

Introducing: Roy & Christine Debenham

Roy and Christine tell us about their remarkable journey amidst the poverty of Albania, and war-torn Kosovo. There is no doubt that the Lord walked with them.

Both were born and brought up in the town of Bury St Edmunds Suffolk. We met and married in 1969 and have two sons. Fourteen months ago we moved from Suffolk to Bidford on Avon to be closer to family.

Many people ask us how and why we came to go to Albania. Hopefully, what follows will answer those questions.

In 1995 Chris was an Advocacy support worker working with adults with learning difficulties, since leaving school. Roy was employed at British Telecom as an engineer until 1996. He says,

"I might have stayed there until I was 60. I expected a nice quiet retirement - a part time driving job, maybe a spot of golf in the afternoons. However, Albania was to change all that"

In November 1995 we read a feature in the local newspaper about the dreadful conditions in an Albanian maternity hospital. The local charity '999' based in Colchester Essex was appealing for volunteers ("Bring your skills to Albania"), to travel to the southern town of Korçe and construct a modern, purpose-built laundry for the hospital.

Chris opened the paper and saw a photo of a woman hand-washing sheets soaked in blood. It just touched a chord. I thought,

"Do people really still live like that today? There must be something we can do."

I well remember saying to Roy,

"You know we could do some volunteering when we properly retire. Where is Albania anyway?"

A few days later we contacted the project founder and were invited to join a meeting with people interested in volunteering. At this point we merely went to find out more, and to see if we could help from the U.K. Our initial thought was to support the project by holding a coffee morning in our home to raise funds and awareness. Looking back we laugh and say,

"We never held the coffee morning, we went instead!"

Resultant from this meeting, we became co-ordinators responsible for resourcing items needed for the laundry - bedding, towels, overalls, detergent and hygiene items.



In March 1996 An opportunity arose and we became owners of a small garden nursery satisfying Chris' passion for gardening. We believed this to be our future, and something to keep Roy occupied.

By November 1996, the garden centre had become a contact and drop off point for aid and equipment, which we stored in our garage. The interest and support we had was overwhelming .

Our first visit to Albania was in July 1996 for two weeks, as part of a team of volunteers on a sixteen-week project to rebuild the hospital laundry in Korce, with 'Project 999 To Albania'.

We travelled from London to Thessalonica and stayed overnight, before travelling by bus in sweltering heat to Korce. Our quarters were with an Albanian host family in the heart of the town. Each day we walked to work through back streets to the laundry site. It was certainly a culture shock; terribly busy, dirty, rubbish piled everywhere and poverty to a degree we had never seen or experienced. It had a

profound effect upon us. Crazy isn't it? We fell in love with the country and the people, feeling a pressing need to help the most vulnerable. After visiting Korce's heart-breaking home for disabled children and adults, Roy became convinced that his future lay there too.

We felt God calling us. It seemed so unlikely, a couple like us, but we felt against all odds we would one day end up there!



Through church connections, we found out about an orphanage in the bleak industrial city of Elbasan run by a British couple. They had been praying for help to run the orphanage. However, after contacting them they did not think us suitable. In December 1996, a surprise meeting with a missionary on furlough in UK gave Roy the opportunity to co-drive aid, Bibles and supplies to missionaries and churches in many areas of Albania. Interestingly, one of the recipients was the Home of Hope orphanage Elbasan, where Roy met and was able to convince the couple that we were still willing to help them run the orphanage. On Roy's return we looked to sell the lease on our garden nursery. February 1997 arrived, and we travelled to Wrexham to be interviewed, for the role of support workers at Home of Hope

orphanage Elbasan, by board members of Albanian Evangelical Mission (A.E.M.), the umbrella organisation overseeing the work. We were offered the job, initially for one year, with the stipulation that we were both to learn the Albanian language .

Originally, we intended to leave for Albania in March. Unfortunately, the sale of the lease of the garden nursery didn't happen. We contacted auctioneers to do a two-day auction and sell the stock. Then we began preparing for our new life in Albania.

Plans started coming together, and our intention was to leave in April. As the departure date came close Albania was engulfed in a wave of terror, anarchy and civil unrest. With mob violence and indiscriminate gunfire threatening it was deemed to be unsafe to go. Subsequently, the airlines stopped flights in and out of Albania.

Finally, with anticipation, apprehension, excitement and yes, some trepidation, we were about to embark on our travels to begin our new life in Elbasan.

We left England knowing a few Albanian words, e.g. Good morning, Good evening, Hello and Goodbye ,Yes and No and quickly learning how to say,

"I don't understand!"

The thought of learning a new language proved to be daunting and challenging, yet caused us many laughs in the months ahead.

Overnight we were catapulted into a completely different environment. There were twenty-two babies and children to care for, along with several staff members of whom only two spoke English. It was challenging, but fulfilling. We spent almost two years at the Home of Hope and lived in the city amongst the community, enjoying our newfound lifestyle.



With the onset of the Kosovo conflict in 1999 we found ourselves embroiled in the heart of the City, where many Kosovan refugees were arriving from across the border, fleeing persecution. Numerous people walked across the mountains, seeking refuge and protection from war torn Kosovo. They journeyed through Macedonia and into Albania, onto our doorstep. We watched as television reports unfolded the atrocities and devastation taking place, and felt we must do something to help. Armed with 100 US Dollars we went to the Mayor's office to ask where we could be useful, and how best to spend our money. We were directed to a building nearby, run by a German organisation, which had previously housed and provided food to street children We met and spoke with the manager, offering to help straight away. One hundred plus refugees were adding to the daily number, and needed food and assistance.

The work was unrelenting as many flocked to safety, some injured, ill and needing support on all levels. Finance was vital if we were to continue. In desperation we contacted friends at our local church in Suffolk with a plea for the Kosovo Refugees. Within a week we had their valued support. Food, first aid supplies and finance continued to enable support for more than 2,300 refugees during a six-month period before they returned to Kosovo. From these beginnings we were able to establish the charity "A2B", (Aid to the Balkans).

We returned to Suffolk in 2005 knowing it was time to hand over the day to day running of the projects to Albanian Nationals, overseen by Trustees in U.K.

"A2B" continues, and last year we were able to thank God for His mercies, love and provision, and to celebrate twenty years. Amazing years of work in Albania and Kosovo, with ongoing provision of a food

programme, two day centres, family link sponsorship, education and training. Our mission aim is to restore dignity, give hope and eliminate poverty.

So much more could be written - it's a book in the making!

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