

## A second chance for boy from Kosovo

By [Charlie Breitrose/Daily News staff](#)

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NATICK — The energetic 4-year-old ran around kicking a ball in the yard of Tobe Gerard's Purington Avenue home, just 10 days after undergoing open-heart surgery at Children's Hospital in Boston.

The youngster, Endrit Zhushi, and his mother, Behrije, traveled from the small village of Sfeqel, Kosovo, to Boston seeking the life-saving surgery not available in their homeland.

They were brought to the United States through Rotary International's Gift of Life program, and were hosted by Gerard - a past president of Natick Rotary Club - her husband, Marc Peloquin, and their daughter Dani.

Watching her son play amazed Behrije, who spoke through translator Tony Rukaj, an Albanian who immigrated to Natick. Without the surgery, Endrit, who had a hole in his heart, was unlikely to live much past his 12th birthday, Gerard said. On Sept. 13, Dr. Frank Pigula performed the successful surgery.

"Endrit's improvement is incredible. His health has been proceeding in an excellent way," Behrije said. "The only problem is, he likes to scratch his scar."

It took Behrije a long time to reach the point where she could feel relaxed in America, she said through Rukaj.

"Since leaving Kosovo, she hasn't felt that secure, even though Children's Hospital is one of the best in the world," he said. "It is still the instinct of the mother that she can never really (be sure) until she sees something, until after the operation. Then she really can see improvement, and that Endrit is getting healthy and better."

The journey to get Endrit the medical care he needed was arduous.

Kosovo, part of the former Yugoslavia, declared independence from Serbia in 2008. The landlocked country has about 2 million people, and is one of the poorest in Europe. The ethnic Albanians, who make up about 90 percent of Kosovo's population, were the target of ethnic cleansing by Serbian forces under Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic.

Although Kosovo is supported by the United States and some major European countries, Serbia still does not recognize its independence.

The Zhushis live in a village of some 200 people that has an elementary school, but no hospital.

According to the application for the visa that allowed them into the United States, the family lives on about 140 Euros - about \$204 - a month. The money is the pension which Endrit's father, Nysret, receives because he is disabled from an injury sustained during the war in Kosovo.

With open-heart surgery not available in Kosovo, Endrit's case came to the attention of the people at Gift of Life. The program has been bringing children to the United States for medical care since 1974, and to New England since 2000.

Many of the children have come from Latin America and the Caribbean, Gerard said, but Endrit came as part of the first group from Kosovo. Another boy from Kosovo had successful surgery recently, Gerard said, and was hosted by a family in Waltham.

Gerard said a key link was Gani Abazi, a man from Kosovo who was brought to the United States through the Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship program to get his medical training. Abazi said there is great need in Kosovo.

"I think (the people at Gift of Life) do a tremendous job, and a great amount of work," Abazi said. "They open the doors for the people of the world to know about the generosity of the United States. If these two children did not get surgery, if they stayed in Kosovo, they would die."

While some children can be helped through Gift of Life, Abazi said eventually he would like to see such cases handled through an improved medical system in Kosovo.

"We are very happy to have these children come here for open-heart surgery," Abazi said.

Endrit and Behrije had quite a flight, leaving from Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, and flying to Austria, then to Washington and finally arriving in Boston.

Despite the doctors in Kosovo reassuring her that Endrit would be taken care of by the best doctors at Children's Hospital, and that the people in the United States would take care of them, Behrije was nervous. That changed, however, when she saw Gerard and her family waiting at Logan International Airport on Sept. 6.

"She did not feel nervous when she saw Tobe and her husband and daughter holding a big sign in Albanian saying 'Welcome Endrit and Behrije,'" Behrije said through the translator. "She felt at home. Tobe has been very welcoming, an extraordinary person."

Gerard got involved in Gift of Life after Ted Shaughnessy, president of Gift of Life New England, spoke at a Natick Rotary meeting and said the group was looking for hosts.

"I said afterward, 'I want to do this,'" Gerard said. "With Marc being a nurse and us being a loving family and having space, I wanted to do this."

Along with the Rotary connection, Gerard said she has a personal link to Children's Hospital. Her family moved to Framingham from New York when her sister was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. She died at age 12.

"My sister passed away at Children's Hospital many, many years ago," Gerard said. "I knew it was a wonderful place, and I knew if any miracle with cardiac surgery was going to occur, it would be at Children's."

Just four months volunteering, Gerard got a call asking if she and her family would be willing to host a child.

When the Zhushis arrived, it was quite an adjustment. Neither one spoke English, and Albanian is unlike anything Gerard was familiar with.

"We underestimated the language barrier," Gerard said. "Without the help of the Kosovo community, we would be living 24/7 in Google Translator."

The experience of hosting Endrit and his mother has been rewarding for Gerard, who said it "restores my faith in America and humanity." The local Kosovar community came out in droves to help the Zhushis, Gerard said. Many settled in Lynn, Everett and Winthrop after leaving Kosovo during the war.

"People came forward who wanted to help - total strangers. Just because they come from the same country. It was so amazing," Gerard said.

The day after the surgery "people poured into the hospital with gifts. One man took his whole paycheck and gave it to Behrije. They know she is very poor."

The mission statement of Rotary is "Service before Self," Gerard said, and that was one reason she wanted to host a Gift of Life family.

"A lot of things put you out of your comfort zone, but once you come out the other side you feel so fulfilled," Gerard said.

Natick Rotary also helped financially, donating \$5,000 to Children's Hospital for Endrit's care. Gerard said Children's Hospital provided the rest, - the surgery, and all the pre- and post-surgery treatments - for free.

"I'm not sure how much that cost, but it must be about \$250,000," Gerard said.

Behrije and Endrit left for home on Thursday, after spending less than a month in the United States. But Behrije will have tales of the kindness of Americans.

"When I get back to Kosovo, I will talk to people about how people in America are so hospitable, and how it was so amazing for them to help a family like us," Behrije said. "Tobe (took time off) from her job and took care of us. Not many people do this."

She said her son now has a new life ahead of him.

She felt relieved, she said through the translator. "Now Endrit will have as equal and healthy a life as other children in Kosovo. That was what I was really hoping and praying for - his health."

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