

KOSOVO AMERICAN EDUCATION FUND

Quarterly Newsletter, September 2021



16 YEARS OF KAEF IMPACT

This year, the KAEF Program is celebrating its 16th year of existence. Our program, now over 100 alumni strong, has not only changed the face of higher education in our country by promoting an inclusive and equitable education process but also enhanced a cadre of highly trained individuals who work towards solving the most pressing issues facing our country and ensuring a prosperous future for all. To better assess the program's impact on our alumni and its broader footprint in Kosovo's economic and social development, we have conducted an evaluation with program stakeholders and alumni. Below, are some of the highlights from this process.

KAEF Alumni Are Currently Employed In



29.8%
International
Organizations



23.4%
For-profit
Organizations



23.4%
Self-Owned
Businesses



6.4%
Nongovernmental
Organizations



6.4%
Universities



4.3%
Family-Owned
Businesses



2.1%
Government
Agencies



2.1%
Non-Profit
Organizations

Enterprises Owned by KAEF

- Technology.....27.3%
- Professional and business services.....27.3%
- Education.....18.2%
- Business.....9.1%
- Legal.....9.1%
- Finance.....9.1%

Employment by Job Position

- Staff.....16.7%
- Middle Management.....22.2%
- Senior Management.....16.7%
- Technical.....19.4%
- Chief Executive.....8.3%

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During their master's studies in the United States, KAEF fellows have gained exposure to various professional practices, community engagements and academic knowledge that they were excited to bring back to Kosovo. Once fellows finish their master's studies, they join the KAEF Alumni Association, through which various activities get organized throughout the year. These include:

- Fundraising events: supporting financing more KAEF fellows in the future
- Application discussions: giving tips and tricks on how to prepare for winning the KAEF
- Panel discussions: inviting notable field experts to discuss prominent topics

In the upcoming months of October and November, the alumni are planning various panel discussions with prominent figures. More details will be revealed soon. In addition to being engaged in the Association, the alumni contribute daily to Kosovo's economic development through their jobs, entrepreneurship ventures or volunteer activities.



Ereza is now working as Program Development Supervisor at TEB Bank, a subsidiary of BNP Paribas, where she works together with the SME Banking Department to develop programs that provide disadvantaged businesses easier access to finance and non-financial services. From 2014, they have been implementing the Women Entrepreneurs Program, a multi-million loan portfolio consisting of businesses with a majority female ownership. The program bridges the gap in finance for women entrepreneurs and contributes directly to increasing the number of female business owners (where currently only 11% of businesses in Kosovo are female-owned). Another major component of the role working with entrepreneurs aged 18 – 35 years old, to provide them easier access to finance and advice on how to break into the market and establish themselves as formal businesses.



Hana works as a National Research Expert for VET at Lux-Development S.A, in a European Union-funded project. She is directly involved in creating a National Graduates Tracking System (periodic Tracer Studies) in 67 initial VET schools and 8 Vocational Training Centers in Kosovo, ensuring that Kosovo's VET system has consistent evidence on graduate employability and skills relevance in line with labour market needs. She also supports the development of a legal base for tracer studies and a national online database to store data. In addition, she facilitates the capacity development activities targeting the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) and the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK) representatives regarding the initiation, monitoring, and dissemination of findings deriving from tracer studies. This tracking system will help build reliable policy recommendations for future VET curricula and training programmes, contributing to developing a quality-based and inclusive education for youth.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: ARTRIN BAJRAMI

Editor's note - Artrin Bajrami is one of the newest alumni to join the 100+ KAEF alumni community. Through KAEF, Artrin graduated with an MBA at the University of Minnesota, Carlson School of Management. During his studies, Artrin completed an internship at Anaplan, a global planning software company based in San Francisco. Following his graduation, he returned to Anaplan for a one-year post-academic training opportunity, supported by KAEF.

Why did you choose to pursue an MBA degree and what made you want to apply to KAEF?

I chose to pursue an MBA because it was the most logical next step in my professional development. I wanted to return to school and broaden my skillset after acquiring work experience for a couple of years. I was researching different programs in the United States when I learned about KAEF through my social network. I reached out to KAEF alumni and current students to learn more and each of them described their experience as far exceeding their expectations. Looking back, I would say the same.

What was the defining moment from your program experience and how did it shape you?

I would consider the first semester to be the defining moment in my MBA experience.

After orientation and the start of the first semester, the whole MBA cohort was (naturally) encouraged to explore all that the Carlson School of Management has to offer in terms of Enterprises and what would be their best student/enterprise fit. The Enterprises provide an opportunity to gain experience on certain subjects by tackling various problems in specific areas. There are four enterprises at Carlson: Funds, Brand, Consulting, and Ventures. Each venture enables students to specialize in a certain subject by providing an opportunity to solve actual problems as well as receive mentor support. By working closely with select fellow MBA, MS, and undergraduate students on small teams, it allows them to gain more experience in such a field. Furthermore, the decision of which enterprise to join impacts the coursework that an MBA student needs to take in the following three semesters.





My defining moment was choosing the enterprise; each one of them is great at offering different skill sets that a student can obtain by the end of the MBA program. Throughout my first semester at Carlson, up until November 2018 (when the enterprise applications were due), I put significant thought into what I would enjoy doing the most. Fundamentally, I am a numbers person and I enjoy having numbers tell a story, and that was the deciding factor on why I chose the Funds enterprise.

Is there any class at the University of Minnesota that has shaped your opinion on a particular topic?

The Carlson Funds Enterprise (CFE) was definitely the class that most impacted my whole financial beliefs system. The CFE, part of the University of Minnesota, is a student-run fund where accepted candidates have a say in the ability to invest on behalf of the fund. The thought-provoking discussions held at CFE were not only beneficial in doing more thorough analyses, but also the duration of the program provided sufficient time to develop such analytical skills for the long-term.

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Sussanna Gibbons, the managing director, provided outstanding leadership and guidance that helped me enhance my analytical abilities in investing. I was part of CFE for three consecutive semesters, becoming team leader of the Technology, Media, and Telecommunications (TMT) sector group. I think the greatest impact of this class was the ability to actually apply the knowledge, financial models, and various theoretical financial concepts in real life. There is a greater sense of responsibility when my input can be a deciding factor on whether or not to invest real funds in a company. At the time when I joined the CFE, the fund's assets under management were approx. \$37 million; today that figure is more than \$50 million.

Additionally, the fund itself is a Principles of Responsible Investment (PRI) signatory, so when screening for investments we factored in environmental, social, and governance issues such that our potential investments would not adversely impact society or sub-groups within it.

How did you benefit from the professional development opportunities at KAEF?

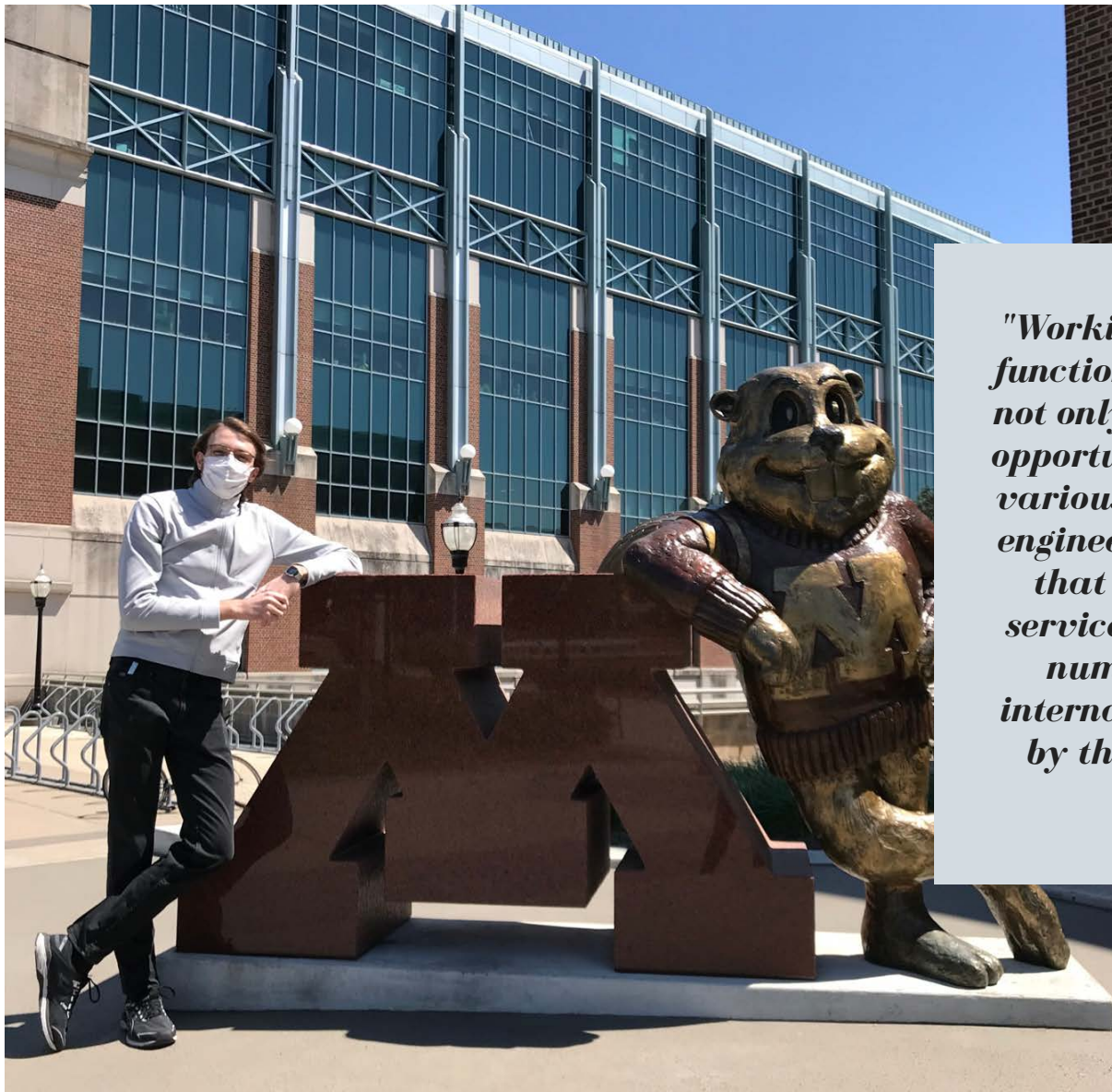
I was able to leverage the Academic Training component that KAEF provides. While researching companies during recruiting season in my first year at the MBA program I came across Anaplan. They offered software-as-a-service (SaaS) enterprise solutions to large companies, and they had an internship program for the summer of 2019. Since it also greatly overlapped with the in-depth research I did at the TMT team, it was a perfect opportunity and I was fortunate to be part of the internship program. Towards the latter part of the program, my work got selected to be presented to the CEO and the Executive Leadership Team of the company. ([Youtube link here](#)). The internship paved the way to become a full-time employee for the company after graduation.

However, my start date was in June 2020, a few months after Covid had disrupted businesses across the world. This in itself provided a unique opportunity, mainly because the solution that the company offers helps large enterprises have more agile planning, forecasting, and budgeting tools at their disposal. From a professional standpoint, being on the forefront of technology at such a pivotal time for organizations in the United States offered a valuable insight into an emerging trend of firms becoming more flexible in their consideration of Covid as a potential disruptor.

What was the most challenging/rewarding moment at Anaplan?

Following my transition to full-time employment, I joined the company as a Senior Business Consultant and became a part of the company's Rotational Program. As such, I joined the Sales Planning and Analytics team as the team I would be working with was part of my rotation. The advantage of such a program structure was that it allowed me to understand processes supported by that team while simultaneously collaborating with other teams.





"Working with cross-functional teams has not only given me the opportunity to see the various business and engineering verticals that these teams service, but also the numerous tools internally leveraged by the company."

One of the most rewarding experiences I've had has been working with various cross-functional teams within the organization. By engaging with other teams, I was able to gain firsthand exposure to the numerous business processes that are required for such a large-scale organization. Working with cross-functional teams has not only given me the opportunity to see the various business and engineering verticals that these teams service, but also the numerous tools internally leveraged by the company. Through this, I was able to get to know great colleagues in the organizations with specialized skills and backgrounds. This provided the opportunity to ask questions and dive deeper into subjects that I usually wouldn't have come across otherwise. It was also a terrific opportunity to see how all of these processes fit into the "big picture" of ensuring the organization's operational processes were in sync and running as expected.

What can you tell us about your future plans and the work you will be doing now that you are here in Kosovo?

Now that I am back, I have several projects that I am working on simultaneously, each with different timelines. Currently, my main focus is the digital transformation of the company that I worked for prior to departing for the MBA program. On this project, I am looking to apply management and technical tools that I have learned and used from the MBA program and my work experience, albeit at a much smaller scale. Another project that is currently in the pipeline is a tech startup idea that I believe has considerable potential in the Kosovo market. This is still in the early stages, and there is much work ahead that needs to be done.

Yoga in Albanian *Lands*



By Alba Kondirolli, KAEF Program Coordinator

It all began with her hometown Pristina. In 2013, Annea Hapçiu founded a yoga studio in Pristina, the first of its kind, as a way to introduce an alternative healing practice to the people of Kosovo who had not had access to such discipline before. Through N'Yoga, Annea aimed to teach yoga as a complementary activity to the everyday life of Kosovars as well as remove stereotypes related to the discipline. In this quest to redefine yoga, Annea began documenting her travels around Kosovo and Albania in an online blog where she would post stories and yoga poses inspired by the landmarks she visited. Eleven places turned into eleven stories. After eight years of adventures, travel, and diligent work, these stories have finally found a home in a book titled "Yoga in Albanian Lands" - a brilliant depiction of our favorite towns seen through the lens of a yogini.

In a virtual conversation with Annea, she revealed how practicing yoga led her to this fortuitous artistic journey around Kosovo and Albania and culminated in a published book. She credits her friends for insisting she opens N'Yoga, initially as a teaching space for them and a sanctuary to practice yoga herself. Within a short time, more people were intrigued by the discipline and started joining her classes. Her biggest concern at the time – how to introduce yoga in a way that was accepted and understood by everyone?

"The way I taught it in Kosovo was as an alternative way to healing something, as a complementary activity to your everyday life. You do not have to change anything, be anyone else, or change your views about anything in the world. It is important to just focus on yourself, on your body, on your healing, and your perception of the world and your internal state."



After Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Annea witnessed how the nation struggled with self-expression and identity, and she thought that yoga would serve 'as a good way to find our own voices.' After all, she believed that it had helped her find her purpose, and she was adamant that it would help many people do the same. When she began taking pictures of yoga poses in front of architectural landmarks, she sought to express the connection of yoga with nature, rituals, art, spirituality and demonstrate the similarities of cultures and human experiences. She admits that at the time, she was not aware of where this pursuit would lead; she was only nurturing her passion for yoga by showcasing it in a unique way. However, in 2015, after she commenced her graduate studies at the American University through KAEF, she signed up for a photography class and learned of 'Conceptual Photography,' a type of photography that involves illustrating an idea or concept before the photo takes place. For the first time, Annea could see how her project could go beyond conceptual photography.

'Yoga in Albanian Lands' is a Travel & Arts book. The book does not recommend restaurants or hotels, nor has it been sponsored by a private company. "This book has been done out of love" - Annea often likes to say, as for her the most important thing was the artistic value that the book brought. The book has three components: the stories of the towns, the photos of yoga poses, and the captions underneath the photos, which connect the stories with the yoga poses. The stories, rich in historical information, capture brilliantly the souls of the cities and what they stand for, attesting to Annea's storytelling powers.

In the beginning, she only wanted to write one story for Pristina, her "heart," as she calls it, but as her audience grew, she expanded her project to the main towns of Kosovo. She chose these places because of the cultural heritage they represented, as she sought to highlight their architectural treasures with yoga poses. She felt that her artistry "brought something new; it brought a positive alternative to the way we see and feel for our cities and towns." Her now-husband Rilind encouraged her to expand her project to Albania and put these stories in a blog so that they would not be lost in the endless void of the internet. However, the project did not come without its challenges.



She explained that one of the reasons why the project took eight years to complete was due to many cultural landmarks such as Artana in Novoberda or the Idromeno Street in Shkodra being under renovation. Because she wanted to keep her work authentic, she chose the cities in a way where each story would have its own voice and differ from the other.

"We wanted as unique of a representation of culture and identity, and that's why we chose various towns because what you get in Shkodra is very different from what you get in Butrint or Berat. That is why we did a special article for the Albanian Riviera as well, where we highlighted only some rural areas and villages."

Another challenge she faced was drafting the stories. She points out that the book is 'heavily research-based,' and most of the difficulties arose from the limited data. "I would read as much as I could about the city or the town that we chose to write about, the local authors and the artists, the value that the city brought and whatever it stood for the people and the society there, and then we would go to the place."

She also relied on friends, family, and locals to receive the information needed for the stories. "We wish we had more resources to do more in-depth interviews with people. I wanted these stories to represent the soul of each city," she further adds.

As she vividly brings the stories behind the cities to life, the yoga poses represent the connection between the discipline and the identities of the cities. For her, the process of choosing these yoga poses stems from her feelings. She claims that she always chooses the yoga pose upon reaching the place; it's just how she works! However, oftentimes the places she visits are in such poor conditions that she has to alter her poses. "We tried to keep the poses as varied as possible" - she adds, "but also, in certain places we did, for example, the dancer pose, the tree pose, or a bridge pose many times because that's what the place stands for, and that's the representation that connects and reveals yoga in that place too."

Performing the poses has brought a lot of memorable stories. She recalls a minor incident that occurred while shooting on top of a bunker near Gjipe Beach for her Albanian Riviera article. As she bent into a wheel pose on top of a muddy, burning hot bunker, her husband Rilind slips down on the rocky mountain while taking her pictures. "Suddenly, I see Rilind disappear; he was taking the photo, and he just slipped down. I was like, there we are, this positive project might be the end of Rilind. That was one of the scariest things we did during the project; we laugh about it now, and we are glad no one got hurt."

"I don't think I would have done it if I didn't have the education I do, and I don't think the book would come out as it is, without the education I have."

While performing a yoga pose on top of a bunker might not be everyone's bed of roses, Annea feels comfortable being uncomfortable. Her years as an undergraduate at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio, coupled with her graduate experience through the KAEF scholarship at the American University in DC, gave her the confidence to raise her voice for many issues and feel comfortable being seen as a foreigner. Although she had a great team on her side, she remembers how difficult it was to begin the project. "Initially, it took some guts to go out, expose yourself, and do yoga poses in the middle of the cities. People did not refrain from catcalling you or just saying anything that came to their minds, just because it was so unusual." KAEF's support for artistic expression and its investment in students also contributed tremendously to expanding the project. The media classes she took during her time at AU and the yoga certification she received with the money saved from her stipend made her understand more about the practice and better integrate the poses.





Although this project is not directly related to Social Entrepreneurship, her field of specialization, she believes it will create similar positive benefits, whether through more yoga studios being opened from her previous clients or tourism promotion from her book. Above all, she hopes that 'Yoga in Albanian Lands' can be a friend to its readers and a fun addition to their collection of books. "We saw this book for the youth of Kosovo and Albania that might be struggling in the way that they see their cities and countries and see that something beautiful can be created from these places. For the diaspora, we thought that it would be a great addition to their coffee table books or just a good souvenir from which they can feel closer to home, or that they can read it to their kids, or that their kids can learn Albanian or sustain their language skills from this book."

As the book is finally out in the bookstores, Annea is looking forward to commencing new projects. She disclosed that there are no imminent book plans; however, with the recent move to the United States, she is looking forward to being a foreigner again and inspired to create something unique and artistic.

"I feel like for a very long time I had this undone project that did not let me go, so now that it is done, it is in the bookstores, I feel like I can go work on other stuff. So, I am really looking forward to that. I hope I have the energy and health to do it!"

Editor's note: Yoga in Albanian Lands is now available in bookstores in Prishtina, Kosovo, (Bookstores Buzuku, Dukagjini, Toena, and online at [GjirafaMall](#)) as well as on [Amazon](#) (international shipping available). The publishing of this book has been supported by the Kosovo-American Education Fund Alumni Grants Initiative.

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