

METRO

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Chicago-Kent group helps build a nation

For decade, law students, others have aided Kosovo

By Robert Mitchum
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When Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia on Feb. 17, it was a culmination of a nearly decade-long effort by its government leaders and international organizations to usher the heavily Albanian region into official statehood.

But one small, minimally funded group at the Chicago-Kent College of Law played its own part in helping the young country to its feet.

Operation Kosovo, an organization founded by Chicago-Kent professor Henry Perritt spent 10 years sending Kent students and undergraduates from the Illinois Institute of Technology to Kosovo to work on various nation-building projects, from economic development, to helping war-crimes tribunals, to promoting local tourism.

Along the way, about 50 aspiring lawyers, diplomats and even one Chicago alderman received valuable experience in the unique environment of a turbulent region working toward political independence.

"The best benefit has been that a series of young American professionals have gone into a situation they saw in newspapers and learned they actually can make a difference by themselves just by be-

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ing determined and doing homework; being can-do Americans," Perritt said.

Operation Kosovo evolved from work Perritt had done in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s at Villanova University in Pennsylvania. Shortly after moving to Chicago-Kent in 1997, his focus shifted to the region of Kosovo, where tensions and violence were rising between the ethnic Albanian majority and the Serbian government led by President Slobodan Milosevic.

One of the first students who visited Kosovo with Perritt shortly after the 1999 NATO bombing campaign was Scott Waguespack, now alderman of Chicago's 32nd Ward. He said that the work he did in Kosovo—including helping to develop the region's economy and infrastructure after the 1999 fighting and working with current Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci—helped shape his future career as a Chicago politician.

"It's pretty much progressive movement in the same direction, trying to make things work better and craft better institutions," Waguespack said.

Waguespack also recalled his time in postwar Kosovo as being dangerous, having once narrowly missed a political meeting where a bomb exploded. On a trip to the ethnically mixed town of Mitrovica, he was briefly detained with a friend by Serbian militants, before finding an unusual diplomatic common ground.

"They thought that I was Albanian and shouldn't be on that side of the bridge," Waguespack said. "But we said we're from Chicago. . . . They said, 'Michael Jordan?' and I said, 'Yeah, yeah, Chicago

Bulls!'"

More recent visitors to the region through Operation Kosovo said the violence has abated, though ethnic tensions and the challenges of building a new political system persist.

Ed Pauker, a Chicago-Kent student who worked for a United Nations court settling privatization and property disputes in summer 2006, described Kosovo as a "mad, wonderful place."

"Organizationally, the court was a bit of a nightmare," Pauker said via e-mail from Scotland. "It was also tough seeing people who so frequently hate other human beings solely because of their ethnicity."

But Pauker and other students involved in Operation Kosovo, many of whom have jobs in international law or relations, described it as a transformative experience.

"I thought it was fascinating," said Ben Shanbaum, a Chicago attorney, who helped Perritt research a book on the Kosovo Liberation Army. "Here we were going to Kosovo with a purpose, trying to get to talk to a lot of the players, major or minor, in the conflict."

While Kosovo has now taken the major step of announcing its secession from Serbia, Perritt said there remains much work to be done in the region.

In the current class of first-year law students at Chicago-Kent, four are working on projects to take to Kosovo, on topics such as efforts to stop human trafficking.

"The time may come when Kosovo becomes a boring place and students won't be as interested in it," Perritt said. "Whenever that happens, we'll deal with it. But it hasn't happened yet."

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