

# Compact

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April 2021

Dear friends,

Here we are, one year later. A year that has allowed us to contemplate the value of things we had previously taken for granted. A handshake. A hug. A visible smile. Classrooms. The hustle and bustle of what used to be an ordinary day.

COVID-19 together with its precautionary measures is a chapter we're all ready to close. At Nehemiah Gateway we have experienced a year of flexibility, uncertainty joined with innovation.

We also have plenty of normalcy. Retirements, board member transitions, project expansion and development. And gratitude. For our friends, our coworkers and our clients. For the ability to come alongside and bring positive change. For a bright future.

Gratefully yours,



Michelle Mann, Executive Director  
Nehemiah Gateway USA



At-risk children find a safe space at the after-school program in Gjirokaštër

## Functioning in a New Reality

### Challenges during twelve months of COVID-19 in Albania

#### **In February 2020, it was full steam ahead at NG Albania.**

At Nehemia School, a Business@School competition was underway. Staff from NG USA and Switzerland were in Albania conducting the annual audit, and staff from Nuremberg were in Uganda interviewing applicants for potential scholarships to Nehemiah Gateway University in Pogradec. Faculty from the US was teaching at NGU, and four young volunteers from Germany were helping with various projects. The clinic was seeing patients every day and planning for its annual International Women's Day bash. Amaro Tan was holding an open house to show parents the importance of science education. Nehemiah Gateway USA had just received a donation to start making cloth bags for village aid distributions around Pogradec.



Increasingly important: food distribution



Children returning to Nehemia School under a strict hygiene regime.

**And then COVID hit.** By March 9, all schools were closed to in-person education. Nehemiah Gateway University admissions were paused, as the international travel situation was too uncertain to justify enrolling students in a program that required equal parts classroom and employment. International staff and volunteers had been sent home, even as more and more flights were canceled. Roma students in Pogradec and Gjirokastër had to try to learn from home, without computers, television, phones, or even, in some cases, electricity. Clinic patients had to stay home unless their condition would get substantially worse without care. All NG staff were working almost entirely from home.

**The humanitarian aid program**, which has been part of NG from the beginning, assumed renewed prominence. With generous support from donors, teams operating out of Amaro Tan, the Buçimas clinic, and the Gjirokastër soup kitchen delivered thousands of bundles of food and household supplies to people in need. Even in the best of times, NG Albania supports people who have no other option, year in and year out. During the spring lockdown, confined to their homes, they needed help more than ever—as well as compassionate human contact. Others who had built precarious day-to-day livelihoods fell into crisis when they could no longer go out and work. In partnership with the Pogradec municipality, NG brought some relief.

**At NG's schools, teachers and students** were plunged into the world of distance learning. At Nehemia School, teachers for all grades cobbled together instruction using the equipment and materials they had at hand—in many cases, their cell phones, in the shared spaces of their family homes.

**At Amaro Tan and in Gjirokastër**, where most students live with poverty and instability every day even in normal times, schoolwork was only part of the challenge. Teachers worked long hours to keep children connected and learning. But, as Amaro Tan director Marin Piqoni says, the technology-education aspect was not the most difficult or the most important. Amaro Tan, and the Gjirokastër after school program provide much more than book learning. For at-risk children, school is a safe place where they get enough to eat and have caring and professional adults working to help them. Many do not have these at home.

**In Albania, lockdowns eased in mid-May**, allowing people to leave their homes for more than 90 minutes at a time. Among other measures, curfews and a mask mandate were implemented nationally. The youngest children came back to school, with older grades returning in the fall under greatly altered conditions. A summer fundraising drive brought laptops to the teachers at Nehemia School, so they could teach from home if necessary. Students with sick family members (or who were sick themselves) could quarantine without missing school.

School director Elona Rira admits that this has been a difficult time. Despite careful efforts, 43 staff members and 12 teachers had COVID-19, with two of the teachers getting severe cases. Keeping the school functioning and safe every day has been challenging, with the constant fear of bringing sickness home at the end of the day. She says

**“COVID-19 has given me a new appreciation of the life and health of the people I work with, live with, and surround myself with.”**



Therapy session for children with special needs

**It has been a year of disruption for patients at the Buçimas clinic.** Reduced public transportation—and the risk of infection that comes from using it—has made it hard for patients to make it to their appointments. [NG has helped with transportation where appropriate.] Once at their appointments, therapies have new layers of precautions built in. Nikoleta Xhindole, who runs the social program in Buçimas, describes the approach thus: “treat each patient like a person, but also as a potential carrier.” Although the team has treated people who have turned out to have COVID, with careful masking and abundant cleaning and hand washing, so far there have been no cases among the clinic staff.

**COVID-19 is far from over in Albania.** At the time this article is being written, in a country of less than 3 million people, there are over 1000 new cases per day, and approximately 20 deaths per day. Pogradec is considered a hot spot and is facing new restrictions as a result. Vaccines are slow coming to Albania, and it is likely to be some time before they are widely available to the public. As long as international travel remains restricted, the connections that underpin NG’s work will remain at a distance. Yet the global team has learned to function in this new reality and will work to support the important work of team members like Piqoni, Rira, and Xhindole, who continue to care for people even during this difficult time.



Joana Stensland and Lazaron Gusho

## A New Face And a Farewell

### Change in NG USA’s Board of Directors

After a 2-year term, Joanna Stensland has stepped down from the NG USA Board of Directors. “It has been a privilege to be a part of an organization that helps the poor and marginalized in Albania, a country close to my heart. I will continue to support the great work of NG USA,” says Joanna. Joanna is originally from the UK. With her husband Erik, she spent several years in Albania, where they became familiar with the work of NG. Says NG USA Executive Director Michelle Mann: “We will miss Joanna and also her polite British ability to keep us on track during meetings. We are grateful for her contributions and look forward to keeping her engaged in NG USA’s work.”

Joanna’s position on the board will be filled by Lazaron Gusho. Lazaron was valedictorian of the first class of graduates at Nehemia School in Pogradec. He earned his BS in Civil Engineering from Idaho State University, and a MS in Construction Management from New York University. He is now part of a construction management team that manages multi-million-dollar construction projects in New York. He is also a philanthropist. He co-founded the Lyhnida Fund in 2018 to support outstanding students in the Pogradec area. “I firmly believe that investing in education today is the best means to build a better future,” says Lazaron.

“We are so happy to have Lazi join our team. He brings valuable perspective as an Albanian graduate from Nehemia School, and will enhance our board and position NG USA for growth,” said Michelle.



Masks, hygiene concepts, distant learning - teaching has become more difficult, but by no means impossible.

## Keeping The Fire of Education Alive

### Challenges and opportunities in moving forward after a year of pandemic

Arnold Geiger, Managing Director of Nehemiah Gateway, has been known to point out that “you don’t get to choose where you are born,” because the circumstances we are born into determine many aspects of our lives. Today, the whole world has been impacted by a deadly global pandemic. At the time of the writing of this article, there have been over 114 million cases worldwide, and 2.55 million deaths. Yet experiences and outlooks vary widely depending on where in the world one happens to be. With borders closed, travel curtailed, and close contact between people discouraged, the distance between members of our global community has grown. How does an international organization, like NG, that is built on a foundation of caring for and empowering people move forward, after a year of pandemic? What are the challenges, and what are the opportunities?

COVID-19 has exacerbated inequality worldwide, with potentially long-term consequences.

Mr. Geiger observes that technology has helped workers in office jobs stay connected, productive, and employed during the pandemic, with video conferencing platforms like Teams and Zoom bringing people together from afar. But, what if you don’t have a computer, and can’t even get access to one? What if you do not have electricity, or an internet connection?

How is a student to learn online if he or she cannot get online? And what happens to the children who count on school not only to learn but to be safe, and for a full meal every day?

We must find ways to keep the fire of education alive—even when good fuel is hard to come by.

And then there is the issue of global fairness regarding the vaccines that are now becoming available. At the time of the writing of this article, ten countries have administered 75% of all COVID-19 vaccines available worldwide, while 130 countries do not yet have even a single dose available. Albania is not one of the top ten countries. In some parts of the world, the possibility of life after COVID is on the horizon; in others that is still far away, and the public health, education, and economic impacts will continue.

The impact of a year of COVID-19 on education, and on this generation of children, is unknown, especially for children coming from at-risk backgrounds—like the children in NG’s Amaro Tan program.

Children from at-risk background face increased risk and insecurity outside of school.



The computer lab at Kemono Orphan village, funded by NG, provides students and teachers with digital access.



International students volunteer to help children in need.

Marin Piqoni, director of Amaro Tan, is worried: There is already a decrease in focus on the part of these students, and a troubling increase in young girls dropping out to get married and have children.

Even among children from more affluent families, online education is new, and implementation has been bumpy. And all children are struggling with lack of socialization with their peers.

Michelle Mann of Nehemiah Gateway USA worries about the long-term social impacts of a year of avoiding one another and covering our faces. Will we be able to reconnect warmly and authentically when this is all over? Anne Uellendahl of NG Switzerland echoes her concern, saying that “the psychological, social, and educational consequences are a huge,” but difficult to quantify. “What does all this anxiety and uncertainty do to the young people?”

For the NG team, there have been some bright spots. Much of Nehemiah Gateway’s international leadership, including Mr. Geiger, travels internationally numerous times annually. This year, that came to a halt. In the absence of travel, the team was able to use technology more regularly and effectively to collaborate. When in-person international contact can happen again, team connections will be far stronger, and the collaboration will be far more productive. If distance education is here to stay—at least intermittently—our schools have become much more proficient at using technological tools to facilitate it.

Fledgling enterprises like the Lindenhof Hotel were able to focus their energies on a substantial remodel in early

2020 and had a busy summer season even in the face of the pandemic. At times when the hotel and restaurants were not operating, the team focused on necessary tasks, certifications, and, when possible, relaxation. The German “kurzarbeit” program, which subsidizes salaries for workers who temporarily stay home, helped retain staff in the absence of year-round hotel income.

NG’s global project investments continued helping people even in this year of no travel. In Tanzania, the computer lab NG funded in 2014 for the Kemono Orphan village not only continued providing orphans with digital access, it also helped Nehemiah Gateway University graduates, and students who were sent home during COVID, to stay engaged with their studies. Nehemiah Gateway University graduates continued helping and empowering people in their own countries, running NGO programs and personally supporting others. Closer to home, Nehemiah School students continue volunteering to help others, making and donating face masks and delivering food aid to people in need in their own community.

A year of COVID, and over 2.5 million dead. The pandemic has brought tragedy, exposed vulnerabilities, and exacerbated inequalities. It has kept us apart but also pushed us to rely upon one another more.

Let us build on new collaborations and partnerships to bring real help to one another in the days that follow, with a renewed appreciation of the people and places that have sustained us, and the role each of us can play in sustaining others.



Flamur Elmasllari

## A True NG Veteran Retires

**Flamur Elmasllari was in charge of finances at NG Albania for almost 30 years**

“Ishte njehere ....” - everybody at NG Albania loves to hear these words from Flamur, the introduction to another of his unique jokes. He is an expert in putting life’s wisdom into humorous form, even though his work is of a rather dry nature. A geologist by training, Flamur has been responsible for the finances at NG Albania for almost 30 years. Soon he will go into well-deserved retirement.

NG has a lot to thank him for. When the Iron Curtain fell at the beginning of the 1990s, a world collapsed for the people in Albania. The hardship was enormous, as was bitterness about decades of deception and oppression under a totalitarian regime. Private enterprise or NGOs did not yet exist. Back then, everyone had to try to help themselves, according to their own rules, since the old rules no longer applied.

It was a challenge to find employees who have not lost their inner compass and whose honesty and integrity you can rely on. Flamur is such a person, he has proven it in all these years! We are happy that he will continue to be available as a consultant for NG even in the times to come.

**We wish him all the best and many blessings for this new phase of his life!**

## 30 Challenging Years

**Flamur recounts his time with Nehemiah Gateway**

When I first came into contact with NG (back then it was simply called „Nehemia“) I was 36 years old. Today I am 65.

I remember the spring of 1992 very well. My wife Liza told me about a group from Germany at the school where she worked as an English teacher. They invited us to visit a Sunday meeting. We went there - as usual, the two of us on a bicycle, 3 miles from our home in Memelisht to Pogradec. Liza was pregnant with our second son Devi.

Here I heard for the very first time about the Christian faith. After all, we lived in a strictly atheistic country. Arnold Geiger, founder of Nehemiah Gateway, was the speaker and what he said touched and convinced me deeply, just like many others in our town. From then on we could hardly wait until it was Sunday again, so that we could attend the meetings. Soon we became members of the newly founded church.

Two factors made me decide to take this path. First, of course, there were clear and eye-opening sermons and messages. But these messages were also put into practice through the distribution of relief goods that were so urgently needed in these difficult times. Many people were saved from hunger and cold and given new hope. I was reassured by the fact that aid was never made dependent on faith or religious affiliation. I often helped to distribute parcels in the villages. The poverty there was unbelievable, sometimes children had to walk barefoot through the snow.

Soon Arnold asked me if I would like to work for him full-time. I gladly agreed and in the following almost 30 years with NG, I worked successively as project manager, administrator, and chief financial officer. Import and handling of trucks with relief goods was always part of the job. In 1992-99 alone, every family in the Pogradec area received at least three aid packages, and institutions and hospitals got plenty of material and machinery.



1992: Nehemia Albania's first employees: Ajet and Flamur waiting to distribute relief aid in a village



1998 - Liza und and Flamur with their three sons at church

Alone during the Kosovo refugee crisis in 1999 we brought 43 big trucks into the country.

In 1994 we founded the company „UNAL“ Shpk (Ltd.) under whose roof a small carpenter's workshop, a bakery and a car repair shop were established. The aim was to create jobs and model businesses. Until then, there were no private companies in Albania. Profits of these businesses were destined for the work of the Nehemiah Foundation. (A concept that NG continues to pursue today.) The quality of our products was really good, so the order books filled up quickly. Arnold insisted that the following sentence be written at the bottom of every invoice: „Thank you for ordering from us.“ I overheard Petro Cobani, our carpenter, say, „Gee, Arnold, we hardly ever get home because of all the work, and we're supposed to write thank you for that!?“ Arnold's response, „Today, only we deliver such quality. Tomorrow there will be others who may work even better. But our customers will come back to us - simply because of the little word thank you.“ That was one of many lessons about market economy.

Unfortunately, those businesses were destroyed in 1997 during the national unrest in Albania. Barely one year later, we started rebuilding, but this time with a focus on education. A few months later, in 1999, war broke out in neighboring Kosovo and we, along with partner organizations, provided shelter and care for over 2,000 refugees.

A strange story has haunted us throughout the years. It started with people whispering to me that they knew where there was gold. Didn't Arnold have a device to de-

tect it ... ?? All my assurances that Arnold had nothing to do with gold fell on deaf ears. It bothered me that people, instead of being grateful for all the help they received, started such rumors.

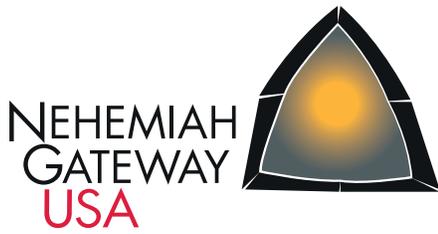
Arnold told me that he too had repeatedly heard these and similar stories. He tried to reassure me, knowing the reason: „These people never experienced the concept of selflessness in the Christian faith. They can't imagine why someone would leave everything behind and come to Albania at such a difficult time, just to help others. So, gold is the only explanation they can think of.“

NG's work is based on the values of the Bible. I think this is why people at NG are different from others. It is also the source of lots of good-natured mockery: „You are so correct, it's because you work with the Germans.“

We have a saying: „Whatever you can do today, don't leave it for tomorrow.“ Arnold likes to reverse it into: „Let's get tomorrow's work done today.“ Perhaps this didn't always work out, but it has repeatedly helped us get ahead of new developments in the country.

Working at Nehemiah Gateway gave me the opportunity not only to contribute, but also to constantly learn and develop. I'm reminded of the words of an Indian teacher: „When I was young, I wanted to change the world. When I got married, I wanted to change my wife. When I became a father, I wanted to change the children. Now that I am old, I have decided to change myself.“

It is a great privilege to be part of Nehemiah Gateway!



## At a Glance



### AMARO TAN IS BEATING THE ODDS

Even in a pandemic, certain life milestones still come and go. Seven students from Amaro Tan graduated from 9th grade. Of those seven, four were accepted at the college preparatory Nehemia School, and two went on to the Enver Qiraxhi Vocational Technical School in Pogradec. A 2021 UNESCO reports finds that less than 40% of Roma and Balkan Egyptian youth in the region attend high school, so these students are beating the odds! The NG team is very proud of our Amaro Tan graduates.

### EMPOWERING THE YOUTH OF POGRADEC

NG University facilitated the project "Activation and empowerment of young people to be part of local decision-making through free speech and civic action," implemented by the SIG Foundation with the support of LA and SDC. NGU provided support with facilities and staff for one year, to empower the youth of Pogradec involved in this project.



### OUR NEW HEAD OF OFFICE IN BERLIN

Joana Xega is a graduate of NG University in Albania. She took over from Vanessa Machowetz, who continues working part-time for Mohab, NG's Tiny House Company. Joana already contributed talent and expertise in NG's work & study program and proved her worth as trainee assistant for the Managing Director. Fluent in Albanian, English and Greek, she is a great asset to NG's office in Berlin, but her real strength lies in the world of finance and budgets. Welcome in the German capital, Joana!

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