

# THE BIG WORLD OF DENTISTRY

## It was a typical work day.

Arrive early, boot up the computer, scan AzCentral.com for the local and national news, fill my water bottle, check voice mail, and dive into the ever-present pile on my desk. Opening my email, I spied an odd notation in a subject line: "A Letter from Albania." Thinking it was one of those scams saying there are millions of dollars in a foreign bank account and half of it will be mine if I would kindly send my account number... You've seen them. I almost deleted it without a second glance. But I decided to take a closer look, and I'm glad I did.

The message was from Dr. Rozarka Budina, President of the Albanian Stomatological Society, letting the Arizona Dental Association know that one of our members was revered in her country for the care and education he has provided there. Not only was I grateful to have this story idea dropped in my lap, I found this faraway doctor's message to be quite charming. She closed with: "Have a good time." After acknowledging her message, I called this AzDA Member, Dr. John Gillan, to schedule an interview.

## Month of John

Dr. Gillan, who practices Endodontics in Mesa, first visited Albania in 1994 when an Oral Surgeon friend invited him to speak at the country's very first dental conference at the University Dental School and Clinic

in Tirana. "It was scary to say yes," he said, "because I was hesitant to leave my family and my business. But with their support and encouragement, I accepted the challenge." He has since returned, often with family members in tow, 12 times and will go back this October.

Recalling one excursion to Albania, Dr. Gillan described his arrival. "The President of Albania had just returned from visiting with President Clinton, so security was tighter than usual. There were guys with machine guns on every roof. I met with the Albanian president and they served cookies and soft drinks. Our conference was successful and we then went to the school where 20 dental students crammed around, their faces smashed against one

another as they strained to see what I was doing. I have always been provided with a translator and have been working with the same one, Emin, for the past seven years. He says his favorite time of year is when I'm there. His father and grandfather were dentists."

During one of his most recent visits, Dr. Gillan was enjoying a casual lunch with Dr. Budina and others from the Albanian dental team. When the topic turned to weather, Dr. Budina exclaimed: "Summers are very hot. In September, it begins to cool down. But October is our favorite... the most fun... it's the month of John!"

## Colleagues, Patients, R&R

His Albanian counterparts, who "think I am more important than I really am," typically bring Dr. Gillan difficult cases and he must make do with limited equipment and supplies. "Once they brought a patient to me who had an extremely large hemangioma," Dr. Gillan explained. "I did all I could to find help in the U.S. and later learned that she eventually found treatment in Australia. Also, somehow word gets around the community that I'm coming and parents wait long periods of time with their children. They think I can help any patient with any condition. It flatters, humbles, and saddens me. I can't help everyone."

Dr. Gillan has also had several opportunities to work with physicians in Albania. He has also been invited to



Village, Republic of Cameroon.

participate in revising the Albanian dental school curriculum. "The dental faculty have become close friends and we have a great time working together. We call each other 'the team.' The only endo book they had was a 1971 edition. I bring books each time I go and on my last trip, I brought CD-ROMs and DVDs which they now use. I would love to spend more time teaching but they always want to take me places!"

When work is done, Dr. Gillan is usually whisked away to the coast about 30 miles from Tirana. There, they visit a second century coliseum on which homes have been built and once spent a night in a 2400-year-old castle. Another time, they drove for eight hours over poor roads to deliver money for a medical conference, and then visited fourth century B.C. Byzantine ruins. "It's a beautiful country," exclaimed Dr. Gillan. "The coast is spectacular, especially in the fall when the mountains are ablaze with color."

The Albanians he has come to know, Dr. Gillan pointed out, are "wonderful, warm, kind and loving." Once, the former Albanian Chief of Dentistry came to the U.S. to study and stayed with the Gillan family where she experienced her first-ever Christmas. "It was a great celebration for all of us," Dr. Gillan smiled, "to share in her enjoyment of American culture." Another time, three Albanian dental professors and one of their spouses spent ten days observing Endodontics in Dr. Gillan's office and Periodontics in the office next door. "The women checked their watches constantly, waiting for my wife to pick them up for a shopping expedition.



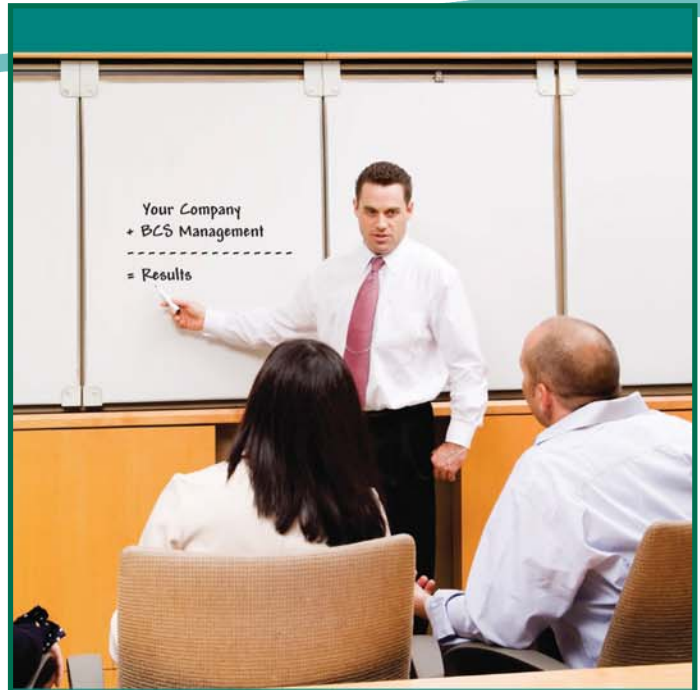
Teaching students at the University Dental School and Clinic in Tirana, Albania.

One of them said to me, 'you are wonderful but Cindy is the best!'" Cindy Gillan has accompanied her husband to Albania five times, visiting orphanages and sharing meals with the professors and their families.

### Beyond Albania

Dr. Gillan has also gone on dental missions to Romania (twice) and Kosovo. After that trip, a Kosovo dentist spent a week in Arizona learning, sight-seeing and forming familial bonds with the

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-- Albert Camus

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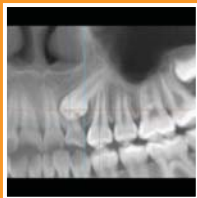
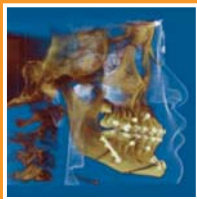


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Gillans. "The Albanians have met my mother and continue to ask about her to this day," Dr. Gillan noted.



Dr. Gillan and team in Mesa.

He has also been to the Republic of Cameroon in central west Africa three times with Health Teams

International (HTI), a non-profit organization that mobilizes health professionals to provide care around the world. His most recent trip there, last March, almost didn't happen. Major violence broke out in the region and when he received notification from HTI that the trip was cancelled, he sent me this email: "I think of the multitudes of people who will go without care, much of it lifesaving. I am in love with those people and hope to return some day." A few days later, Dr. Gillan wrote me again: "My trip is back on! Emails have been flying back and forth across the ocean today. Things have settled down over there." The trip was successful and soon after returning, Dr. Gillan attended the Western Regional Dental Convention.

Dr. Gillan said mission trips are "hard but fun." He invites AzDA Dentist and Allied Members to contact him if this story inspires you to want to know more about the next mission to Albania. "We really need hygienists," he concluded. "They don't even teach hygiene over there and don't quite understand yet how important the team concept is and how vital auxiliary personnel are." He advises packing light because "you may not be bathing or changing your clothes every day" and bringing your own scrubs. And, he added, don't get stressed about the trip. "Remember why you are doing it and know that everyone on the team will help and encourage you. Plus, you will make new lifelong friends who will never forget you, and who will make every effort to keep in touch with you. You will make connections that have nothing to do with teeth. The world of dentistry is big and when you reach out, the rewards are big as well."



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