

Natick family opens its home to Kosovo four year old

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By Jessica Rudis, Town Correspondent



On a recent warm afternoon, [Endrit Zhushi](#) climbed into a Little Tykes foot-powered car and turned the front yard of the Gerard Family's cozy Natick home into his own personal highway.

The blonde, blue-eyed child bumped through the grass and driveway going forward and backward, only stopping occasionally to get out and kick a ball around.

It's a level of energy typical for a 4-year-old, but weeks ago such nonstop activity would have been unimaginable. That was before his pediatric cardiac surgery.

Endrit and his mother Behrije Zhushi came to Natick from Kosovo through the efforts of Natick Rotary and Gift of Life New England, Inc., a Rotary organization that helps children in need in the United States and abroad receive open-heart surgery. They returned to Kosovo Thursday.

For Endrit, the surgery was required to fix holes in the wall dividing the right and left sections of his heart.

Tobe Gerard and her husband Marc hosted the family in Natick for almost a month and watched mother and son change ever since Endrit's successful operation at the Children's Hospital of Boston on Sept. 11.

"Behrije came here with no smile, I mean, she was very stern looking," Tobe Gerard said, "Now she's smiling all the time."

As Endrit played on the front yard, visitors from the Albanian Orthodox Church of Natick came over one by one with homemade food and gifts. They brought lively company and provided translation services to the best of their ability, given that the Albanian spoken in Kosovo is a different dialect from the one they know.

Through one of the translators, Behrije Zhushi said that she is thankful for everything and is very happy to have had the opportunity for her son to receive help in the U.S.

The Gerards said that there was an outpouring of support from the Albanian Church and the Kosovar Albanian Society, as well as from the entire Natick community. The family sent an email to their friends and neighbors asking for donations before the Zhushis arrived, and they said they started receiving toys and clothing within minutes.

“I was keeping the stuff in my office just to see how much we had, and I could barely see my desk in there,” Tobe Gerard said. “It was just out of control, and we actually realized how much stuff there was when we started setting up their room.”

The Zhushis came to Boston along with another family from Kosovo, The other boy, Beqir Agushi, and his mother are staying with a family in Lynn and was sponsored by the Waltham Rotary Club. He had cardiac surgery Wednesday.

The boys were the first people from Kosovo to come through the Gift of Life New England program. The decision to reach out to families in that area came in part from Kosovo native Dr. Gani Abazi, who is a post-doctoral research fellow in neurosurgery at the Children’s Hospital in Boston and a former Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar.

“Cardiac surgery is not being provided in Kosovo,” Abazi said. “If these children could not get this surgery somewhere else in the world, they would have died at home.”

Abazi said he worked with local doctors to select two children who had the greatest financial need and whose medical cases would produce the best outcomes.

In a follow-up evaluation weeks after Endrit went through surgery, his doctors indicated that he is ready to return home. According to Abazi, the effort to help patients who need specialized medical services in Kosovo will not end once Endrit returns.

“We are also bringing a vision to Kosovo, that it gets its own medical services including cardiac surgery so that thousands of patients there can get treatment back home,” Abazi said.

As the Zhushis prepared to go home, Tobe and Marc Gerard said they are honored to have been a part of the experience. They keep a letter of thanks from Behrije Zhushi's husband sealed safely in a plastic bag, tucked into a kitchen cabinet. Marc Gerard pulls out another letter, one that will travel back to Kosovo, written from one father to another.

"It is the highest honor that one man can receive from another man as to being trusted to care and protect his beloved family," the letter reads. "and I shall carry that honor with me until my last days."