

INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH GOWING

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Duration: 85 minutes

Present:

1. Elizabeth Gowing (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Donjetë Berisha (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Part One

Elizabeth Gowing: So, my name is Elizabeth Gowing. And I was born in Britain in a town called Ely, which is in Cambridgeshire in the East of England. And we were there because of my father's job. He was a, worked in the Air Force. So all of my childhood we moved around from place to place. So we didn't stay very long in any... And in fact his father was also in the Air Force. And my mother's father was also in the Air Force for a short time. So it's very difficult when people in Kosovo as me where I'm from because I'm not really from anywhere. I don't have even, from my father or from my grandfather a place where you know, is really ours.

So, I mean, I'm happy with that but it makes that conversation complicated. So we only lived on Ely for... I think I was one when we moved from there and then we moved back to Cambridgeshire a few times more times during my childhood. But I don't feel like I'm from Cambridgeshire, but I happened to be born there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How do you remember your childhood, like in a movement, constant movement?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, it didn't feel like a constant movement. Like it felt... I think my mother is very good, is very adaptable and very good at making a home and making things feel safe, you know, and it didn't feel like a complicated way to live. And in fact I think, it helps with my strange life now. Because now I live in three places. I have three homes. And I... in an average months I spend maybe two weekends, three weekends in Kosovo, so I'm here maybe nine days a months. And then I'm in Albania for the rest of the time, except one week I'm in England. So that's my average month, split into three pieces.

So I think maybe the idea of being on the move, or making a home wherever you are perhaps that came from having moved around a lot as a child. And I was the... There's two of us, me and my sister but I was the first one to be born. And I was five when my sister was born. So actually I was an only child for a lot of my childhood.

And then when I was nine I was sent to boarding school because of my father being in the Air Force, and because of the moving around. So they, it's normal for children whose parents are in the forces to go to boarding school. So that was okay, I didn't love going to boarding school but I think I... It gave lots of opportunities you know, it was a very good school. And it gave a lot of academic opportunities but also social opportunities like the Air Force pays a contribution to schooling. And I also won a scholarship to the school.

And so my family was one of the poorest families in the school. I mean we weren't poor but compared to the other they were very, much more rich, kind of elite children, girls. It was an all-girls school. And so I think this gave me a... At first I found it hard, because they all had very beautiful clothes and things mattered very much. This was 1980s Britain Margaret Thatcher's Britain. And so this idea of having the right labels in your clothes mattered a lot.

And that was a big shock for me because my family is not like that, but I think that I learned from that. Like, just not to care. And I think it gave a confidence, once I had got used to it. It gave me a confidence like to not wish to be like rich people or very privileged people and not to feel... to feel confident in saying like, "This is not my world and... but I'm not going to compete with you, I don't need to have the right labels on my clothes. There are other things that are more important."

So I'm, I'm grateful for having had that experience because, I think, otherwise I might have spent my life always thinking that there are rich people or elite people who... or there is a world that I can't be part of. And I've kind of seen that world now and I feel comfortable in, in ignoring it (laughs).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where was this?

Elizabeth Gowing: So the school is in Malden. Which is in, in the center of England. It's a very beautiful little town, but it's a very strange town. In the 19th century it was very famous because of the water there. The water was supposed to be very good for your health. So it was like a spa town. So people would come to the spa town to take the water for their health.

So there were lots of big houses built there. Victorian houses. And they're too big now for a normal family to live in. So most of them have been turned into wither old people's homes, or, like nursing homes, or boarding school. So when I was there, there were five boarding schools and only one government state school. And of the five boarding schools four of them were girl's schools and one was all-boys. It's a very weird way to grow up (laughs). It's not a normal, exactly, not a normal demographic. Either very old people, they were really rich people and more girls, four times more girls than boys. So I had a very strange (laughs) adolescence as the...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did that intergenerational communication take place?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah. There wasn't really intergenerational connection. I wish there has been, but other schools, maybe they're different now, but the schools were very self-contained. And they didn't encourage connections really with other school or with the local community or... I guess maybe they were worried about keeping people safe. But I think we missed opportunities for... because for example have gone to see the old people's homes.

I remember, we did have like some volunteering program where we would go to... we would cook lunch and then invite some of the older people to have lunch. I remember doing that a few times. And then when I was in sixth form, so like in the middle school part of school, I... There was a big volunteering initiative and I spent some time in, in a shelter for women who had survived domestic violence. And that was, I mean that felt very, like connecting with real life and the real community. So I'm glad that our school had that opportunity. I think that's an opportunity that in Kosovo is still quite rare, for people to, for students to be encouraged to make connections like that.

So I think once I got to that age, the older, the last two years in the school, then I had opportunities to be more of the person I wanted to be. I started the Amnesty International Group at the school and I was the representative for volunteering and... That's when I started doing some of the things I still do now. So...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What type of education was it? Was it more like liberal arts or?

Elizabeth Gowing: It was quite an academic school, so it was quite tough I suppose, and quite rigorous for, for learning academically. But there were also good opportunities for drama... You know I acted in plays, and doing public speaking, which is something I do a lot now. I'm glad I had that training in public speaking. And even things like fencing, you like fencing with a {explains with her hands} you know, I don't know how to say that in Albanian. That's, you know, not many schools offer fencing but I learned to fence. I had a term of learning golf. So you know, great opportunities that you wouldn't have in a normal government school. And I guess that's what comes of going to a privileged school. I did have lots of opportunities.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was your relationship to your family during this time? I mean how did you communicate with them?

Elizabeth Gowing: I think it was, I think we kept very close. People think it must be very strange, I mean even in England people think it's strange, and certainly in Kosovo, like the idea of not being with your family. And I know my parents found it very hard. They didn't, they didn't want to send me away. But we wrote letters a lot, it was before all the other forms of communication and I came to visit maybe every three weeks, or every month. Either they would come or I would have the chance to go home for one or two nights. I mean it seems strange to talk about it now and then of course when I went home for the holidays it was a really special time. It was, because it was just free time and quality time and so I never had to argue with my parents about homework or you know about sharing the bathroom like the routines of a normal family life. Because when I was home it was all like a treat for everybody. So, so it was very happy growing up, yeah.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where they moving within England or throughout the world?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, throughout even... they lived in Belgium, we lived in Germany when I was a young child, before I went to boarding school, but Belgium and Algeria, so those were the two foreign countries during my time at school. And then they also lived in London for a time. So, yeah so I got to explore the world a bit as well in my holidays.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What happened next in your life, after the boarding school?

Elizabeth Gowing: So I applied to Oxford University and I was accepted but I had a gap year you know a year where I did a lot traveling, I went to India, I went to Egypt and North Africa. I did a lot of volunteering, working with the homeless and I also did a lot of jobs. I, I worked as a secretary as a cleaner, I worked in a restaurant to save the money to do the traveling. So that was a good year of, you know, trying out, becoming an adult.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you describe us one of the places that you found yourself more at home or more used to....

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, that's a good question...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Because it is difficult when you go from one campus to the other.

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, I suppose, the volunteering like working for this charity to the homeless. So going and giving food to people who are sleeping on the streets and talking to them about... Often they survived by going through the rubbish and picking... looking for food in the bins. This is in London. So that's, I lived in London then for maybe four years and I thought I knew the city. But this was another sight of the city and it made me realize the reality, a city always has this underbelly of people who maybe there are drug issues or there are mental health problems or reasons why they are not with their families or in a home but, then how vulnerable they are. So I suppose you can make a connection between that and then what I find myself doing in, in Kosovo.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was England at the time, you mentioned Thatcher being empowered...

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, she in fact she lost power during that year so, uhm how was England? Well, I think England wasn't a kind place during Thatcher's Britain. And growing up in a private school, private boarding school probably didn't... I wasn't opened to being connected with the whole of my country.

You know the miner's strike for example which was this very big event in the history and the identity of Britain today. That happened while I was at that school, I scarcely noticed that it happened, you know, this was just felt like a long way away, it didn't touch my world of privilege. I feel embarrassed about that now because if there was a miner's strike now and the way that divided the country and the... then I would want to be engaged and I would want... If I had a daughter I would want her to be engaged. But I was shut away in this bubble, of private, boarding school. So I, I think, I probably didn't know what Britain was like and that's why my gap year was so important that I had that chance to find out some realities.

Erëmirë Krasniqi : Did you visit all these places that you mentioned throughout that single year?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, so yeah I did a lot of traveling. I had originally had a plan to travel with one, on a bus like a group of people to go on a bus from England down to Europe and then across Iran... And oh, North Africa and then across Iran and then go all the way to India.

And then I changed my mind and decided I would make individual trips myself, rather than doing it with one group of people. So, I organized lots of different trips. Which was good 'cause it meant I could, I could work for a bit, travel for a bit, work for a bit, travel for a bit, so, so yeah.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it a common thing at the time, to go to India as British, I mean were these routes established with colonialism?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, There were lots of people, yeah. Exactly. And it was a, it's a place speaks English, lots of people speak English, it's a familiar place in the British identity because as you say it was one of our colonies. So, part of our empire anyway. So yeah, there were lots of backpackers when I was there. But it was still really a wonderful experience. And of course if you go to places for a short time you don't really get to really understand them or get under the skin. But just traveling on your own was very exhilarating. I remember when I went to India I was going to travel with a group of people but I arrived a day early. And so I got there and had a day just all on my own and in Delhi, I was seventeen then so (laughs) it's quite scary to think about and... was I seventeen? Yeah, seventeen.

And I didn't know like what to do. I was just walking around wide eyed and looking. And I sat down in this park and a guy came up to me and he offered to clean up my ears with these tools, like this metal, like a scoop and a long stick. And I just remember thinking, "You know yeah, I'll have this experience." And now I think about it like I let a guy I'd never met stick a metal stick in my ear, and clean my ears in public (laughs). But that was you know having an experience that hadn't happened in my private boarding school in the middle of England. Yeah, it was exciting.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you do next like, how did this experience inform the next one?

Elizabeth Gowing: So, then I went to Oxford and I studied English Literature. And Oxford is a wonderful place, Oxford University is a university with just so many opportunities, so I was very lucky and very... I think I took lots of opportunities, I did lots of things. I got involved in, in the environmental society, I got involved as a volunteer with a charity that worked with people that had AIDS. I worked as a teacher, volunteer teacher for newly arrived immigrants to England. So, I did lots of volunteering there but I also did lots of drama I directed a play. I had a couple of plays I directed and you know went to lots of talks and lectures and... Not just for my studies but about all kinds of things. Yeah I met people like who were different from, from me, so it's a very, very rich place of experiences to go.

But probably most importantly is where I met Rob, who's my, my partner. We've been together for twenty-five years. And I met him there on my first year of university so we've been together ever since. So that was probably the most precious thing I took from it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did it feel as another bubble, like I mean in terms of privilege... I'm asking...

Elizabeth Gowing: I don't think it feel like that and that, it might be, I've maybe, it should have felt like a bubble, 'cause it is a privileged place. But I, I think because I was active with people who weren't just from the university. Things like working with this family who'd just arrived from Africa, as a teacher, home tutor for their children. Or working with people who had AIDS, or you know I felt like I was connecting with the world that wasn't just the world of the privilege.

So, I think and I think that's one of the strengths of Oxford and of other universities in Britain, is that they work quite hard to offer opportunities. So of course people can go and live in this elite world, and that's what some people want from Oxford. But if you bring that many thousands of intelligent people together then you're going to find people who also want to do something with their ideas. And I guess

that's what it gave me the opportunity to see how people might do that, and what could be achieved. And it was challenging the way I thought about the world.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And how did you meet Rob at Oxford?

Elizabeth Gowing: Just at a party. He did a lot of acting then he had been in a play. And it was a party it was a friend of ours' party but he'd just come on a, the end of play party and he yeah... We just got talking and he walked me home and kissed me, very quickly, so yeah. I think we would have met eventually. We had a lots of friends in common we had interests in common you know, it's not like one of those freak meetings that you might think, if *për pak* [by little] we missed each other. But no we, we were meant to be together in lots of practical ways as well as very significant ways.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did you stay there or...

Elizabeth Gowing: At Oxford? So, three year course. And then I decided I wanted to be a teacher. And so I had to go do an extra year of teacher training and so I needed to raise the money, I wanted to fund myself with that. So I spent another year in Oxford not in the university but living in Oxford and working to earn the money to pay to become a teacher. So I worked then at a special school, a school with children with special needs as an assistant at the school. But I also worked in a bar, and I also worked cleaning and, you know, I did lots of jobs to try to... I also worked at the Oxford University press, the publishing house. So just doing whatever I could to earn money so that I could pay for the next year, living in London and training to be a teacher.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: That was the year after the university?

Elizabeth Gowing: That was the year, yeah exactly.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you start teaching afterwards or did you...

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: With any practical...

Elizabeth Gowing: So, well I had been working as an assistant in the school anyway. And then I went to the, to the teacher college and you have to lots of practical work there as well. And then I got a job straight away in London. And started teaching really, you know really full-on teaching in a London school with lots of difficulties. That was, that was great I had so much energy for it and, you know, I loved it. It was exhausting but it was, that really felt like what I wanted to be doing with my life so.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What are these years that we are talking about?

Elizabeth Gowing: So, it was '96 that I got my certificate. And then I, yeah that's right, '96 and yeah... And then I worked in various different schools and... also did some management roles in schools. So I was a, I took the role of a deputy head in a school, and then I after that decided not to teach full time but to do some policy work. So I worked in education but advising the government, working in a teacher's professional organization. And I continued teaching after that just part time 'cause I wanted

to still have some connection with children and the classroom. But, so I did one day a week of teaching.

And that's what I was doing. So I did that ten years and then basically one day Rob said, "Do you realize that there's nothing to stop us just doing exactly what we're doing right now for the rest of our lives?" And although we were happy, it wasn't like we weren't happy with our jobs and with London and with each other... we wanted a change, you know. And we decided we didn't want to have children. And so our friends were all starting to have children, and I could see that we were just gonna be doing same old, same old, same old. And we decided to go abroad and we wanted to volunteer. So we sent our CVs to lots of charities in Africa, in Asia. We thought maybe we do a year of volunteering but at the same time Rob had been working with the British government. So he sent an email out to people he knew in the embassies around, anywhere he had contacts, to say, "If you hear of any NGOs that might want some volunteers Elizabeth and I are looking to volunteer."

And then the embassy in Kosovo got back and contacted us, said, "We don't know about volunteering job but we think that the new Kosovo Prime Minister wants a British adviser and we think that you could do this job." So Rob came home one day, and said, "You know, how about going to Kosovo for six months?" That was eleven years ago (laughs). He said it was for six months.

And like to be honest, Kosova was too near that wasn't really what we were... we'd been wanting to go further. Somewhere that seemed exotic and very different, but it was like okay, we haven't had any answers from the volunteering applications we'd done, this was a very safe way to do it. It felt because it was paid so it wasn't like we were having to give up everything and it was only six months, it's what we thought (laughs) so we said, "Yeah, let's do it." And it moved really quickly so ten days after he was offered the job our house was packed up and ten days after that we were here. So it was not quite how we planned.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And how was it? How, what are your first impressions? What were (laughs)?

Elizabeth Gowing: Well I mean very good ones, otherwise I wouldn't have, wouldn't have stayed. I mean it wasn't how I imagined it was gonna be. I think everyone is surprised by Kosovo, everyone who comes from Britain. Because the images that you have of Kosovo, the only information you have is about the war and about refugees and maybe about corruption or.... So you come expecting a country that's gonna be physically damaged from the war. Particularly in 2006 is when we came, so seven years has passed. And I thought I would see buildings that had bullets holes in them. And I guess I was suspicious of people, you know, I was expecting people to be dishonest or not trustworthy or...

And I remember, like on the very first day at the hotel, just somebody offering to help us and me thinking this doesn't seem like someone who is untrustworthy, you know. If someone's being so welcoming and so hospitable and so helpful and thinking. Oh maybe I need to shift my, what I'm expecting of this country. And every person I met here shifted that a little bit more like, "You had the wrong idea". And the war wasn't very obvious, you know. There weren't houses with bullet holes in them, of course it's still a part of people's identity and experience but it's not part of the physical

landscape, not in 2006 not now, even less. So all of that was a surprise too, it was a different kind of country.

But I remember on that very first day we were in the hotel and Rob went to his, to meet the Prime Minister Agim Çeku. And I was left in the hotel, like not knowing what I was gonna do. And I remember looking out of the window at the hotel, it was the Hotel Baci which is shut now. But there was a block of building, shops, and buildings in the opposite and I was just looking out to this apartment opposite thinking, like, “Who lives there and what’s their life like, who are these people?” You know I want to get to know the reality of their life. Yeah and I’m pleased that I’m, we were welcomed into people’s lives to be able to do that. That first Friday so we arrived on a Monday I think, and that Friday we were taken out to dinner by a Kosovan couple who Rob was working with. I think probably next week we were invited to our first Kosovan home. Like within three weeks we had gone to our first wedding (laughs), people invite in you very quickly so...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where did you move in? Where was your first house here?

Elizabeth Gowing: In Pristina? Yeah, the first wedding was in Podujeva, Lupç i Poshtëm village. Podujeva was a proper Kosovan village wedding you know, beautiful, lots of dancing and everybody in traditional clothes and that was quite...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was that? Can you describe it?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, well that was great. It was a family who I had actually met in London when I’d been teaching in London in 1999. A Kosovan family came to our school and I would help... I had some children, one of the children in my class and I thought I would help them settle a bit. And I kept in touch with that family after, even after the children left the school. And so when they had heard that I was coming here you know they were amazed that, and I was amazed that I had a connection. So they very kindly put me in touch with their aunt who lived here, who I’m still in touch with, Elmaze Pireva, who bizarrely is now in London (laughs). So we kinda switched.

And their uncle was getting married and so they invited me to the wedding and I hadn’t realized it when I arrived but I was kind of, well I was treated like the guest of honor. I was really, I was put in the car with the groom and the sister and when we, when it was the *kanagjegj*,¹ I was invited to dance. Like the first dance on my own and so (laughs) I had to stand up and put my hands in the air {puts her hands in the air}, and kind of wiggle (laughs) that was quite frightening. But of course very welcoming.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In which part of the city did you live in?

Elizabeth Gowing: So we lived then by the old Ministry of Education, which is behind the old Ben-Af. this is a very Pristina way to give directions (laughs). I don’t know... It’s kind of near Ulpiana, like opposite Ulpiana. Anyway it was a very nice house and with a little garden and we were very lucky there. And the house was paid for by the British Government so it was nicer than what we had been living in London and nicer than what we live in now (laughs). But it was, it felt like a very happy place

¹ Henna Night, a bridal shower, the ceremony held one day before the wedding that generally takes place in the home of the bride and among women.

to make it a home and it was empty when we moved in, no furniture at all. And we had no furniture, well very few bits of furniture.

So actually that was a great way to discover Kosovo, because I had to go and learn the word for *garnishte* [drapery drop] (laughs). I had to go find a carpenter, *zdrukthtari*, was one of my first words which is a really difficult word. And he made some tables and shelves for us and like we really made everything from the beginning. And that was my project because I didn't have any work, and so that's how I learnt Albanian as well. I mean I had lessons but this was how I practiced Albanian and you don't normally learn *garnishte* [drapery drop] and *zdrukthtar* [carpenter] (laughs) in your first lessons.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you learn it here or...

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, yeah. Well 'cause we only had like three weeks before coming here so... Rob had a few lessons in England and he passed a few words to me. But with three weeks just to get ready, we didn't have time to, to really be ready. So, luckily we had a great teacher Gazi Bërlajolli, he worked with us like one to one and that was really exciting as well, the way of learning about the place.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did you learn it for, how long was that?

Elizabeth Gowing: Well, I'm still learning (laughs). I remember, I had been here a year, I did some work for Save the Children, for a long time I was a consultant for Save the Children. And the summer after we had arrived, I did some training for teachers for Save the Children and they offered me a translator as I'd always had before and I said, "You know I need a translator yes, like I'm obviously not fluent. But the translator always slows things down, you know. You have to say everything twice and sometimes the translator doesn't quite get it right, what, what you want to say. And I think I am at the stage where it's the disadvantages of having a translator outweigh the advantages, like I can do it and of course I will make mistakes but we will work it through." And that felt like a very big day, to be able to go and do training without a translator. So that day I felt like I had learnt to speak Albanian, of course not fluently but enough. But really I am still learning, I have a notebook I write words, new words every day you know it's....

Part Two

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How come you decided to stay here after six months?

Elizabeth Gowing: Well yeah, we were loving it here so we said, you know, we'd like to continue here. and so Rob was able to extend and he extended two, three times. And he worked also with Hashim Thaçi when Hashim Thaçi became prime minister. And then he was offered another job back in London, like back working for the British government, so we, he moved back to London, we moved back to London but we kept on a room here and a house. Not the house we'd had before but just a small room, because I was working with Save the Children and so I was commuting back and forth every, maybe six weeks. I would come back to, back to Kosovo.

So we still had a base here, but just not here full time and Rob would come sometimes and that lasted for a couple of years. And then Rob applied for a job at ICO, when there was the ICO here, and so we moved back full time to live here then. And then after that he got another job in Albania so that's why now I split my time in three ways. So we still have our house here, that we rent in Pejton and we come back here to keep things going with the Ideas Partnership with our NGO to see our friends and...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay, we'll get to that, all your life, throughout... Can you describe us... [can you give us] more descriptive account please?

Elizabeth Gowing: Of living in Kosovo? So, yeah, yeah. Well... So...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: It must have been a very critical period I mean, this transition... they're not very easy and with just two years since the 2004, and before, just a bit before (laughs)...

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, exactly...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Quite delicate.

Elizabeth Gowing: Well, I remember we had, we were told to keep a bag ready for, if we had to you know evacuate quickly and like to have our trainers in a bag and to have a bottle of water and any medicine... and you know some money in small amounts, you know.

So for the first year or so it did feel like living in a place that could, things could get frightening because people remembered what 2004 was like and of course what 1999 was like. But yeah you know I'm very glad, grateful that we didn't ever need to do anything like that. And then I guess, we were, well then we were here for independence and you know that was just so exhilarating, I mean it was exhilarating for us, I can't imagine what it was like for people who'd been here for generations. But that felt like an achievement and like a landmark. Of course that probably wasn't true but you know, the really hard work had to start after independence. But I guess we, you know that was all interesting and it felt, but particularly for Rob, for his work that was important but my work wasn't really connected so much with, with that.

I was excited to be able to, to do things like I volunteered at the ethnological museum that was really exciting to do. I made some really good friends there and it's such a beautiful building and a place where I, I still feel very happy just walking in there gives me this sense of, you know being in the right place. And also a way I learned a lot about Kosovo's history and culture and you know the handicrafts and these things that I care about.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In what capacity did you get involved?

Elizabeth Gowing: So I did... No, I did not know that had already been done. It opened almost exactly the time that I arrived here. So, like it's been there all of my Kosovan life, but I taught English to the guide so I held English classes there. And then I helped him apply for some funds and we had a grant from the British embassy for an artists and residents week. Which was a really nice event where we invited artists to come and be in the museum every day and make paintings or sculptures or works while they were there. Then their work was auctioned at the end of the week and we raised more

money that it had cost us to do it, so it was a really great... yeah it was a nice initiative. And we did a photography project as well and then, and then of course the staff that, you know took a lead in things more and more and so once we'd shown there was real...

There were a lot of people that really loves that museum, I think that gave them also the motivation to see that it was worth being experimental and creative and they've made a real success of it. So we did the first craft fair, people of crafts, people coming and demonstrating their skill every day for a week and then at the end of a fair of activities and that is still continuing now and is much, much bigger now and they've done great things with it. So yeah, I really enjoyed doing all of that.

I also set up, I took trained foreigners who were here to teach English classes after school. So we had five schools around Pristina where we ran clubs, English clubs. We had a short kind of curriculum and that was really fun. Just last night I met with one of my volunteers who had been a volunteer there and he is still in touch with the family of one of the boys that he had taught. He calls them "My Kosovan family" and it's lovely to think you know. That was you know, how many years ago was that? Nine years ago, and still he is in contact with them. So yeah, this was what I was busy with, which wasn't related to independence.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have a social life? Friends?

Elizabeth Growing: Yeah, yes lots of friends. And I mean we're both, Rob and I are godparents or *kumbar* [godfather] and *ndrikulla* [godmother], not, not religious godparents to our very good friends, Alisa and Burim, to their little daughter Adena. And so that was very important to us because that's a kind of formal connection, we did the formal ceremony of cutting her hair and you know. That family, I like to feel that that's part of our family or we're part of their family. And so we have good friends, like that. And now with the work that we do through The Ideas Partnership, there are lots of families that we've helped and who yeah, we're connected with in a very fundamental way, so, yeah we have a social...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you start with the NGO?

Elizabeth Gowing: So we'd started doing these kind of projects, like I said like working with ethnological museum or these English clubs, and those were all, we had no NGO, we had no funds. It was just volunteering, and other people were volunteering. But after a few years of doing that, we realized that if we wanted to apply for things, for example like the residences of the museum, we needed to have a bank account, and we needed to be transparent. And people were also starting to give us money because they liked what we were doing. So someone would give us, you know, 50 euros for the work of our charity. We'd put in an envelope and write in the envelope, but it wasn't very transparent. So we decided we would register as an NGO.

So we got together with our friend Ardian Arifaj. And the three of us, Rob, me and Ardi registered The Ideas Partnership in 2009. But we didn't have any big plans for it. And we didn't have a particular project in mind. It was just... so we had an organization. And that's why we chose this name The Ideas

Partnership, to be very neutral, you know. It didn't say that we were working on environment or on cultural heritage, or on education... Just, those were our three themes, but just to have a vehicle.

And then we did it, our first... It wasn't a big project, I think it cost 2000 euros or something, it was quite a small project but was running an environmental summer camp in Rugova. And we worked with two other NGOs on that. But indirectly that led to everything else because the summer camp had... was a multi-ethnic camp, it had Albanians, Bosnians and Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians. And one of my jobs was to give the... to work with the children through the camp to have a project that they wanted to implement after the camp.

And then after the camp my job was to go and visit those children around Kosovo and make them make... some very small things, like one of them was trying to put bins in the school playground so the children could put their rubbish there. There was this group from Fushë Kosovë, who were Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian who wanted to plant a little garden in their community.

So I went with the, and met them in their homes or in their community. And that's the first time I went to a Roma, Ashkali or Egyptian community Kosovo and I was really shocked. Even though I had been here by then for five years and... four years, and I had heard about the conditions of the Roma, I knew the statistics, but I had never actually been in a community and to see the rubbish pickers and to see the poverty, and especially when you know Pristina from the cafés and from an international bubble, again. So that really made want to, to work with that community. And we had some things left over from the summer camp, like some sleeping bags and some plates... I don't know, random things. And I thought, well I can give those to some families in need because I could see there was a real need.

And so I asked if somebody could take me to see poorest families in the community, I said I wanted to do it myself, because these had been donated to us, I wanted to have a kind of accountability for where things are gone. And it happened that one of the families I took the stuff to, the little boy of the family who was three at the time, had just recently been playing in a very crowded, very small house. And he had pulled a pan of boiling water off the stove and had really badly burned himself. And so when I went to give these sleeping bags and plates and random stuff to this family, they were like, "Thank you very much, but please can you help our son?" And I said, you know, "I can't help him, I don't know what to do to help him".

Like he is already been to the hospital so it wasn't, it hadn't just happened. But they said to her that he needed an operation because his skin was so badly burnt that he couldn't walk properly because it was kind of all tight in his groin. And so I said, "I'm sorry, I'm a teacher, I'm not a doctor." And I walked away. And like, I couldn't walk very far because you know, he had been so... his body was so damaged. So I rang my friend, Mary, who had... a British woman who'd been a doctor here for a long time and I said like, "What could I do to help? Or what should I do? What's the system?" And she said, "Well if he has been to the hospital then they should have some papers and there should be a doctor's name, and you could get in touch with that doctor.

So I went back to their family and I said, "Okay, show me the *fletëlëshim* [release form], or whatever from the hospital." And they, there was of course a stamp there with the doctor's phone number. So I called him and said, "What can be done?" And, long story but I went in the end with the mother,

Heteme, and the little boy. And what was significant was that the doctor actually said that there isn't anything that can be done now to operate because he is so small, he needs, the skin needs to be just kept supple and then it can be operated. And so all that's needed is some cream to rub into the skin every morning and evening. And the cream costs nine euros, which is not very much but their family of... the dad was a rubbish picker, that was impossible. So I was like, okay, I can buy the cream. And I said, "Call me when it runs out, and I'll come and bring you some more."

And that's... that turns out to have been the most significant moment of my time in Kosovo. Because what that meant was that basically every two weeks, I would get a phone call, I'd go and buy some cream, I'd go and visit the family. And at first I just handed over the cream and the next time I was invited in, and the next time I was given tea. And the next time, you know the neighbors came around. And that's how I became a real part of that community, yeah.

So I didn't go there with the idea of having a project or opening a Center, or doing any of the things that we do now. But because I just got to hear about, "Oh these kids need to go to school, these kids need shoes and this is... These children aren't vaccinated and let's do something about that." And that's really how our work started. It was very natural and organic.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So it all started with this family?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah. With that family, yeah. And I visit them every time I'm in Kosovo, I visit them. I was just... that's where I've come from today (smiles). Because in fact I was...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was Gjejlane also part of that family?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yes, exactly! It's the sister of that little boy. So I went from the... So Gjejlane wasn't at school... Well first of all there were the brothers. The brothers weren't at school and they needed shoes. So I bought them shoes and that is all that they needed. They are still at school, like seven years later, those boys have gone... are still in school. I was just talking to them this afternoon. So I thought that was all that was needed, I was like, "Okay shoes. We can get shoes for as many children as we need." And then Gjejlane said she wasn't in school. She was nine at the time, and I said, "Well, I'll buy you shoes." (Laughs) Like, I know the solution to this one. She said, "No, it's too late. The school won't accept me."

And I couldn't believe that was true. I thought she was just making it up as an excuse. So I went to the school I said, you know, "There's a misunderstanding here, because there's a nine year old girl who wanted to go to school and she thinks she's too late." And the school said, "No, no it's too... she is too late to come, she can't come now." So then I went to the ministry and I said like, "You've got this director who doesn't understand because he's saying this girl can't come." And the ministry said, "Yeah, yeah he is right." "They're just too hard to teach," they said.

So this is when I said to Gjejlane, "Okay, I'll start teaching you." And then she said, "Well, can some of my friends come?" So that's how we started doing the work with them. And then we got Gjejlane...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you work in Albanian with the community?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah, yeah, yeah, in Albanian. And then we got her to school, we got them all to school... Well we got 62 children to school in 2011. And then we realized we needed to keep them in school, which is a kind of different thing. So we started various projects, including working with the mothers to offer... in a social enterprise, so the mums could earn some money and the kids then would not need to go out begging or go rubbish picking. So we're still continuing that now.

And then, this family still didn't have a house, or, yeah, they were living in just one room and it was horrible. And one day the youngest boy came to our activities and he had a mark {touches her cheek} on his cheek. And I said like, "What happened?" And they said, "The rats bit me in the night." I was like, okay, that... this is no good, you know, we've done all the right things. We've vaccinated the children, have the mothers working in this social enterprise, the kids are all in school, they've all got shoes. But if they're living in a, in a room that's got rats in it and the children are being bitten at night then actually I've achieved nothing. And it's almost hypocritical to say, "Look what a great job we've done." When the family is left like that.

And so, I felt very torn because I wanted to help that family but by then I thought, I knew there were lots and lots of families. And they were one of the worst off, because of this very small room that they were in and that's, that's overcrowded. And that had caused the little boy to pull the boiling water over himself was because of being in such a small place. But I still felt like The Ideas Partnership couldn't go and build a house for just one family. That wouldn't be fair, and we couldn't justify that money. But then my friend Nicola came to visit. And she came with me to see this family, and she came away and she said, "They can't stay there, this is just outrageous. How about if I raise the money and you know, you can help me but it won't be through The Ideas Partnership. It won't be you."

So that was really significant because she then stormed her head, used her friends, and her contacts. Used Facebook and raised enough money to buy some land for them. And then Mercy Corps built... Said they would build a house on the land, if we could buy their land, they would build a house. So we did all that and about three years ago. It must be almost exactly three years ago they moved into their new house. And they were like, the luckiest, the happiest family in Fushë Kosovë.

And then three months later, so in February the father had a heart attack and died. So leaving six children, at that time they were aged three to thirteen, Gjejlane was thirteen. So from having been like the luckiest, happiest family and we kind of thought they were on their way. We'd sorted things, they were now, you know, able to look after themselves suddenly they were in a very, a very vulnerable family and very fragile. Heteme still had to look after the little ones, so she couldn't even go out rubbish picking. The eldest son... the day his father died he said to me, "Well, I have to leave school now. I have to take the wheelbarrow and, and go rubbish picking." I was like, "No, your dad did not want that, you know, your dad wanted you at school."

So we've tried to support them in various ways and we've set up a project now within The Ideas Partnership, which is named after Agron Krasniqi, the dad. And it's the widow's fund, so it's for his family benefits but also other families who are widows. Because I just haven't realized how vulnerable a family is when their father dies. Especially if they've still got young children, and so the mum can't even go out and work, even if there was easy work for her. And of course they had no money saved

and they didn't have any food in the, in the cupboards, you know. They had nothing, from that day they had nothing.

And I haven't really ever thought what that meant and that of course that it's be the older boy who was going to have to leave school to work. Unless somebody else helped the family. So yeah, we're basically having you know started to get... started trying to support a little three year old boy who had been burnt and then discovering the issues about education. And starting clothing distributions to get the children's shoes so they could go to school, then tackling this question about children being allowed into school. Then starting the social enterprise so that their mothers could earn money to continue at school. And now we do lots of things there, we've been looking at ways to try to make the community itself more agents for, for change for themselves.

So we have this vision that... of having three levels helping people in need so that would be giving the tube of cream to for Ramadan's burns, helping people in need to help themselves. So of course that's what every charity does, and that's about education often and all the work that the social enterprise does. But then the third level which is think is quite unusual for what we do, is not just helping in need. Helping people in need to help themselves but helping people in need to help other in need. So that's... you know, however poor you are, you can be the one who can on your knowledge, or you can share what you have or you can... So for example we have a bursary scheme, so Agron was on that scheme before he died so suddenly, for adults, so people like Agron who are in their 30s to go back to school to evening classes. So they can get their high school diploma. And we pay the cost of that, which is 150 euros a term, so it's not a big cost. But again it's way too much for a rubbish picker to be able to afford and...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He died so young is that the life expectancy...

Elizabeth Gowing: Well, yes. The life expectancy is, is very short for... can't remember the figures now but I think it's seven years less, I think the average life expectancy for Roma, Ashkali or Egyptian compared to the average in Kosovo. I mean in his case it was this particular, it was kind of like a heart attack but it was, it's called and atrial myxoma. It's a particular heart condition. And that's not linked specifically to being a rubbish picker or being poor, but of course all these things are connected. And there are high levels of smoking, there's very poor air quality because people, like, living in that tiny room with wood stove, or lignite stove.

Of course people make bad choices because they don't have an education so they often, they spend money on something that's really not very important for their health. So a child had a temperature and they'll rush to a private hospital when probably they could just give the child's liquid overnight and you know, rest and in the morning it might be fine. But a child might have something like an epileptic attack and they just don't get around to going to the doctor.

So they're not making good decisions about which things to focus their money or their health attention. And often there's just a... they don't know the implications of what, what they're doing. In health nutrition for example, there's very little knowledge about the importance of, you know, if you got a small budget, but do you spend that on fruit and, or beans or do you spend it on ice cream for the children, or sweets for the children or... And often families, they want to treat their children, of

course everyone wants to indulge their children. So they, the budget goes on crappy crisps for their children or... instead of actually buying food that would be nutritious.

Or the doctors, as we know the health system in Kosovo is probably Kosovo's biggest crisis... and the doctors quite often prescribe things which are very expensive. May not even be necessary. So they'll prescribe something like Floradix, you know that syrup {explains with her hands} that's got vitamins in it. That costs eleven euros for a bottle of Floradix. And you could get the same benefit by buying, you know, some oranges, some spinach and some beans. And so people will come to us with a receipt, with their prescription and they'll say, "The doctor says I've got to have this so... and I can't afford eleven euros, so please will you cover it?" And when I look at it I'm like, "No, just go buy some beans. This is gonna do the same thing for your health."

But they don't have the knowledge to make that judgment because they haven't, they don't, haven't been educated about vitamins or about what Floradix is. They can't read the label to even see what it is. They just know the doctor told me to buy this and it will make me better. We're doing a lot of health work now, as well. And we have a community health adviser. We also have a midwife who comes and works with about forty women every week, because we're trying to make sure that babies are born at home. There's a very high child mortality rates, really, outrageously high. So in Kosovo as whole it's from every thousand babies born, twelve die before their first birthday which is very high. But in the Roma, Ashkali community it's 41 babies out of a thousand.

So that's a scandal that we're trying to do something about making sure babies are born in the hospital. That they're vaccinated, that mothers know how to look after their babies with things like smoking and breastfeeding and how to have a healthy...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you find a way how to support them through The Ideas Partnership, like what is the...

Elizabeth Gowing: The midwife is the... so she'll come and have sessions, like consults, consultations with the women. And our community health assistant makes home visits to the, everyone who has a baby, takes them some blankets and baby clothes and... Also checks the paperwork to see what the hospital said, when their checkup is, have they had their vaccinations. You know, reminds the mum what, when she need to go. Because if you can't read, you know, you just had a baby, you've just left the hospital, you can't always remember all of that information.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What do children do to help others?

Elizabeth Gowing: Well, we have a Children's Council, which is a group of children, one from each age group who come to our classes. And they meet every month, and they have a small budget, 50 euro a month budget. And they have to decide what to spend that on that's on the benefit of other people. So not for their own benefit. And yes, so I didn't finish saying about the bursary, so the bursary recipients, we pay for them to go to, to evening classes or to go to university. But in exchange they have to do something every week for their community. So lots of them volunteer at our Saturday activities where we have kids coming to have academic support.

But some of them help with clothing distribution, some of them help with transports, one helps with going to make home visits to pregnant women. So whatever they're interested, someone ran a football club. I mean, they can do their interest but we're trying to encourage that sense of civic engagement and being part of the community. And we're now spreading, I mean Fushë Kosovë is our biggest project, and it was our first but we're now in six municipalities. So we work in Lipjan, and in Janjeva town. We work in Gjakova, where we work with the blind children, so that's a separate project, along with the Society of the Blind there. We work in Istog and we, our office's in Pristina so we're active across...

[The following part was conducted on February 23, 2018]

Part Three

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And what happened after?

Elizabeth Gowing: We got Gjejlane to school? Yeah, yeah. Yes, we had this amazing experience of of, that was one of the proudest days of my life, was walking this, I was the head of this line of sixty-two children like walking to school, we left from the center of the *mahalla*² in Fushë Kosovë. And you know as we walked there were all these people from the community like, saying, "Where are you going and well done!" And you know it really felt like quite a procession and an achievement, the children were really proud, so that was a really great day.

And I felt like we achieved what we set up to achieve. And I's said that I would give that six months and it was almost exactly six months, like it came really close to not being achieved within that timeline. But we did it. But then actually various people told me that we couldn't stop there because if we did just stop there, probably everything we had achieved would just, you know, be lost because the school obviously didn't want the children there, because otherwise they would have made it easier for them to go in the first place.

The children were all I mean some of them were two years behind, some of them were five years behind, so they were really going to struggling. So they were gonna be 14 year olds in a, in first grade for example you know. So that's not an easy thing for the teacher, not easy for them so...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And how was that managed?

Elizabeth Gowing: Well, by the school you mean?

Erëmirë Krasniqi : Well, in the school and how did you assist in that?

² Word of Arabic origin that means neighborhood

Elizabeth Gowing: Well the school, I mean the teachers were perhaps understandably really unhappy about having these children in their classes. I guess they were visibly different children, they were poor children, they were also children who hadn't had any prior learning. And you know there's teachers who's classes are very full and so you know they already had 38 children and they were being asked to take another three children or whatever.

But it was horrible like all the children were in the, the lobby of the school and along with all the other kids you know starting school. And the headmaster called the teachers out and they had to pick the children. So, of course some children were left until the last, you know so it was like what should have been a really positive experience for the children was made into a very horrible one.

And the first week, I think we had eleven children sent them home from school for all kinds of excuses like, "Oh you're too big for the chairs, or you're too small, or come back when the extension of the *objekti i ri* [new facility] has been built." Two children, brother and sister, were called up in front of the class and the teacher said they had scabies or fleas, I don't remember which. And we took them to the doctor after, they didn't have fleas but they refused to go back to school because you know they had been ashamed. So the teachers really tried lots of ways just to get these kids out which...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: To discourage them to take part?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah but I suppose one of the things we did which, which helped, hopefully helped the teachers and certainly helped the children was, an idea of one of our volunteers, that we should start Saturday activities, to the, so that the children could come back together and they could see each other and have that kind of solidarity. They could also have that extra learning 'cause they were still very behind. So we started those and actually we still continue those even seven years later and we have about eighty or ninety children who still come every Saturday. So not just those original children, we have some kids who come who were always in school, like they registered in the right way they go, but they just want, want to be with their friends, so that's really nice.

And then we have some children, still who come, who are not in school for whatever reason and this is actually the only education they get, is coming on the Saturday. So it's nice, they're really nice activities and they're run by volunteers and almost all the volunteers are from the community, including a group we call "the little teachers", who are teenagers from the community who had like training every week, they have a training in critical thinking and a bit in pedagogy. They have a trip like a *shëtitje* [trip] every month so you know they have some benefits. But in exchange they teach the children of their community every Saturday, which I think is a really important model, you know.

That's one of the way that I think our organization has grown since, well has matured, since that's start. Because back in 2011, it was you know crazy English lady volunteers mainly foreign volunteers and we were kind of busing in, helping the children going back to our homes. Now it's people from the community who are helping in the community and that's much sustainable and much healthier.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You mentioned *shëtitje* [trips] and I'm just wondering, do the people from the community get to see other parts of Kosovo?

Elizabeth Gowing: Well that's exactly why we set up these, these outings because lots of the children know, lots of the children haven't even been to Pristina. Some of the children know Pristina really well because they're the ones who pick the rubbish you know go into the *kontenier* [rubbish container], yeah. So actually they know it better than I do, like they know all the back ways and they know.

So, they have a different map of Pristina from what I have. But some of the children haven't been at all and you know even when they come to Pristina and they're not going to the theater or art galleries and the cinema. So we've taken them to those places and we've taken them around Kosovo as well you know, to Prizren and trying to think where Novobërba and yeah, cultural heritage sites and Gërmia and have, you know, fun as well.

And we also have speakers coming in to talk to the children because this idea of expanding their horizon is really important. So yeah, that's I think something that we're, we've really moved on from, from that, that starting point. But the other thing that was really important as the children were being registered for school, was that we realized that unless the families were economically supported then in the winter, when the children when it's the hardest time and people are sick, and they need firewood and then that's when the children would drop out of school. And so we needed to help the families financially.

And so we set up this women's enterprise to employ the mothers of the kids who had registered on, on condition that their children went to school they, they could be employed in this project. And then the profits from the sales of what they made would go straight back to them, so we didn't take any profit, not even to cover the salary of our coordinator. So we got a grant funding for that.

And we started off with making soap and making tote bags. And now we've expanded into making greeting cards with this beautiful filigree, silver filigree design so we cooperate with a cooperative in Prizren who makes silver filigree. And then we, the women sew this little bit of jewelry into the card and so it's kind of a card but it's also a present. Because then you can wear the jewelry so as this piece of jewelry {shows her jewelry}. And yeah, I think the other products we make, we're just about to start making candles as well, so we have a range of product.

And we have women in Fushë Kosovë in this and we have women in, we had women in Istog in fact that part of the project just closed at the end of last year. And we have women in Janjeva in the project. So at it's largest I think we had thirt... and more than thirty women in it, it's slightly smaller now. But that's been a very important model you know like it's not just, we have this model that we didn't start out with but now we've constructed around what we do, which is we help people in need, we help people in need to help themselves. But we also help people in need to help other people in need.

So the, the project with the making soaps and bags is people in need to help themselves and then the little teachers I was talking about is really helping people in need to then help others. And that I think is the real magic formula if you can manage to do that. And, and I don't think that many NGOs think about that third stage, so I think that's something that we are, I think we're quite proud of incorporating that into our work.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What's your, what's your relationship with all the community members now that you've gone away, what's your personal...

Elizabeth Gowing: Well, the family Gjejlane's family this first family that I met, I still... so I can't remember if I said that before that... We decided to build them a house that I talked about the house right and did I just shortly after they moved into the new house the father died, right. So suddenly that family was left very vulnerable and, and a lot of people who had been moved by that story and it's the story I write in my book. And so some people read the book and met the family that way and so a lot of people wanted to give money to the family that way.

So, we didn't want to give them money directly, just as a handout to the family, even when they were at their most vulnerable, we wanted it to be kind of *kushtëzuar* [conditioned] somehow and that's conditional on the children going to school. Because when their dad died, the oldest boy told me that day, he said that, "I have to take dad's wheelbarrow and leave school."

And like you know that's not what your father wanted and we're not gonna let that happen. But it was a real battle in those months after their father died, that of course the children were very, you know, upset and it was, their mother was very upset and, and quite fragile. And so the family really needed support so we said, "Look your job now is to go to school and if you go to school there are all these people in England who want to help your family." So we set up this kind of sponsorship so that they, for each child that goes to school their mum gets money every week and the child gets like a pocket money as well so it's kind of motivation.

And it was a real battle for the first six months, you know, the one child basically didn't go to school for four months at that time, just gave up, kept running out of the school even when his mum took him, she would leave and then he would skip out in the break or whatever. But they are, with the exception of Gjejlane who now wears a headscarf and so can't go to school but all of the others are in school. And so, I go every time I'm in Kosovo, which is now maybe twice a month, I, I go and visit them. So I have a very close relationship and I'm in touch with them on Skype or phone you know, perhaps every few days even when I'm out of Kosovo.

So that keeps me connected and I think my role has changed a little bit because this is something I thought about a lot during my sabbatical as well so if maybe my stories changed (laughs). But I think I see an important part of my role as joining up the UK and Kosovo. There are so many people in Britain who care about, who care and who can be made to care if you can tell the story then they can be made to care. And some of them have read my book some of them have been volunteers with us, some of us came out to Kosovo with other organizations but wanted to help and see The Ideas Partnership as a way to do that.

So we have a lot of people who want to give, maybe money or they want to give... I mean this big suitcase that I just brought today that is the reason I was late, is full of shoes that were donated by people in England. Because they say, you know, "My kids grown out of these shoes, I want to give them to a child who will wear them to school." And I think what The Ideas Partnership is very good at, is making that direct connection so that woman that gave her children's shoes will get a photograph of the boy who's wearing those shoes now in Fushë Kosovë, and we will send it and say this is *filan* and

you know, he's in school and his mom say thank you and you know a little bit so that they really feel connected.

And when we take them to *filan*, we will say this comes from a lady in England and her son used to wear them and now she wants you to have them. And so I think making that joining the world up, yeah...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Personal connection...

Elizabeth Gowing: Exactly. And so what was your question, no I was, it's...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: It was more about what's your relationship now?

Elizabeth Gowing: So, I feel now that one of the important things I can do is to be that connector and so I always, when I'm in England which is once a month, I always come back with a big suitcase. Often two because British Airways will give me free suitcases. And I bring baby clothes, particularly baby clothes and blankets and children's shoes and whatever else. And then on Saturday I go to the families in Fushë Kosovë and I give to the newborn babies or people, the widowed, families the ones who are having a hard time and I take the photograph and I send it back and I write a little explanation.

So that's a piece that I can contribute, we've now got staff, we have an all local staff. We have 27 staff now, not all full-time like majority of them are part-time. But then still 27 staff, and half of them are from the Roma, Ashkali or Egyptian community so...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you involve the entire communities through this work?

Elizabeth Gowing: In Fushë Kosovë, I mean we've touched every family one way or another, you know. We have a kindergarten now which has 80 children and that's in its third year so if you think that's how many generations of children.

We've got all these children into school every year, you know not just back in 2011. We give out clothes, you know we offer bursaries to adults who want to go back to high school, doing evening classes to get their certificate. So we have lots of different ways that we've touched different people. And a big program for pregnant women as well, for safe pregnancies. So we have about 40 women in Fushë Kosovë and about 40 women in Janjeva who every week come to our midwife and get vitamins, and we pay for the transport to take them to hospital, to have their baby in safe conditions.

And we take the blankets that were knitted by the ladies in England you know, so we, yeah, so I'd say I'm still quite close to community yeah you know to answer your question. And we're not in more than that community so we're in Fushë Kosovë, in Janjeva and Lipjan, Obiliq, in Gjakova, in Graçanica and we were in Istog until the end of last year. And I feel like there's one more that maybe, well then I suppose in Pristina we have our office here maybe that's what I'm thinking, so...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you expand, like... 'cause you started in Fushë Kosovë?

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah and Fushë Kosovë is still our biggest project like you know that's where we have everything, in Fushë Kosovë. Whereas in the other places we have, in Janjeva we have a kindergarten but it's just three times a week, whereas in Fushë Kosovë it is every day. In Janjeva we have the social enterprise as well and we have a few classes but not as many, not like our Saturday activities. So we have, art class, and we have English classes, we have Albanian classes just on certain days of the week.

In Obiliq we just have education for older kids three times a week. We don't have any social enterprise, we don't have any health work in Obiliq. In Gjakova we work specifically with blind children and not just from the community, like from any community, working with the society of the blind. So that's a very different project. There's no antenatal stuff. There's no social enterprises. Just working on supporting those kids into school.

So, I guess we... ideally, I would say that we have an organization that has a huge number of volunteers. We have a hundred and something. A hundred and twenty, I think. Volunteers. We have a center. A few centers. We have a center in Janjeva, a center in Fushë Kosovë. A few other centers in other places. And, if somebody shows us a need, we can kind of mobilize those things and and make the needs, you know, resolve that problem. So you know one day somebody said to me, someone from the community in Fushë Kosovë said, "We really need German classes."

There are so many people who've come back from Germany or kids who grew up in Germany or people who want to move to Germany or engage to someone from that community who's living in Germany and I put out an email to all our volunteers and we had one in our center within less than a week, we were able to start German classes. And, you know, no other NGO I think can work like that because normally you'd have to apply for funds and it would take six months before you've got that approved and by then maybe the interest would have gone. So we're able to be very responsive because of that.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay. I was wondering, I mean if you have nothing to add about The Ideas Partnership, I was wondering about the book, do you find inspiration from the work that you do there? Are they creative non-fiction or are they just pure fiction or can, can you tell us about that?

Elizabeth Gowing: So, it's called Travels in blood and honey. Becoming a beekeeper in Kosovo. So this one really tells the story of, from I first arrived in Kosovo in 2006 to 2008 like when we left Kosovo, the last chapter is us leaving Kosovo. When we thought that, you know, Rob had a job back in England and we thought that our time in Kosovo was coming to an end. Little did we know (laughs) that was just the beginning. But... that's, that's, it's got a very different feel in my opinion because it's about becoming a beekeeper but it's also about learning not just beekeeping. But learning Kosovo's history and its traditions, its food. You know, it got recipes in the book for what to make with the honey.

It's a very sweet, very lyrical book. I think it's kind of, it's a lot about the landscape, the countryside, the villages, and, and, it's kind of a love story about me, you know, falling in love with Kosovo. And, and, so I, you know, I love that book because it's, it really tells that, that journey. But I remember there was one review of it that said it was uncritical of Kosovo and I suppose that's true, I mean, I didn't want to be critical, and, but, also I perhaps hadn't got, you know, deep, I hadn't met the community in

Fushë Kosovë to see some of the problems and frustrations. So, yeah, it's a love story, when you're in love with someone, you're not critical (laughs).

And then the second book I wrote, well, I started writing it before the first one was published and, which is about Edith Durham, this British woman who came to Kosovo a hundred years ago, and that is a different kind of book, you know, it's partly biography. It is called, Edith and I: on a trail of an Edwardian traveler in Kosovo. So, it's partly Edith's story, and it's partly my story in finding out about her and then retracing her steps. So, it starts with me finding out about her when we lived here, but then it talks about me going back to England and being stuck in this small apartment in London, feeling frustrated that my life in Kosovo, which had been so rich and happy, was, you know, I was now, I've been torn away from that. And the remembering that there was this other British woman who, a hundred years ago had gone to Kosovo and had had this wonderful experience and then had had to come back to this flat in London and had been very frustrated.

And so, that's why I started researching her really, was kind of from homesickness, yeah when I was in England thinking about Kosovo, but in the middle of writing it, Rob got this job back here so actually the second part of the book is about my journeys in Kosovo where I used Edith's travels as a guide, so it's partly a travel book, it's partly a biography, partly an autobiography. And then the third book is the story of the rubbish picker's wife and it's such an unlikely friendship in Kosovo and that tells the story of Heteme and Gjejlane and meeting with that family and what that pulled me into. So, that's probably the book that has got most of me in it, you know, that's really the story, perhaps the story I care about the most because it's really shaped, at least for now, who I, who I am.

And, but it's, it's much more critical of Kosovo, if it's not a love story, because, you know, of course it's about the frustrations here and the ways that some communities are being shortchanged here and... But hopefully it's a positive story because it does have, it has a happy ending and then my most recent book which was published last year is, The Silver Thread, which is about silver filigree, and the subtitle is A Journey Through Balkan Craftsmanship. So, it's a Balkan book, so it's not just Kosovo, although it's mainly Kosovo. But there's quite a few chapters in Albania and also one in Istanbul. And that's about this silver filigree and it starts, in fact it starts way back before even my first book started.

The first contact I had with Kosovo was when Rob, when we were living in London, he got a job with OSCE, two weeks election monitor during the first elections here. So in 2001 he came out for two weeks and he was based in Prizren and he was you know, in a polling station there and he brought me some Prizren silver filigree back, just a very simple necklace. And, so the story sort of starts with that and then describes how I was given this beautiful, intricate, extraordinary necklace and wanted to discover where it had come from. And so I go back to Kosovo when we get back here, I went down the mine, I went down the mine in Trepça which is where the silver came from, and then I went to Novobërda, and saw there where the smelting was done. And then I went to Prizren and saw how the cooperative make the filigree. And then I visited these women, actually in Albania, who collect the filigree and who sort of told me the stories of it, its history and then I went...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What are the stories around this type of craft?

Elizabeth Gowing: Well, it's particularly the way it's worn, those, that's the, I mean, there's some detail, technical details in the book about how it's made and you know, these techniques. But the bit that interests me more is the, the human context of it, so understanding, for example, however rich a woman was, even if she was able to have all gold jewelry, she would always have had one piece of silver jewelry because silver is supposed to be, had the power to see off the evil eye. You know, and so, silver is important, it's not just like a poor man's gold, it's important in itself. And then the *xhubleta*³ you know, the traditional Albanian costume, and I went to the Malësia e Madhe and to the Lugu i Bjeshkëve, where all the young women, the latest brides from all the valleys are all dressed in this *xhubleta* which goes back possibly like 3,000 years or something as, as a style.

And they all have this amazing intricate jewelry and there's various types so traditionally, women would have tongs, and hanging like a long chain with tongs and that would be so that she could pick up an ember, a burning coal from the *mangall* so that she could light her husband's cigarette with it, so she, you know, has to have tongs. And they say that she would have to put her hand out like this {puts out her hand}, because heaven forbid that the burning coal would fall on her husband's foot, it should fall on her hand first.

So, yeah, learning, you know, that tells you a lot about lots of things and there's also the symbolism of lots of bees, actually, made out of filigree because that symbolizes hard work and the sweetness that the bride was bringing into their family. Lots of triangles cause they're also amulets against the evil eye, and you know, this is all a way of understanding people, and then going to see the young filigreenists who are in Pristina today, who have, just as a couple, young women who started up businesses. And it's great to go into their shops and see other young women, professional women, buying filigree there. And this is, I think it's having a bit of Renaissance in Kosovo, and that people are not buying Swarovski like down the road, they're buying from these shops. And buying that as a gift or a present there for a business colleague or something, you know. So modern women are buying it. So yeah, this is the story I tell really. And what's been interesting with those books is that I've done a lot of talks about my books because I love doing...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What is the audience? That's what I want to know.

Elizabeth Gowing: Yeah well, that's what's been interesting. So when I started the... I started the first book about honey and I got in touch with all the beekeeping organizations in England and some of them... I mean they're mainly farmers and they're interested in beekeeping and the practicalities of that, but a few groups were interested to hear about beekeeping in a different country. And then I started working... talking to some women's groups, there's a big network called The Women's Institute which has... something like thirty thousand, no it can't be that many, maybe it's three thousand groups in Britain, branches in Britain. But still, you know, a lot. And so they're mainly older women, mainly in rural areas. Often quite traditional, it has a bit of a reputation in Britain for being about homemaking and making jam and doing handicrafts and although not all the groups were like that. But so that was again a quite an older audience and who didn't know about Kosovo so they were interested in this, you know, learning about something,

³ Traditional Albanian costume.

And then, with particularly with this last book and there's a group in Britain called The Art Society and that has six hundred branches across Britain. And each of the branches has a lecture every months on an art's topic, fine arts topic. And so they're always looking for lecturers and they have quite a rigorous process to become a lecturer. So I had to go through this process, but now I'm on their list and so actually the main talks I'm doing are to art societies, which are very big groups. Usually over a hundred. So I did one on Monday, there were 150 people in the morning and then another 130 people in the afternoon. And I suppose that's a slightly different, you have to pay quite a bit more to be a member of that group, compared to the other ones I was talking.

So these are people who, you know, consider themselves very educated and cultured and they're interested in fine arts. So it's wonderful to be talking to all these different kinds of people. I've done now 160 something talks (smiles) and so if you calculate it it's more than thousand people who I've spoken to. So that makes me very proud, like I can go and tell Kosovo's story and my story...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What are the questions, like what kind of curiosity the books spark?

Elizabeth Gowing: My favorite, my favorite questions are when people ask about tourism here. And you know, I kind of think, "Oh, I hope that means that they're gonna come." And I did once get an e-mail when I was sitting in, in Pristina and it said, "Dear Elizabeth, I'm sending this from the Grand Hotel. I would never have been here, if you hadn't come to the Wimbledon Women's Institute last year (laughs). And that makes me really proud.

And then people often want to know about, actually they're not so interested in the war and the politics. Maybe that's the one thing that people do know about Kosovo, or at least they think they know. But they will often want to ask about the quality of life, you know, health care, you know, jobs, electricity, you know, those kinds of things. And when I do my talk about the filigree people always want to buy some of them. Like, "Where can we buy it?" Because of course they've discovered just how valuable it is and they understand the work that's gone into it. So that's why it's great to have these cards that the women in our project have made because then people can buy a piece of Kosovan filigree.

And we have a collaboration with a designer in Cornwall, who in fact made these earrings {touches her earring} so the filigree on these earrings is made by the filigreenist here. And then she combines it with these other beads and crystals and pears and whatever, for necklaces and earrings and.... So those sell very well, and she gives some of the profit – well she gives all the profit to The Ideas Partnership. So it's also, everybody wins, yeah.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I think we can close it here but I was wondering if you had something else to add? You think you can tell us something else...

Elizabeth Gowing: I mean there's always be more (laughs) but no, I think we're done.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay, thank you. Thanks a lot!