

Albanian Alps Institute
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*Our Mission:
Supporting improved quality of
educational opportunities for
the children and youth of the
isolated Malsia e Madhe
region of Northern Albania.*

AAI Eyeglasses Project

In Shkrel, the region in Albania where AAI works, only a handful of students out of a population of 900 wear eyeglasses. The low percentage is due in part to a cultural stigma against wearing glasses, as well as the extreme poverty in these villages. Some of the parents don't read anything, including newspapers. The Dutch Embassy in Albania awarded a grant to AAI in the amount of \$17,000 through its Small Grant Program to provide funding for eye exams for all students and eyeglasses to those who needed them.



The Eyeglasses Project was at the top of AAI's agenda during Steve's 2009 trip to Albania. He and Albanian Alps Manager Dr. Marash Rakaj and ophthalmologist Dr. Agron Luli visited the villages of Bogë, Xhaj, Vrithë, Dedaj, Zagorë, and Rec testing eyes and fitting glasses. In just six hectic days, they screened 541 students and provided eyeglasses to 65. In the lower valley schools, attendance wasn't as good. Marash and Dr. Luli, returned in September and examined 274 more students and distributed 21 more pairs of glasses.

It seems that the cultural stigma was overcome as the students immediately began sporting their new glasses. Steve received effusive thanks from students, parents, and teachers and is optimistic that they will continue to wear their new glasses.

Meet Our English Teacher

Aleks Vulaj has worked as the AAI English teacher in Vrithë since the fall of 2003. Aleks currently teaches in three village schools with a total of 84 students enrolled in his classes. His teaching has improved every year, and AAI is very lucky to have him. Aleks lives in Vrithë with his parents, Tom and Marie; his wife, Marie; and their one-year-old daughter, Armela.



2009 Albanian Trek by Steve Cook

For the first several days after my arrival it rained every day which didn't bode well for a trek in the Albanian Alps. The day we began hiking, we got soaked getting to our van. But by the time we picked everyone up and arrived at the trailhead, it had stopped raining and it didn't rain again the entire trip. Faleminderit Zoti! (Thank God)

Our group consisted of Imme from France, Lars from Switzerland, and Tom from Ohio along with myself, my colleague Marash Rakaj, and Angjelin Olaj as a "gofer". We hiked first to Repishtë and spent the night with AAI scholarship student Xhemalie Hoxhaj's family at their humble home. We had two great meals and then hiked on to Rrjolë, with Xhemalie's brother Edi wrangling the donkey with our gear. Our trail clung to rugged mountains, wended along a beautiful river, and overall we had a great time as a group of friends way, way, off the beaten path.



After an overnight stay in the home of another scholarship student, Kristian Peja, his father guided us through some spectacular mountain passes and high meadows replete with abandoned summer sheep camps. It was a long day – eleven hours ending in the community of Kir, where we were greeted like old friends by our poor but gracious hosts. The first floor was shared by us and the family farm animals.



Next day, our host expertly packed our gear onto a horse and took us on a long but gentle tour up the Kir River and over a forested pass into the Shalë Valley. There is plenty of water in these mountains, unlike those to the west around Bogë and Nikc. The old trails are nearly empty, and I thought of Edith Durham, as we traversed her old stomping ground.

The Shalë a beautiful valley, with an improved road for walking. Upriver to Theth, and after one night moved on into the high meadows above Bogë, where we rolled rocks down a cliff like middle schoolers. A couple of days in Bogë getting reacquainted with old friends, a final dinner in Shkodër, sipping beer and raki on the new car-free Piacca and strolling along the lake on the new promenade, fatigued but pleased with the memory of another successful trek through the Albania Alps.

Where Are They Now?

Updates on some of our current and former scholarship students:

- ❖ **Angjelin Olaj** is a sophomore at University of Shkoder, Albania
- ❖ **Aureljan Kronaj** is a senior at Lewis & Clark High School, Spokane, WA
- ❖ **Lula Dragani** is a senior at Shadle Park High School, Spokane, WA
- ❖ **Alfonc Rakaj** is a sophomore at Oregon State University in Corvallis, OR
- ❖ **Kristina Milaj** is a senior at Santiam Christian High School in Corvallis, OR

AAI is currently helping 29 students pursue further education. Many more are in need of assistance. You can help a needy student with a pledge as small as \$20 per month for an academic year. Donors receive personal letters from the students as well as timely updates.

Annual Yard Sale – May 2010

AAI will have its 4th annual yard sale in May 2010. We welcome donations of books, clothing, furniture and household items. **Please let us know in early May if you have items you wish to donate.**

Learn more about AAI at www.albanianalps.org

Become a fan of our Facebook page and receive updates of our activities throughout the year.



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(Please complete this form and send it with your tax deductible contribution)

Yes! I want to help the children in the poor mountain villages of northern Albania get a better education.

Here is my donation of:

\$500 Full high school scholarship

\$250 Bus fare stipend

\$200 Early Intervention student

_____ Please accept my unrestricted donation

Even this much helps:

\$5 puts a book in a library

\$25 buys kindergarten supplies

\$100 buys chemistry lab equipment

Name _____

Address _____

Email _____

Phone _____

THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROSITY