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BALKAN INSIGHT

Balkans Heroes – People Who Saved 2017

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As the Balkans readies for a new year, we bring you a list of ‘Balkan heroes’ – men and women who acted selflessly in tough times, or when no one else was brave enough to do so.



In a region still known for its instability and political earthquakes, some people in the Balkans deserve to be called “heroes” for their acts and deeds this past year.

Macedonia pupils and teachers bridge ethnic divide:



Pupils involved in the multi-ethnic project. Photo: Natasa Geleva.

Pupils and teachers from two elementary schools in the capital, Skopje, this year showed how camaraderie can bridge the ethnic divide that remains pronounced between the country’s majority Macedonian and minority Albanian community.

The pupils from Lazo Trpovski school, in Skopje’s mainly ethnic Macedonian municipality of Karposh, and Liria, in the mainly

Albanian district of Cair, veered off the beaten path of segregation and took time to get to know each other, share their different traditions and discover things that connect them.

In the process, they have become good friends.

Throughout the year, the pupils, helped by their enthusiastic teachers, openly debated ethnic violence, held yoga and meditation exercises together, had drawing and writing activities and created an ethno room with various traditional garments.

The camaraderie peaked in November when they gathered their parents and teachers for a fashion show that displayed traditional Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish and Roma garments with modern street styles, accompanied by a music mix that the pupils put together, using samples of famous songs sung in all these languages.

The feat of these young heroes and their teachers is that much greater, as such actions form no part of Macedonia's official curriculum.

Ethnic divisions in Macedonia remain strong and have been particularly pronounced in the education system, in which there is little or no contact between ethnic Macedonian and Albanian students.

The work of bridging the ethnic gap and countering hate-related violence currently falls on small groups of enthusiasts and on limited funds coming from NGOs that wish to help.

Pupils from both schools say they wished that all of their friends learned what they have learned this year.

"I will tell all my friends that violence leads to nowhere. We must understand each other and be friends because we are all the same," Daniel, a pupil from Lazo Trpovski, said.