

## **A Conversation with Bardhylka Kospiri**

After working as an engineer/architect for 25 years, Bardhylka Kospiri became a wheelchair user due to a chronic disease. Since then she has devoted her efforts to the cause of people with disabilities, advocating and lobbying for disability-related policy and legislation adoption and implementation.

Kospiri shared her thoughts with IRI during a recent conversation on her work and how her life has been affected by her disability.

### **In what way have the challenges you faced changed overtime?**

It is not easy to be disabled in Albania. We have achieved some results, but we are not where we should be. This pushes us to undertake new and bold challenges in order to meet our objectives. A disabled woman in Albania faces double the challenges and, being one myself, I make twice as much effort.

I was very much committed to my work, as an engineer in a projecting studio, where I had to always be active, work overtime and travel often, I did not pay attention to some strange phenomena happening in my daily life. I had started to lose control over my motor skills. I did not want to believe and accept that my life was taking a difficult direction. When the doctors confirmed that my disease was already present and would be with me permanently I felt I had lost everything. Not prepared for such a situation, at first I felt powerless to face the reality. I felt like a victim. I felt that I was losing my strength and that the disease was overtaking me. Being out of work, made it worse for me. Total lack of access made it impossible for me to keep up with the pace of work, overloaded at that time by the transition period reforms.

It is not a coincidence and I will never forget the moment when my husband, having seen me turn down a project I had been offered to work on, thinking that I could not do it while unable to leave home, said to me “Why don’t you try? You can work from home. I will help and assist your relations and communications with the working group.” That was the turning point for me. Surrounded by family members who completely understood my situation and friends who tried to facilitate my efforts in becoming useful once again, I could work on my projects for hours.

Only through work, I would forget about the isolation and try not to pay attention to the progression disease. It had its own pace and I was obliged to adapt to the new disabilities it brought to my body by establishing a balance in my relationship with the disease.

When I heard about the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation, a foundation offering information and support for disabled people, it peaked my interest. Even though it never distributed packets with food and clothes, so necessary and needed during the difficult ‘90s, the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation offered and continues to offer, among others, packets of much needed information for me and other disabled people and their

associations, which are now looking beyond the present and want to establish a clear vision for their future.

I will never forget my first meeting with the group of disabled people in this foundation during which, in tears, I talked about myself. Among them, there were disabled people that were suffering more than I was. This gave me the strength to continue my activity.

**Was it a challenge for you to be in the leadership of a disabled people's organization?**

When the foundation offered me to be in the leadership, I hesitated. I did not believe at that time that I would be able to do it. However, when I read the materials and leaflets, I got familiar with the efforts of the disabled people wherever they were, I understood that disability did not stop many of them to meet their objectives and I realized that my hesitation was very inappropriate. It was not about becoming famous, but about doing away with discrimination for disabled people in the Albanian society and about us equal rights to participation in the social life with all the rest of the citizens, about us learning, studying and working just like them.

Even though my disease is still progressing, and even though I am conscious that I have to be scheduling the use of my energies for the future, my persistence is continuously growing. My persistence is based on the support and love my family gives me, in the childhood my children gave up by maturing too soon, in the smile of my gray-haired mother seeing me off to the door every morning and wishing me to have a great day. My persistence helps me schedule an active day and thus, not think only of myself.

I wouldn't trade the working mornings at the offices of the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation for anything in the world. Working with a wonderful, skilled and committed staff that do not have boundaries between ability and disability, whose work results are pillars for the future, I have come to realize that I would have never achieved anything on my own, within my sad, self-detachment of disability.

My efforts so far have been part of the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation and its partner organizations' initiatives, in trying to make the society and its institutions understand that disability is not a problem of the individual; part of the initiatives aiming at increasing the number of disabled people who understand and accept that it is only by them becoming part of the development that we ensure an equal future for all. This requires for more than just asking, this requires cooperation and continuous struggles. Even though I am woman with a disability, I believe that we have enough strength and will to face the challenges of life, and we can give our contribution to the development of the society.

IRI's support in my work has in all these past years been very much needed and fruitful. While expressing my special gratitude for IRI's support, allow me to extend my thanks to you as:

- one of the activists for the rights of disabled people, rights that should be enjoyed by all and whose defense must be a priority for the whole society;

- a mother with disabilities, wishing to see all disabled children attend the same all-inclusive education system along with their friends of same age;
- as a woman with disabilities who fights for the eradication of the double discrimination of disabled women;
- as an engineer and wheelchair user, wishing to see other wheelchair users be able to move easily in the streets of the city, trying to influence the implementation of ways and tools of accessibility; and
- as a member of the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation staff, which has been working with perseverance for the past 10 years, and has managed to influence the inclusion of the concerns of disabled people into government policies, has tried to make the society aware of disability issues, has created employment models for disabled people, has managed to get support from many international organizations, and hopes to have continued support so that we can successfully take to the end the activities we have begun.

Thank You!