

Being fearless – one step at a time

By Kirsten Dodd

[Dr Blerida Banushi \(https://researchers.uq.edu.au/researcher/17435\)](https://researchers.uq.edu.au/researcher/17435)'s story is an incredible tale of resilience and hard work which starts in the ancient city of Durrës, Albania.

Growing up on the Adriatic coastline, Dr Banushi enjoyed a carefree childhood with her parents and two sisters until the fall of Albania's Communist regime.



March 1991, saw a mass exodus of people leave Albania in search of a better life. Over 25,000 refugees crammed into overcrowded, rotten boats and set sail for Italy - Dr Banushi's father was one of them.



“My parents were both teachers and their salaries weren't enough for us to survive on, so my dad moved to Italy to build a better financial future for us. We stayed behind in Albania and were growing up with my mum,” Dr Banushi explains.

“When the civil war started in 1997, things became quite scary, so my parents moved us to Italy to join my father. I still attribute my extremely jumpy character to that period,” Dr Banushi reveals.

“The place we moved to in Italy was small, dark, and cold – a one bedroom apartment for the five of us. I started school straight away but cried often because I missed my life in Albania.

“I remember my mum encouraging me to stay positive every night, while warming up my cold feet. That’s when I began to learn every hard time in life is only temporary – you just need to take each day as it comes – one foot in front of the other,” Dr Banushi insists.

Studying in a different language was difficult at first, but Dr Banushi quickly adapted and began to excel academically.

As she settled into Italian life, Dr Banushi balanced her love for cell biology books with a passion and talent for sport- and eventually she became an Italian Javelin champion.

“My dad was an athletics instructor and trained me in javelin during high school. He also taught me discipline and persistence pays off.

“In my view - resilience is something you get trained for when you have the right soil to

walk through - one step at a time," Dr Banushi confides.

"I never thought too deeply about the impact my past had on building my resilient character, but I can now see that it has made me more fearless."

After completing her undergraduate and master studies at the Collegio Nuovo (University of Pavia) in Northern Italy, Dr Banushi moved to the UK to undertake a PhD at the University College of London (UCL).

"Towards the end of my PhD, I started to see research not just as an instrument for discovery, but as a powerful tool to make a positive impact on the lives of others," Dr Banushi explains.

"I came across the work of UQ [Associate Professor Fiona Simpson](http://researchers.uq.edu.au/researcher/896) (<http://researchers.uq.edu.au/researcher/896>) and was fascinated by her translational work with research clinicians and hospital patients. "I was very excited to join [her lab](https://di.uq.edu.au/research/simpson-group) (<https://di.uq.edu.au/research/simpson-group>) and apply my skills to improving the therapeutic options for cancer patients.

Members of the Simpson lab

Dr Blerida Banushi

"My current work is focused on applying a novel technology that we developed in the lab to manipulate the surface of tumour cells in humans so that existing cancer drugs that target tumours can interact better with the immune system. If our research proves this technology works it could be applied to many different cancers and save thousands of lives," Dr Banushi explains.

The results of Phase I of this clinical trial was recently published in 'Cell' Magazine, and while her colleagues were celebrating in the lab, Dr Banushi was marking the occasion by climbing Mt Kilimanjaro in Africa to raise funds for UNICEF Australia.

“The climb was hard work, but the take home message for me was 'pole pole' - in Swahili that means 'slowly slowly'. This saying was repeated to us continuously during my trip. When we reached the summit the head guide said 'don't look at the summit or at the time, just focus on putting one foot in front of the other', “Dr Banushi recalls.

“Taking such small steps at the time made me think we were never going to reach the top, but at the end of 6 days we made it.

Now with her feet firmly planted on Australian soil, Dr Banushi is walking her own path and continuing to give back where she can.

“When I was in Africa, I volunteered in a Tanzanian orphanage. I will never forget the children's big smiles and love for learning and education. Knowing they have no opportunity to receive an education is heartbreaking to me,” Dr Banushi reveals.

“I was once a child who received help with my education, and now I want to help other children.

“My life changed completely when my parents moved to Italy, and this taught me that the opportunities each person has depends enormously on the place they were born. That's why I want help others because slowly, slowly I believe we can all make a difference.”

This story is featured in the Winter 2020 edition of UQmedicine Magazine. [View the latest edition here. \(https://medicine.uq.edu.au/magazine\)](https://medicine.uq.edu.au/magazine) Or to listen, watch, or read more stories from UQ's Faculty of Medicine, visit our blog, [MayneStream \(https://medicine.uq.edu.au/blog\)](https://medicine.uq.edu.au/blog).

