

## Albania 2023 Mission Report

Ken and Debbie Martin were blessed to teach again in the World English Institute (WEI) summer campaign in Tirana, Albania, from July 10 through August 4. During that period, we were joined by eight other teachers, five of whom were from Maryville—a strong East Tennessee presence!

### Where Is Albania?

Although many Americans do not know about Albania and its rich cultural and religious history, they are familiar with some of Albania's neighbors, including Greece, Macedonia, and Italy, as shown on the map in **Figure 1**. The early history of the gospel being preached in this area is mentioned by Paul in Romans 15:19 (**Figure 2**). Also, two handwritten Greek Gospels (codices) from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries have been found in Albania.



*Figure 1: Map of Albania and surrounding countries*



*Figure 2: Romans 15:19b*

From the 4<sup>th</sup> through the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, Albania was under the control of various conquerors. Then, for nearly 500 years, it was ruled by the Ottoman Turks, who cut it off from any Western influence. From 1967 until 1992, its Communist government declared Albania to be an atheist country, closed all places of worship, and banned all religious activities.

After Communism fell in 1992, spreading the news about Jesus was once again accepted and expected. God's Spirit made connections that would have ties to Hardin Valley and East Tennessee. One of the initial members of a group of missionaries then was Ben Jones—Mark Jones' father. In Romania during that time, two young Albanian men who obeyed the gospel were Artan Xjaferi and Erik Qirjaqi, both of whom you may have met when they visited Hardin Valley in 2022. Artan now lives in Maryville. (Enid, who lived with us during Covid, is Erik's son.) Jim Fox serves on the board of WEI and has had a long relationship with the Tirana church. Woody and Gwen Byars have also taught many times in the summer campaigns in Tirana.



Today, more and more people are “discovering” Albania. Tourism is being promoted heavily. Evidence of the country’s desire and expectation for tourists is seen in the construction of a new high-rise addition to one of the hotels (see **Figure 3**). This addition will bring its room total to approximately 500.

*Figure 3: One of many new hotels*

### **What Is our Weekday Like in Albania?**

Debbie and I made two trips to Albania this year. Our primary purpose on these trips is to help students improve their English speaking and writing skills, using grammar lessons and Bible lessons from material that was written by Dr. Dick Ady for this specific purpose. (Copies of the books we use are available in the HVCOC library.)

A typical day begins with a buffet breakfast in our small, inexpensive hotel that is only a couple of blocks from the church building where we teach. At 9:00, the teachers and staff meet in our “classroom” for a devotional. We then meet students at 10:00 and 11:00, have lunch, and meet additional students at 4:00, 5:00, and 6:00. Some evenings, we “refresh” ourselves by walking to a nearby akullore (gelato) shop—an inexpensive treat when the temperatures have exceeded 105 degrees!

Usually, our students’ ages range from young teens to adults in their 40s or 50s. Some of them begin their studies in the online WEI course, and some continue in the online course after we return to the states. Some began their studies in previous summers, while others have studied with teachers who preceded us this summer. This year, a teacher was available for every student who wanted to study!

New students begin with the story of creation and continue through God’s plan for man’s salvation through His Son. Some students are hearing the story of Jesus for the first time! Others, such as Nikolas in **Figure 4** and Fatjona in **Figure 5**, have heard the story, and their faith is beginning to grow.



*Figure 4: Nikolas in a study with Ken*



*Figure 5: Fatjona in a study with Debbie*

## What Does God Do in Albania?

Our greatest joy in Albania (or, for that matter, anywhere) is seeing God work in our lives and the lives of our students and others with whom we interact. In some students, we see the seed grow and develop. In others—both students and nonstudents—we see God making connections. These connections are only possible through Him, and we can only imagine what He has in mind! Here are a few of these stories.

1. Debbie was “chosen” to have several meetings with a blind man and his wife. This man was seeking information about U.S. educational institutions that provide resources for blind people. His desire is to identify the resources and how they are provided, so that similar provisions might be made available to blind people in Albania. The blind man does not speak English and does not read braille, so the WEI secretary (Sadete) translated during the meetings as well as translated the English materials that Debbie collected.
2. One Sunday, we met an American family who had moved to Shkodër, one of the larger cities in northern Albania, where the church is not known. This family includes 10 children, ages 2 to 18! One of my current students, who lives in Shkodër, has studied online for several years. He also spent a week in Tirana studying with me in person. God connected a man, who speaks some Albanian, with a man who lives in the same city and who desires to be a disciple of Jesus!
3. Debbie lost contact with two of her former students (Gema and Klea), whose family prepared lunch for us on one rare, rainy day several years ago! This summer, Debbie and I were having lunch, and Debbie noticed a couple entering the restaurant. She remarked that they looked like Gema’s parents. Soon, the man walked past our table, and he and Debbie recognized each other. Mikel does not speak English, so he kept referring to his other daughter, Klea. After we joined the couple at their table, he called Klea (who speaks English fluently), and she told us she was on her way to meet her parents. After she arrived, she became the translator.
4. This story continues in a most unexpected way! That same evening, Debbie and I were having dinner in another restaurant, when we saw Stinn and Lindita and their two sons walk by. They live in California, and Lindita is an Albanian/American, who met Stinn when he was teaching in Tirana in the early 2000s. None of the family saw us. However, they decided to return to this restaurant for dinner, too. They joined us, and we began telling them about our lunch experience. Lindita was amazed, and she recounted her story of growing up in the apartment adjacent to Gema and Klea’s parents! She recalled how, after her father suffered a heart attack, Mikel carried him on his back down several flights of stairs and a few blocks to the hospital! She had not seen the family in many years. God has something in mind!
5. During our first trip to Albania this year, in late April and early May, we met with some of our online Albanian students as well as some previous students and had in-person studies with some of them. We also met Nardi, who worked as a waiter at our hotel in 2018. Nardi had taken our picture and told us that he wanted to paint a portrait, which he planned to finish before we left that summer. However, he didn’t complete it in time, and we lost contact with him because he was not working at the hotel the next summer. This May, however, we learned that he works in the office building where Anila Qirjaqi works. One of their conversations led to us re-connecting, and he presented us with the completed painting (shown in Figure 6)! Nardi speaks little English, but our faithful translator (Sadete) accompanied us when we met this summer, and he shared his unusual story of how he became an artist. God has something in mind!



*Figure 6: Portrait, with Nardi the artist*

### **What Are our Weekends Like in Albania?**

Our activities on weekends were quite varied this year. Usually, we worship with the Tirana church and see people that we don't see during the week. However, on our second weekend this summer, the Qirjaqis took us to Korçë, a city in southeastern Albania, near the Greek border. We had not seen Korçë, so Erik and Anila showed us some of the sites in and around the city. We worshiped with the Korçë church on Sunday, where Albert Cepi preaches. We had met Albert and his wife many times, including once in Tennessee.

The third Saturday, Artan (Eri's father) and Flavio (Eri's brother) drove us to Eri's grandparents' one-acre farm, where we enjoyed a visit, pictures with our "honorary" olive trees, and a traditional Albanian meal prepared by Eri's grandmother. The fourth Saturday, Artan and Rudina (Eri's mother) drove us to Permet, a beautiful historic town in the mountains of southwestern Albania.

### **Come to Albania!**

Debbie and I thank you for your continuing prayers for us, for our students, and for all those with whom we share in God's connections. We invite you to join us in Albania in 2024! We also invite you to become a WEI online teacher. In a typical day, more than 200 students from many countries are waiting for a teacher! For more information, please contact Woody Byars or go to the WEI website ([www.worldenglishinstitute.net](http://www.worldenglishinstitute.net)).

Ken and Debbie Martin