups in Batllava. I like it very much here. I live with my brother. I work a little in a store, where I load and unload goods, although I do not earn a lot but, it is better to work than to stay doing nothing at home.



There's no life in institution

I was depressed during my pregnancy, as well as after the birth of my child. Because of the depression, doctors instructed me to go to a mental health institution in Belgrade and in Niš. I spent one month in Niš. After I started feeling better, they allowed me to leave and I went back to my husband. Six month later I got sick again and they sent me to Belgrade, in an institution located far from the city. There I felt like I was in some mountainous place, with no access to anything. I spent one week there.

My father took over my care and he brought me back to Prizren, to his house. Now, it's been 13 years since I got divorced, and I have a son but he lives with my ex-husband.

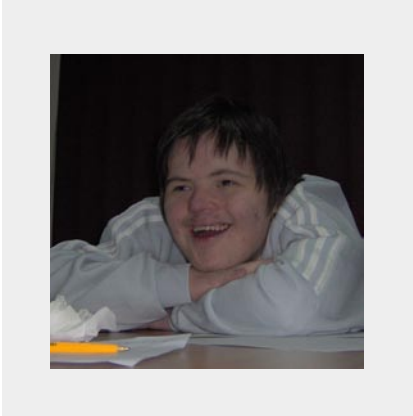
During my stay in mental health institution in Belgrade and Niš the health care was very poor, and the food was no better. In Belgrade I had friends from Prizren. During my stay there we didn't have the chance to socialize with each other because the doctors would give us injections that would put us to sleep all the time.

I am happy that now I live well and I'm at home. I would recommend people who live in mental health institutions to get out of

there, because it's much better to live in their homes. There's no life in institutions!

On the other hand, I ask the doctors and staff that work in the institutions to try harder and to take better care of people that are there, and not just give them injections that will put them to sleep. Let clients go out, come to different organizations, let them get together in groups and get close with their families, sisters and brothers.

I am now waiting for my son to get married, have a bride and may we all live together in harmony and happiness.



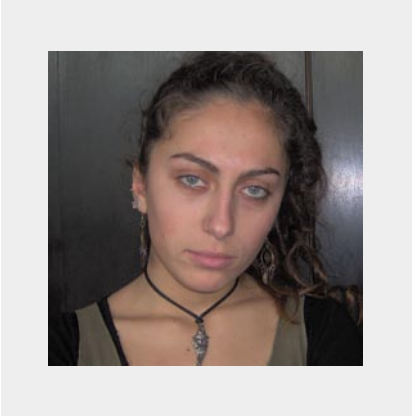
*Adrian Kabashi
Prishtina*

I am Adrian Kabashi. I come to the support group for two months now. About these meetings I learned from Arjeta's parents therefore, I decided to come, too. I like it very much at the meetings because we learn new things. I like the people and I like going out time after time. I would like to work in the post office or in a parking lot. I also think that it would be very good if all other people with developmental disabilities would come to the meetings because here we have a good time and we are all friends.



*Arta Shala
Prishtina*

I came here today with my sister Zana. I like the group because I meet with friends and we learn new things. I would tell the others to come, because we have a good time here and we talk about everything that we want. I will continue to come here.



*Lumturie Koka
Kaçanik*

I am Lumturie Koka, born on August 17, 1988, in village Runjevë, municipality of Kaçanik. I attend “Skënderbeu” Gymnasium in Kaçanik, 12th grade, Division of Natural Sciences. I am involved in many activities that deal with youth issues such as: Vice-President of Youth Assembly in our municipality; coordinator of a group for volunteer work within our school, which is funded by NGO “QPEA” (Center for Development of School and Education) in Ferizaj; I am also a member of an organization for battle against HIV-AIDS, Kosma. Other than these activities, one of the things that I like most is the work with the support group by and for people with developmental disabilities. We help them learn writing and reading. The coordinator of Handikos office in Kaçanik, Elmihane Krasniqi has introduced us to the peer support group. Currently, I perform this activity together with three other friends. Many of the group members can now write and read, however, the most important and blessed thing that happened was that we became friends with the group. Now they are a part of my circle of friends as well.



*Daut Borovci
Kamenica*

I have a very good time in our meetings. We have gone to visit people with developmental disabilities many times. In these visits I went together with Naser and Selvete. We went to Bosovatë, where we met Zijadin and Ganimete. After the visit they started coming to the meetings. They stopped coming for some time now because their house is too far and there's no one to bring them here. Also, I went to visit Xhevahire, another friend. She came once as well, but stopped coming recently.

I have been coming here for two years now and I have a very good time. At home I live with my parents and I like to draw and paint.

*Muhamer Bajrami
Prishtina*

My brother, who is a member of this group, informed me about this activity. I like coming to the peer support group meetings in Prishtina very much, because here I meet many friends. I would like it if as many people join us at the group meetings. Here we socialize with group members, talk, practice, draw and learn. I work in my brother's workshop, where he works with wood, makes tables and other wooden things. I like the work I do very much.



Acceptance of individuality and independence, it's the only sincere way of life where real love can live

This I understood very late. I understood this after my paths were pointing a different direction. For a long time, for almost 15 years, I was used to just express emotions, at least that's how I understood it, and it felt to me that nobody ever gave me anything or they were giving much less than what I was requesting.

Trying to get out of myself, just to transform into another person, I almost forgot my personality, which means I stopped being myself. Initially I didn't notice this until one day I started talking to myself in front of the mirror and realized that something was going wrong. I had changed so much, Or simply, all these years I had been playing a role that I did not chosen, a role that was troubling more and more each day and was taking me down destruction path.

I knew that something was wrong, something always made me unhappy, I was never satisfied when someone would tell me "you're pretty" or "you're smart" or something similar, that would make others happy.

I was simply missing something that even I myself, didn't know how to ask for. I had been trying for many years to find that missing

thing because the state that I was in was getting worse by the day. Later, after many struggles I understood just one part of my problem.

My childhood was a happy one. Everyone loved me and I was used to that love, as something that gave meaning to my life. I didn't have any self-confidence, and I thought that what I was doing for the others, they would never do it for me. Therefore, I had entered my adulthood and marriage with the thought that all those new people in my life will love me as much as I had been loved in my family. This was a mistake that made me start taking high doses of tranquilizers.



A bad period of my life...

My parents married me of without my consent. The man I was married to was married with another woman as well. He abused me. Due to these difficulties I lost my baby when I was 5 months pregnant. I was living in a village. That is where I fell into depression.

When I lost my baby, I went to the psychiatric ward and I asked the doctor if I could live in the hospital because my family wouldn't accept me at home. It was a time when Serbs were in charge. I checked into the hospital. When the war in Drenica started, any movement was forbidden and I was stuck alone in the hospital, without any money and without care.

During this period I overcame many difficult challenges. Despite all the difficulties and the fact that I was living in a hospital, I had other problems as well. A head nurse in the hospital was very immoral, he would take me to his room and made me sleep with him. In his room, on his desk I found some medication against epilepsy. I stole them all. I went to my room and I took them all. Little before midnight, they found me dying in my room. They took me to the surgery hospital. A nurse put on me the aspirator.

Next morning they said that there's nothing left of me.

I was in coma for forty four days. After all those days I woke up again. When I woke up, I heard Serbian music playing everywhere. I thought I was in Serbia. I refused to eat for whole ten days until my weight dropped to 40 kg. During all this time because I was completely immobile, I was lying on my back, I got a severe infection on my back and my legs. Forty months I was immobile, without food and without basic hygiene. A year later I began to walk and eat a little.

I went back home but my parents didn't accept me back. I had nothing to live off. I went back to the hospital again.

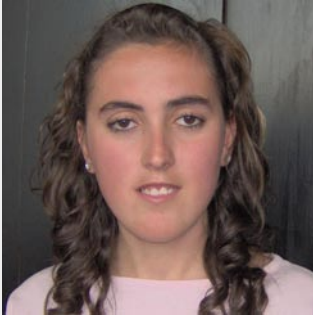
I started to improve, I was feeling better. War in Kosovo had ended. I took the road of going back home again. My brother came out to the door, he beat me up severely and thru me out again. Once more, I went back to the hospital, because I had nowhere else to go.

Since then, I spent additional eight months immobile, and the bad period of my life was repeating.

This period was over, too. Step by step, I started getting better, I felt more alive, and I was also getting social assistance money.

Four years after the war ended, I started to go out and to visit different clubs and organizations. Even though it was very difficult for me to leave the hospital, I did the impossible just to meet people.

In addition, I attended a computer course, I started learning new languages. Lately I have started to work as well. The thought of my son helped me the most to get better, and now I'm very happy because I hear only good things about him. He is now engaged and has promised me that soon he will bring me to Austria, where he lives. If I had financial means, I will get register a degree in University.



*Fatbardha Shtraza
Kaçanik*

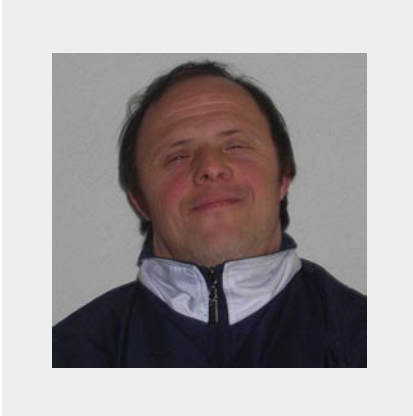
My name is Fatbardha Shtraza, and I was born on January 2, 1990 in Kaçanik where I also live. I attend professional secondary school “Voskopja” 11th grade, Division of Economy – Customs.

In Handikos I started my involvement as a volunteer six months ago, when I heard about it from my friend Florina Lika, who had started doing volunteer work for awhile. Before I started my engagement in volunteer work, when I would hear my friends talk with such deep blissful love about people with developmental disabilities, I started thinking why can't I be a part of this group, I too can help the group to integrate easier in the community.

It is really a pleasure to see how people with developmental disabilities go out of isolation and socialize with the community.

My message for everyone is:

- Don't let your disability make you feel that you are not a part of our society.



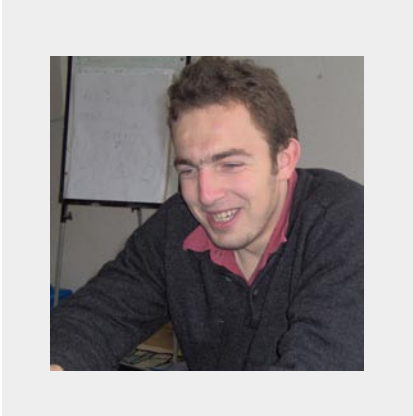
*Dukagjin
Peja*

Suzana from Handikos Peja invited me to come to the meetings. I always come here, because I have many friends: Arbnor, Egzon, Syzana and many others that are not here. Once I had a fight with my group friend Mehdi, but I will not fight anymore. Now, except that I come here, I also help around the house and cut wood. But I would love to work and get paid for the work that I do, and then to get married and live with my wife and of course with my mom and dad. I would tell all the people to come to the meetings, because there are girls and boys. Here we meet, talk, sometimes we even go to Prishtina. I would invite them to come by myself, but I don't have a phone.

*Trim Krasniqi
Kaçanik*

I am Trim Krasniqi and I come to the group meetings so that we can learn from each other because knowledge does no harm at all. If you don't have knowledge and don't recognize the money, you can't have friends either. I come to Kaçanik support group meetings since the beginning. I help my brother in his work as a glass-cutter and I have a very good relationship with him.

In the group we get along very well. I am ready to chair the group meetings with little help from the others. I would invite as many members because here they can learn new things, they can improve and the group work is very effective. Together we can achieve more.



*Arbnor Zhara
Peja*

I am Arbnor Zhara from Peja. I am a member of the support group from the very beginning of the group meetings. First my mom came to Handikos in Peja. She told me that I can come to the peer support group meetings every Tuesday.

When I was little, doctors gave me a vaccine, I had a very high fever. Since then I have been in crisis. Up until the eighth grade of primary school I attended school as a regular student. While I was in school, all other students were making fun of me and my father stopped me from going to school. I was in the same class with my sister. My sister continued school however, I was not allowed even to attend the prom.

I told my parents that I want to work. I told them that I want to finish high school, to learn something, but nobody is listening to me. I have my social assistance money but they don't allow me to use it. If I had that money, I would save it all, and I would fix a room for me.

Before I started coming to the meetings I was completely isolated. The group helped me to open up, and to talk freely with the others.

Message:

- I am telling all the people to go out, I am telling them to come to the meetings and to open up, because there are people who never leave their homes.



*Dea Pallaska O'Shaughnessy
Prishtina*

If three years ago one would have told me that today I will be writing the success story about the support groups by and for people with mental disabilities in Kosovo, I would think that something was wrong with that person since one did not notice that two year long efforts had brought me nowhere, or that this person is an outstanding optimist.

Today in attempt to write my success story I look back in time and I don't know where to begin, probably because this is not just my story, but it is a story of tens of people that live with a label of mental disability who make this story successful indeed with their courage and determination. Other tens of thousands people we have not heard yet, and I hope that soon we will learn their histories, and as such make this story yet more successful or even begin other stories of success.

I am... My name is...

I had read a lot about the beginnings of support groups in other places, for challenges and successes, and the confidence that I once

had about starting support groups by and for people with mental disabilities in Kosovo was shaken after many attempts and meetings that did not last for one or the other reason. However, I had not given up just yet and I was heading to meet another group of people with mental disabilities and to try if this time the support group will work out and keep going. I arrived in a room with about fifteen people and since we did not know each other, we began the meeting by introducing ourselves. There were women, men, young, old and each and everyone had a story to tell, but just not yet.

First coffee in café

In the beginning, most of our meetings were taking place in offices or meeting rooms. This was fine but after a while we needed to change environment. Therefore, we decided to go out for coffee in café and everyone was excited about this decision. As I assumed, many of the group members didn't go out of their homes that often, never mind going out to a café. Going out to meetings outside became one of the preferred events, because it gave us the opportunity to get to know the communities where groups were, the communities got to know us, and they liked us. The best of going out was that we got to know each other in a different light, and if we could have coffee together in offices, meeting rooms and in cafés, this meant that we could have coffee anywhere. Sooner than I anticipated, the members had begun to meet each other in their homes.

Here I found sisters and the daughter that I never had

After a period of time, one by one, gradually, we began telling our stories and to recognize ourselves in the stories of the others. We were comforted to hear that we were not alone and were glad to support someone with the knowledge we gained our own experiences. The most important, we had understanding for each other and to

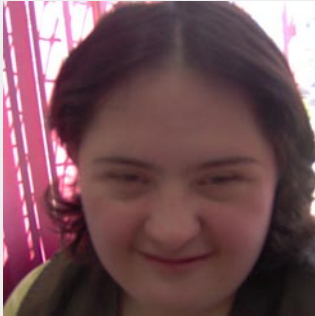
gether we cried, laughed and learned. This made us feel valuable, respected and loved. Finally, we started to believe in ourselves and in our future.

We want to meet with members of the groups from other towns

When group members found out that similar groups exist in other towns of Kosovo and many other countries around the world, then all they wanted was to organize a meeting in Prishtina, where everyone would get to know each other, will meet new friends, and will learn from experiences of other countries. And that is exactly what happened, meetings took place between the groups, contact details were exchanged, pictures were taken, trainers visited from other countries, but members did not stop here, they went another step further: they established their independent organization.

Dea, we are upset because you did not attend the meeting last week

It may sound strange, but this criticism was one of the best things that happened to me with the groups. For me, this reprimand was the best indication that group members were determined and they will stand up for themselves and will express their opinions. This was also a sign that a new chapter was beginning for the groups and for the entire mental disability rights movement in Kosovo. I hope that this chapter will be a bright one.



*Arjeta Emra
Prishtina*

I started to attend these meetings three months ago. I like to come to the meetings because I can talk with my friends, we learn new things and I meet new friends. I would suggest to the others to join us here in the peer support groups. I like it a lot and I believe the others will like it as well.



*Florina Lika
Kaçanik*

My name is Florina Lika, and I was born on November 25, 1989 in Kaçanik. I attend professional secondary school “Voskopoja” Division of Economy – Customs.

I’m 17 years old. Besides studying, I do a lot of volunteer work. I am a member of Kaçaniku Youth Assembly group, as well as a member of Kosmo HIV-AIDS. I am also a member of Handikos volunteer group, which I started attending since 2006.

The best and most important thing that happened in my life was when I got accepted in the Handikos volunteer group. Regarding my involvement as a Handikos volunteer, I got help from my colleague Lumturie Koka, who made it possible for me to contact Handikos coordinator.

In Handikos Kaçanik we do projects, develop different activities: we help people with developmental disabilities to learn how to write and read, we go with them for a walk in the nature, we develop different games and many other things.

Every activity that we do with people with developmental disabilities and all other things, we do them with the help of our coordinator

Elmihane Krasniqi.

It is really a pleasure to spend time with people with disabilities, because they are a part of our society, too, and we have a very good time when we sing, dance and play together.



*Ridvan Krraba
Kaçanik*

I come to the group meetings since these meetings started. About group meetings I was informed by Elmihane's husband. I am married and I live with my mother and my two sisters. I work as a school attendant in an elementary school where my father used to work. I work there from eight o'clock in the morning until one o'clock in the afternoon. It is a small school and I like my job very much.

I am 22 years old and I am a member of establishing board of Ne për Ne organization. As one of the founders of this organization, I would like to create as many new peer support groups by and for people with developmental disabilities, I want these groups created in all towns of Kosova. At the same time, I would like to invite as many members to these peer support groups.

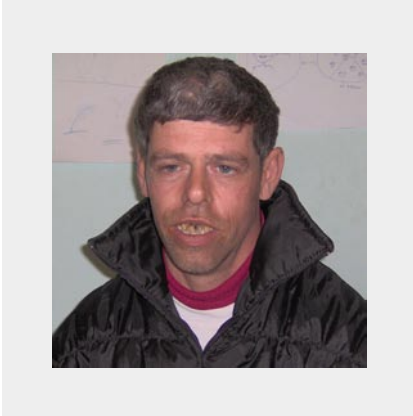


For a long time I had a good life

For a long time, I had a good life. Then I used to go to school, socialize with people and I was involved in many things.

Now for me it's very boring, hard work, work in the yard, different activities, visits to Gjakova, Prishtina, Prizren, weddings, different party's, ceremonies, walks, dilemmas in life and about life, cleaning, difficult physical labor, have left a lasting effect in my life, because compared to my friends, my life is much more difficult.

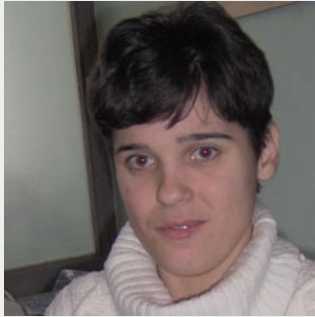
For me, work is the meaning of life. Therefore, I want to always be fresh from education, culture, because I am a part of everyone, of all the people in the world, and I deserve to live and experience all the goods of this life just like everyone else.



*Naser Ismajli
Kamenica*

I started coming to the meetings long time ago. They invited me to come to the meetings, and I came, and now like it very much. I help at home as well, I cut the woods and I help with other things that they need help with.

I would like to work and learn how to use the computer and not sit at home and do nothing. I have a friend, Agron. I would like for Agron to join the peer support group because we can help him, too.



*Arbenita Shabani
Kamenica*

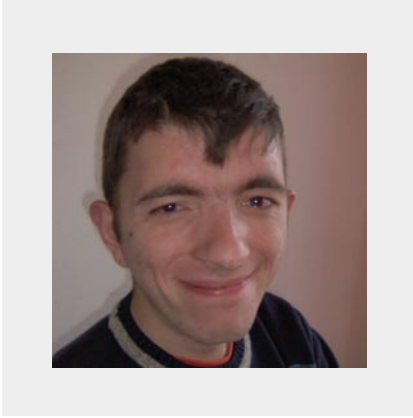
I've been coming to these meetings for two years now. The invitation to participate in peer support group by and for people with developmental disabilities, I got from Hyrmete, Handikos Coordinator in Kamenica.

I came here and I met many friends. I also met a girl when we were visiting other people with developmental disabilities. Her name is Valentina and I feel very bad that her father won't let her to participate in the group and in meetings.

I would like to work as a hairdresser, because at home I always play with my dolls' hair and give them different hair styles.

At home I help my mom, but not always.

- I invite all other members and all people with developmental disabilities to come to meetings because we have a very good time here.



*Qëndrim Jashari
Prishtina*

I am Qendrim Jashari. I come to peer support meetings since August 2006. I come here because I'm given the opportunity to talk, to be together with my friends, to become stronger, and to learn how to protect the rights that I am entitled to. We often meet with other groups from Peja, Kamenica, Kaçanik, because all together we will work in our organization "Ne për Ne".

I have many friends here and I like all of them. I know how to use the computer and I would like to teach others how to use it.

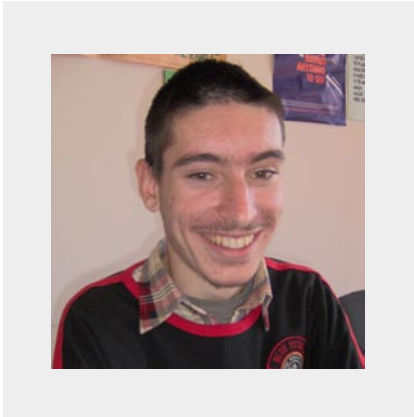
- I want to tell all other people who are not members of the groups to come and join our support groups. Try it, I believe you will like it, and if you don't, we won't make you stay.



*Fatime Fazliu
Prishtina*

Before I started coming to the support groups to complete my internship hours, I was attending the University however, I was not involved in anything else. I was very happy when I saw that MDRI had posted an advertisement, informing that students of the Psychology Department can get involved in the project Initiative for Inclusion. Since that time I come to the group meetings. Therefore, I feel very good for having the opportunity to get involved here, meet with the members of the group and also the whole MDRI staff. Since then, I come to the meetings every Friday and I have learned many valuable things.

The group has helped me to become stronger. Before coming here, I did mostly what others told me to without really thinking it through with my own brain. A positive thing I learned here is that we could establish an organization as well. Here I learned that it is not wrong if we fight for our Rights, and that we can share our concerns with other members and all other people, wherever they are. I hope that “Ne per Ne” organization will start functioning soon.



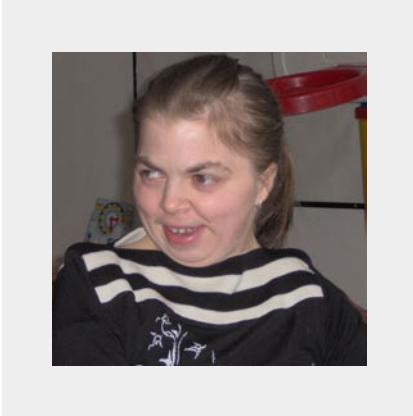
*Bajram Morina
Prishtina*

My name is Bajram Morina and I am from Prishtina. About the peer support group in Prishtina I was informed from Adrian's mother, a friend from the group, who told my father. To the group meetings I started coming a month ago. I like it here very much and friends are very nice. I would like to meet more friends because here we talk about many things such as: how to form new peer support groups. At home I help my family, but I like drawing very much. I want to become a painter.



*Bekim Krasniqi
Kaçanik*

*I started coming to the meetings two years ago. I enjoy it very much at the meetings. About these meetings I was informed by Sherif, Handikos coordinator in Kaçanik. I would like to invite as many friends as possible to attend the group.
At home I usually help with some house work.*



Laura Boshnjaku
Peja

I am Laura from Peja and I started coming to the meetings for quite a while now. I like coming to the meetings very much because I learn many things, such as: what is organization, how should we run the organization and else.

Here I made many friends and I learned a lot of other things. I also have a close friend here, that's Ilirjana. We get along very well.

Before coming here, I went out very rarely and only accompanied with my mother, because they would not allow me to go out by myself. Even now they don't let me come to the meetings by myself. I always have to come with my brother, and it's very annoying because I know the way.

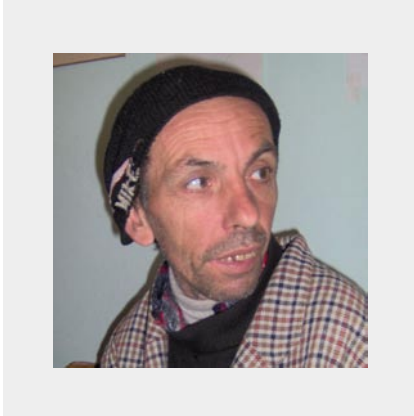
In the future I would love to start working and learn more things, and to earn my own money. Also, I would like to attend a computer course and after I finish the course, I think I could start working in a radio station as a moderator, and maybe present the news sometimes. I would also like to work in our organization and fight for our rights as much as I can, because with the organization it is easier.



*Gadaf Krasniqi
Kaçanik*

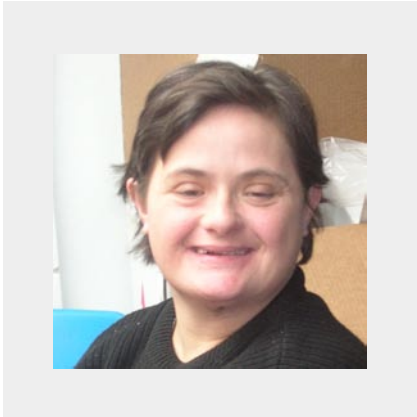
I am Gadaf Krasniqi. I come to the group meetings since the formation of the group. I would like it if more members would join us in the group. I work at home, cut wood, go shopping for different things, and other.

At the group meetings, I learn how to write and I also talk with other members.



*Musa Kastrati
Kamenica*

In the group meetings I have been coming for a year now. I like coming to the group because I meet many friends, we talk together and I would like that in the future we hold these meetings more often. I usually go out for a walk downtown and I engage in some house work: I cut wood for heating, I clean up the house backyard, I go grocery shopping, and I water the garden, and do other things. - I invite everyone to join us in our group because we have a very good time here, we learn and work. It's not good to stay home alone. Since I started coming here, I'm even happier with my life.



*Valbona Luzha
Kaçanik*

*I'm the founder of Kaçanik peer support group.
I enjoy coming to the peer support group meetings. We learn how to write and read here. At home I usually do handcraft, I do embroidery and I find it very enjoyable. I would like to come to the meetings more often and I like the conversation I have with my friends here.*



*Valid Zhubi
Gjakova*

I started my engagement as a volunteer with Prishtina peer support group by and for people with developmental disabilities in the end of June 2006.

I am pleased by the fact that members of peer support groups by and for people labeled with developmental disabilities enjoy these meetings. This is proven by their regular attendance in these meetings. These are meetings where they can express freely and debate relating things that preoccupy them.

I think that people labeled with mental disabilities need more space for expressing their thoughts freely in first place. We as a society should advocate for equal rights among all people and should listen carefully to their wishes, concerns, and requests and to respect them as equals with everyone else.

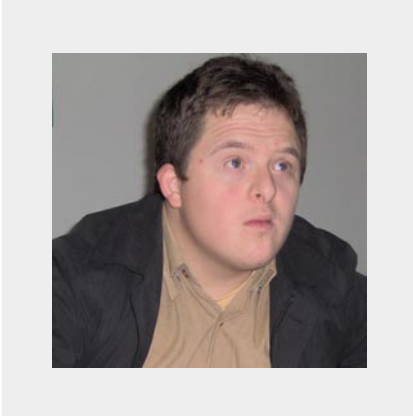
People labeled with mental disabilities have their talents as well, and all they need is an opportunity to further develop those talents, and afterwards the opportunity to convey them in the community where they live and society in general!

- People labeled with mental disabilities are often left out of the dec-

ision affecting them. They are not listened to and are not taken seriously. They are often told what to do without being asked what they want for themselves. They are often not allowed to decide how they want to live their lives. This makes people labeled with mental disabilities feel dependant and unimportant. But their opinion is important, because no one else knows better than them what they really want. This is why professionals, activists, and decision-makers working with people labeled with mental disabilities should listen to what these people have to say.

I am very grateful for MDRI's initiative to include students of the Psychology Department for cooperation. My participation in this project has rewarded me with finding new ideas and new techniques for advancing people with mental disabilities.

For these reasons, being convinced that MDRI will serve as progress in both aspects, professional and practical, I do not hesitate to express my maximum gratitude for allowing me to be a part of them.



*Gentian Bugiqi
Prishtina*

I started coming to the meetings of peer support group by and for people with developmental disabilities two weeks ago. My friend's, Adrian's, mom informed me about this group and I decided to come.

I like it here because we learn new things, we meet with friends and get to know new people. I would like to work in driving school and also would like to learn something more about using computers. I have a message for my other friends: to come to the meetings because we have a very good time here.



*Ilirjana Berisha
Peja*

I would like to go to school and study, and start working afterwards. I also like very much to go out and socialize with people and to visit my relatives. I've been coming to these meetings for a long time, over six months. I like it here because I met many friends: Egzon, Arbnor, Laura, Zamira and with these friends I went out for the first time to a coffee shop here in Peja.

In the meetings I come with the intention to learn new things, to support my friends. I always come here regularly.

In the future I'd like to start working as a hairdresser and to earn my own money. I have my social assistance money and I save it to go to the seaside, but if I work I'll have more money. I would like it if the number of friends in the meetings would grow, and then our organization will function better.



Then and now

Long ago, at a time in my life when I was lost, sometime in 1985, when my friends would walk in town and go to excursions or different dance parties, I was locked in a cage. For me it was a glass cage with rainbow colors, but it wasn't the rainbow of the whole world, it was our rainbow, rainbow of stomped spirits of people with mental disabilities. According to some doctors who wanted their goals achieved, just to get it over with us and diagnose us.

I, just like many others, was one of the people labeled with a diagnosis that did not belong to me, and was sent to an institution where I did not belong. While I was there I was forced to obey the rules of this institution – cage, even though I didn't want to take medication, take injections that caused physical pain, and even worse emotional...

Thanks to friends and the meetings that we were having there, I managed to get out. It still bothers me, the pain that I feel in a little corner of my heart, which I will carry with me until I die, that I, once a great student who attended different competitions, theatrical plays, who was full of life, was forced to wear pajamas with a men-

tal institution label on the left side of my chest, and was forced to walk around town like that.

But today, when I write this part or better said the sentence of my story, where I got the label, I feel very proud because I'm a survivor, now I'm a very happy mother with my children, and I live like every person that has the right to live his life.

I thank my colleagues who supported me and gave me will, and didn't leave me alone.

*Mihane Spahiu
Kamenica*

I am a mother of four. One of them got lung infection and high fever to be left with a disability for the rest of his life. The reasons he did not recover were many. My son is now 22 years old and it's been 3 years now that he suffers from another illness that appeared unexpectedly, epilepsy.

My son is a human being just like us and does not differ from others, still he has only been protected and supported by his family, because until now he was isolated from the community and society where we live, because they never considered him as a normal person, but as a joking object.

MDRI organization has been a blessing for people with developmental disabilities especially when they opened their doors in three centers of Kosovo: Peja, Kaçanik and Kamenica. For one whole year these people have come here once a week, where they have discussed their problems, they socialized and felt equal with everyone else. Special merits for accomplishment of this project have: Dea Pallaska and Myroete Bajrami, who to these children offered many opportunities, a lot of moral support while being close to them with will and

patience.

Together with Handikos “hearth”, after one year we got funding for a project, in which people with developmental disabilities in Kame-nica, during summer months, had the chance to go and visit their peers in their homes, where they continue to live isolated, and they were advising them to go out and join the group.

I think that just like my son, other people with intellectual disabili-ties need support, love and respect from us all.

At the end I want to make a call for the parents of all these chil-dren:

*...he is a part of my body, I created him,
I will cherish and love him more than anyone else,
Because he deserves it.
Even when I will not be by his side,
I am convinced that he won't lack love,
Because the society will protect and respect him...*



*Selvete Berisha
Kamenica*

For a person it is not enough to only have the doors of opportunity open... but all our citizens have a right to go through these doors. We don't ask for equality as a theoretical right, but equality as a FACT and equality as a RESULT...

The right to be equal is a necessity for every individual, therefore the fact and the result of equality should be touched and experienced by all. It's natural that we are a group, its right that we exist and act like we have acted until now... The group of people with developmental disabilities formed by their will and desire has functioned very well and this portrays the need to continue to be a group, even a bigger group than it currently is.

- With lot of pleasure during these two years I have listened to what they said, how they expressed themselves and the ideas of Kamenica group members, and often they have pleasantly surprised me. Their ideas I have used in my professional and private practices... I have always been with them and with their pleased feeling that they have a group like this one...

*Shqipron Maliqi
Kamenica*

My name is Shqipron Maliqi, and I was born on January 5th, 1993 in Kamenica.

It's been two years that I participate in Handikos, in the group of people with developmental disabilities. I am in school and I attend lessons in the attached class. I am very happy that I have found friends that respect me and I respect them, and we have a very good time together.

After I started going to the attached school, I started learning the first letters of the Albanian alphabet. I want to express my pleasure for the opportunity given to me – to know how to write and read. For this I am very grateful to my Mom, Dad and teacher, who all helped me in the most difficult times. I thank Handikos for giving us the opportunity to go to different excursions, parties, and meet many other friends.

I don't know what more to say. These were my words from the depths of my heart.

*Hyrmete Morina
Kamenica*

During the two years of existence of the group of people with developmental disabilities, I have been a coordinator of this group. With all my powers I have tried to be as close to them, their wishes and their needs in the group. This was a good opportunity for us to get to know each other better, to meet and talk freely, we discussed together things that concerned us, as well as the needs, worries and our problems, and we have tried to solve them together...

In reality, these groups of people deserve more, they deserve the right to be respected and appreciated as a person, in the contrary, the society still lives with the feeling of ignorance and disrespect of people who preliminarily identify them as not useful for the society. I have tried to give something from me during the time that we were together and will continue to do so...

With all my heart I thank the group of people with developmental disabilities who have supported me tremendously during the time that I worked with them. They were my support and stimulation in every step.

*Naziktere Maliqi
Kamenica*

The meetings of people with developmental disabilities and their parents started two years ago. Here we have learned about our children. We have learned how to work with them, not to leave them aside, because these children have their rights.

Also, we have visited many other children with disabilities that do not go out and are not close to any friends. We have visited them because they are isolated from their families and society.

I, as a mother, am very happy with the confidence that I have in Shqipron. He has started to get closer to his friends and to go to school, to learn and get involved in different activities.

I beg the other parents to pay attention to their children, send them to school so that they can be a part of the society. You shouldn't feel ashamed of your children but ask for implementation of their rights while offering them opportunities and conditions.

Allow the integration of your child!



A lifetime of problems

I got married when I was 18 years old. I married a man with whom I got along very well. I was married for four years, but unfortunately I was not able to have children, and that is why my husband left me. This was the beginning of my depression and for 40 years now I have been depressed.

I married again with a man who was older and had three children. I have been visiting doctors everywhere, in Belgrade, Turkey, Prishtina. In Belgrade and Turkey I would go for check ups however, in Prishtina hospital I was placed in neuro-psychiatric clinic. After spending two week there and given a certain therapy, I was released to go home. After returning home I felt fine for 2-3 years and then due to nervousness and different problems with children, I fell into depression again.

I have visited different psychologists and psychiatrists who would give me tranquilizing therapy, but they didn't see it reasonable to put me in some institution.

My life was full of problems and because of those problems I think I even lost my life. Even now I have trouble with the children, they

isolated me and they consider and treat me as a strange. The peer support group helped me a lot. I have been coming here for three years now and I feel very well with other friends here. I like to come every week and I am grateful to this initiative for the group because it brought my life back.

*Sherife Shabani
Kamenica*

I am Sherife Shabani, Arbenita's mother. I am very happy that my daughter had the chance to be a member of the peer support group by and for people labeled with developmental disabilities in Kamenica. With the greatest pleasure I started coming to the group meetings together with my daughter.

During these two years we have attended the peer support group meetings regularly, we had a very good time and I am very happy that I got to meet all the members of the group. Also, I'm very appreciative to other mothers, who are willing to do anything possible to help their children and other members of this group. I think that the family is the one who should be the first to support and help these children so that they can become independent.

I am thankful to Handikos in Kamenica and MDRI that have done a great job during these two years regarding the empowerment and integration of people with developmental disabilities in the community.

As a mother, I was and will always be ready to help this group and I believe that something like this we have achieved together with

other mothers who come to the meetings.

We have prepared food from home and in some occasions we have provided transportation for the members, just so that they don't stay at home.

At the end I want to call on all the parents of people labeled with developmental disabilities, to join us and together to do what is best for our children, who are great and who deserve to live happily.



*Afërdita Dema
Prishtina*

Before, I was more concentrated on classes and lectures and finishing the exams successfully, not that they are not important anymore but with my arrival at MDRI, I understood that practice is a very important part of the profession that I have chosen. I am now involved with “Ne për Ne” organization, respectively with Prishtina Peer Support Group. I feel lucky to be a part of this group, with very friendly members, independent and very interested in learning new things.

Thank you to MDRI and its staff that are contributing in my professional formation and especially in motivating students for attending activities of this nature.

We want friends!

We want work!

We want education!

We want everything, everyone else wants!

WE WANT OUR HUMAN RIGHTS!

Për më shumë informata rreth punës së MDRI ju lutem vizitoni ueb faqen:

For more information on the work of MDRI please visit web site:

<http://www.mdri.org>

Për më shumë informata rreth punës së K-MDRI ju lutem vizitoni ueb faqen:

For more information on the work of K-MDRI please visit web site:

<http://www.mdri.org/kosovo.html>

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