

# Compact

Newsletter for friends and supporters

Edition October 2020

Dear friends,

Here comes the latest issue of Compact after summer break. These last months the COVID-19 pandemic has changed so many things. The tireless commitment and great creativity of our employees and partners make it possible for practically all Nehemiah Gateway activities to continue, albeit under difficult conditions.

However, we do not only want to report about Corona. There is so much going on and many interesting developments and stories are waiting for your attention.

Read about people and projects in Albania, Southern Sudan and Uganda and for the first time also about the work of our partners in Israel.

As always, thank you for your partnership.

Your Compact team



Teaching science from home

## Reinventing Teaching Methods

### Teachers at Nehemia School become creative

By many measures, Nehemia School is one of the best schools in Albania. In the standardized "Matura" exams, completed by all Albanian students at the end of 12th grade, scores from Nehemia School are the best in Pogradec, and in the top 20 for all schools nationwide. An impressive 98% of graduates go on to university, and 30% attend universities abroad. Yet these accomplishments are not what the school prides itself most on, or even what parents seek out when enrolling their children. Nehemia's approach focuses not on test scores, but on the whole student. How did Nehemia School become so excellent? And how is the school maintaining its focus on students at a time when students and teachers are doing a lot of their work at home?



School trip on the occasion of Earth Day

NG started small in Pogradec after the fall of the Albanian Communist regime in 1991. The communist regime in Albania was one of the most brutal and xenophobic of all countries behind the Iron Curtain, with some 43,000 Albanians imprisoned, sent to prison camps, or executed, and many people were forced to spy on their own family and friends. The economy was severely underdeveloped. Life under these conditions distorts human behavior and warps values, and the wreckage of a failed state leaves widespread corruption and poverty. This was as evident in the public-school system as anywhere else.

Arnold Geiger, founder of Nehemiah Gateway (NG), remembers how necessary, and how difficult, it was to invest in education—and thus invest in people—in those days. School administrator positions were viewed as a prize in a time when it was difficult for anyone to find work—and a prize that made it possible for the winners to hand out jobs to friends and family. “Teachers we trained would lose their jobs when the administration changed,” Mr. Geiger remembers. “Sometimes, they would take the desks, and the books, and the blackboards we got for their classrooms with them.”

As a result, organizations like NG that invested in the public-school system had little hope of those investments providing long-term benefit to the students. NG, along with partner organizations like Youth With A Mission, increasingly felt that it was necessary to find a better way. At the same time, staff at NG’s soup kitchens noticed that Roma children who came in every day to eat did not know how to read or write and did not appear to be going to school. To help these children effectively would require much more than just a hot meal.

In 1998 Nehemiah Gateway added education to its portfolio. The Amaro Tan program grew out of the needs of the Roma and Balkan Egyptian communities in Pogradec and was run by Youth With A Mission until 2008. The Nehemia School grew out of the urgent

need for a school in which administration and teaching staff were well-trained, good grades had to be earned, and the needs of the whole student were addressed. From the beginning, NG’s core values of forgiveness, respect, integrity, honesty, compassion, and inspiration have served as a guide.

Education in Albania has stabilized since the 1990s. Today, there are many excellent public schools, with well-trained educators who work tirelessly to instruct their students. There are other private schools—there is even a second private school in Pogradec. Yet NG is frequently asked if it will start another school like Nehemia School somewhere else in Albania. Why?

Today, as students, parents, and alumni will tell you, many factors set the Nehemia School experience apart. The school is small—a total of 470 students, ages pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade. This allows a high level of personalized attention for students with different learning needs.

A premium is placed on strong, stable relationships with the teaching staff. In first through fifth grade, students have the same teacher ALL FIVE YEARS for their core classes and during their break time. These teachers get to know the students extremely well, and the students experience virtually seamless continuity from year to year. As a result, when the students get to middle school, they are very supported, with their strengths and weaknesses well known. This consistency from year to year is beneficial to both students and school.

The school day is longer than at public schools. This allows more emphasis on extracurricular activities, including community projects, sports, and cultural activities. As director Elona Rira says, “These various learning experiences and situations help our students discover the world we live in, help them shape their personality and take responsibility for their lives, family, and society.”

Parents prize the top-quality education and social/emotional support their children receive. They also value the safe environment on the Buçimas campus, with a gate and a guard protecting the beautiful, immaculate school grounds and innovative architecture.

It is hard to imagine Nehemia School without the Buçimas campus, or without teachers and students working closely together every day. But this year, the school is having to do just that, as the Albanian Ministry of Education mandated “Blended Learning” for school year 2020-2021 to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This will be a



Masks for all the children - the new school year begins at Nehemiah School.

continuation of the transition to online learning that began in March. During that time, students and teachers, used to working closely together in the classroom, had to adjust to online education that relied heavily on cell phones on both ends. Teachers describe challenges managing teaching class from their apartments and attempting to grade homework on the tiny screens of their personal cell phones. With incredible dedication, and working very long hours, they were able to finish the school year, and the 12th graders graduated.

Although we hope that some in-person learning will be possible, teachers started school year 2020-2021 working remotely some of the time. They urgently need laptop computers to optimize student learning while working from home and at school. This sudden need is outside the normal budget of the school, which is usually self-supporting through tuition paid by parents. Our teachers are highly motivated and eager to help their students learn from afar. We are committed to providing training to optimize instruction. We need your help with the computers. A donation of €700 will provide a laptop for one teacher. We need 35 laptops for Nehemiah School teachers, in addition to 12 for teachers at Amaro Tan.

**You can donate here:**  
[www.nehemiah-gateway.org/en](http://www.nehemiah-gateway.org/en)

**or by transfer to our German donation account:**  
**Nehemiah Gateway Services**  
**DE52 760 50 10100 1177 7711**  
**BIC: SSKNDE77**



## On a Convoy to a New Life

When Naphtali Gideon grew up in the 1990s in the Nuba mountain region in Sudan, a troubled country in the middle of the African continent, he would never have imagined just how many changes his life would take and how often he would pack only his most precious belongings and begin all over again from scratch. Naphtali, now 27, comes from a family of six children. Life was challenging for him as a child, mainly because of Sudan's fragile political situation in the 1990s:

"The Southern part has been fighting for independence since my childhood. My parents were studying theology at the time. They are both pastors and didn't have paid jobs, but were devoted to serving in the church. Financially, it was hard for us to go to school and to meet all the necessary things in life. So, when I grew up, I started to work myself to make ends meet and I managed to get back into school."

Naphtali was still a boy when he had to provide for himself. He left the Nuba mountains and his parents and went 2.000 km south to the city of Yei. His parents gave him money for his first term at school, but eventually that money ran out and Naphtali had to decide where to go from here. Together with a friend, he decided to go to Juba, a bigger and more bustling city, to find some work. He was now 16 years old and the only job he could get was as a "porter", a helper on one of the city's many building sites.

In 2011 the long-awaited change happened and South-Sudan became independent. Juba was made the capital of the young country. For Naphtali it was a joyful moment as he expected the end to a long war. However, on the downside, the independence separat-

ed him from his family, as the Nuba Mountains region was not a part of South Sudan – it remained part of Sudan. By 2012 Naphtali was back in Yei, and there he met a young Nigerian, Mac John, who had the idea of starting a project to help and empower young people in Yei.

“He was looking for someone who could support him with starting an organization called Project 2-5 - and in 2014 I officially got involved. We organized workshops and training for young people to give them a base for earning money: we started classes in tailoring, hairdressing and catering and our students were able to earn a living with those skills.” But after two years in which Project 2-5 had grown and prospered, war broke out once again and came closer and closer to Yei, to the project and to Naphtali’s home. “When bullets were fired in my street, I decided to flee to Juba, alongside thousands of other people, leaving my old life behind - again.”

Mac John and the rest of the Project 2-5 Team couldn’t stay either. They took what they could carry with them and fled over the southern border to Uganda. There they ended up in the Rhino settlement, a refugee camp with over 145.000 inhabitants. They had lost almost everything they had built up in Yei, but then they started meeting their former students from Yei in the refugee camp. Encouraged and supported by them, they built up their project again for South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, giving young people a much-needed perspective and a way to earn some money. That’s when Mac John called Naphtali for help.

“He called me and asked me to go over there and help in the refugee camp. It was hard to go to Uganda because I had already found a job in Juba, working with a church ministry. I talked to my pastor about it; we prayed and it felt like God wanted me to go to Uganda.” But Naphtali didn’t have a passport, in fact he had no official documents at all. The only way for him to go to Uganda was on a military refugee convoy. One of his sisters came along, too. “As we left, we didn’t carry anything other than our clothes. We were also afraid that the military convoy would be attacked along the way.”

But luckily, everything went well. Naphtali and his sister were greeted by Ugandan soldiers once they crossed the border and attained refugee status. They re-united with Mac John and the Project 2-5 Team in the Rhino camp and Naphtali became the administrator for the project. He was very happy to work with his old team. After a while, he started thinking about his perspectives

for the future and what he wanted to do with his life. He decided to apply for the Uganda Christian University (UCU) to study Education, but things didn’t work out as planned. Then, in 2017, Naphtali’s life took an unexpected turn again when a small team from NG visited the NG-supported projects in Uganda – amongst them was also Project 2-5. “Arnold Geiger invited Mac John for coffee in Arua and it is that discussion that changed my life! Through this meeting, I got the opportunity of a scholarship for the Nehemiah Gateway University in Albania. NG gave this scholarship as a way of supporting Project 2-5 and its work.”

Naphtali packed his bags again, but this time the reason was a happy one: he moved from the Rhino camp in Uganda to the shores of lake Ohrid in Albania to study Economy and Business at NGU. His first winter was hard because of the unfamiliar, cold temperatures, but by now, he has gotten used to it.

“I love the studies here because they give me a rich experience – theoretically and practically. I am just happy and grateful and this opportunity matches well with my dreams. Of course, I also miss the people at Project 2-5 and I look forward to going back soon and making my contribution for my people and the project. There, I will be managing the finances of Project 2-5, as well as coaching refugees in how to start or improve their own small businesses.”

Naphtali got his official South Sudanese passport and will get a normal visa to enter into Uganda. But he will never forget his experiences of being a refugee and leaving behind everything he knew for the complete unknown. He feels that the biggest challenge for refugees is actually emotional, not physical. He envisages trauma healing seminars for refugees as well as life-skills training to help them to do something meaningful with their lives.

“People don’t deserve to go through such suffering because of the war. Leaders must value peace for the sake of their people. To all the refugees out there: it is important to always be pro-active and think positively regardless of the situations you are going through. Secondly, always take advantage of the opportunities that come your way. To the NGOs working with refugees: always try to provide more emotional support to the refugees because that is the biggest need in those camps. Lastly to the governments: always find better ways to resolve conflicts because war is the worst option. Dialogue is always the best way to solve a problem.



### PROJECT TWO FIVE (P 2-5)

P 2-5 is a small, faith-based aid organization, run by two young, very dedicated and exceptional people: Nigerian Mac John Njidda and his German wife Judith Renker. They first set up a vocational school project in Yei, South Sudan, with courses in tailoring, hairdressing and catering, giving mostly women a chance to earn their own money. After they had to flee civil war in South Sudan, they started P 2-5 in Uganda. When the organization faced financial difficulties, NG helped to finish the school buildings, attach downpipes for rainwater and buy a water tank. NG employees supported the work of P2-5 on-site for several months. In 2017, NG granted an NGU scholarship to P2-5 employee Naphtali Gideon.

### SOUTH SUDAN

South Sudan is the world’s youngest country with a population of around 12 million people who come from over 200 ethnic groups. Civil war broke out in 2013, only two years after the end of its decade-long war for independence from Sudan. The UN and Amnesty International report gross human rights violations, such as torture and rape by all parties to the conflict, with civilians bearing the burden. More than 2 million people have died, and more than 4,3 million are either internally displaced or became refugees as a result of the civil war. The total number of South Sudanese refugees who fled to other countries has now passed 2.2 million. It is the largest refugee crisis in Africa, and the third largest in the world, after Syria and Afghanistan. Around 860.000 South Sudanese people ended up as refugees in Uganda.

Uganda has a population of 44 million from over 60 ethnic groups and took in over 1.4 million refugees, around 860.000 of them from South Sudan. Uganda provides land for the refugees, allows them to work and the children to attend public school. For comparison: Germany has a population of 83 million people and took in over 1.1 million refugees.

(Source: UNHCR, WHO, amnesty international)

## A SECOND WIND - FOR KITES AND PEOPLE



Young people with fashionable KitePride bags on the beach in Tel Aviv

NG is active in countries all over the world, from North to South, from East to West ... but there was still that one little white spot on the map in the back of Arnold Geiger’s head: Israel - a country with a special significance, an extraordinary situation, diversity and eventful history, with promises and failures. In 2019, Arnold and the NG Team met a young Swiss family with an incredibly inspiring history who founded the NGO GlowbalAct and a social enterprise called “KitePride” in Tel Aviv. NG decided to support their work.

Supported by GlowbalAct, KitePride creates secure jobs for people who have left the sex industry, victims of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution or modern slavery. In KitePride’s small production studio in Tel Aviv/Israel they produce fashionable bags and accessories from discharged kitesurfing kites. They experience a working environment that responds to their needs: teamwork, re-learning to be reliable, concentrated and independent and at the same time having space to work through problems and traumas.



The Oppliger family

Here they also receive social and legal support and prepare for the “normal” job market. They produce unique and sustainable products made from fabrics that are normally thrown away. Old yacht sails, parachutes, surf kites or wetsuits get the chance for a new life - a second wind - just like the people who work with them. Behind this great idea and this sustainable company lies the impressive history of the Oppliger family from Switzerland.

### Off to Israel!

His first flight to Israel in 2012 changes Matthias Oppliger’s life. “On the approach to Tel Aviv I was totally captivated. I still can’t explain it to this day, but a voice inside me said: This is your city!” In 2014, Matthias and his wife Tabea (like him a mission kid who grew up in Papua New Guinea) pack their belongings and move to Israel with their three children.

### Bags made of kites

Earlier in Zurich, Tabea had come in touch with a woman from the red-light-milieu which led to the founding of the association “GlowbalAct - Aktiv gegen Menschenhandel” taking action against sexual exploitation. Also Matthias came in contact with the problem in the course of 13 years working for the criminal investigation department. Therefore, the orientation of their engagement in Israel is becoming clear to the Oppligers from an early stage.

### The difference

What distinguishes KitePride from a “normal” fashion company are the employees. They have no degrees to show and abuse is often part of their life stories. “They find it hard to build up trust in people,” Matthias says. “Someone told us the other day: “I am 50 now and have been out of the sex industry for 20 years. But there

are still moments when I am completely paralyzed and feel trapped in a child’s body.”

Lack of life routine, stability and work experience makes it difficult for former sex workers to enter the job market. They have no CV and no certificates. Many cannot concentrate for long, cannot bear responsibility or only manage 2-3 working days per week. “This is very different from person to person”, Matthias says, “and for this we need the special environment that we can offer our employees here”.

### Social work, powered by NG

Maayan is the social worker at KitePride. NG has decided to finance a part of her salary. She takes care of all concerns of the employees and is the link to authorities and protection institutions from where the women are placed. When the women and men are ready for a regular working life, they are placed in suitable positions. “We are one of the few companies that offer employment to people from these facilities,” says Matthias. In addition to the financial commitment NG supports Glowbalact/KitePride in the development of their social enterprise. This also involves such tangible issues as logistics, market positioning and distribution channels.

### Tatjana

KitePride employee Tatjana is originally from the Ukraine. She is deaf, was brought to Israel by the mafia and forced to beg in shopping malls, ending up in the sex industry. After she was freed by the police and accommodated in the shelter for victims of human trafficking, she found her job at KitePride. Many of the Jewish workers immigrated from Russia to Israel, got off to a bad start and thus involuntarily slipped into sex work. “So far we have offered jobs to 26 men and women. Right now - in Corona times - only 12 people are working with us,” Matthias says. The organization is currently developing a rehabilitation and work integration program together with the Israeli Ministry of Labor, with the state co-financing jobs. This way KitePride could offer training and work to even more people in the future. Matthias gets serious: “I’ll be honest: some of our work here is very hard. Our energy: It’s a God’s gift. We might have already given up, if there weren’t always business opportunities or donors who believe in us.

For more information about KitePride and its great products, click here:

[www.kitepride.com](http://www.kitepride.com)

[www.glowbalact.com](http://www.glowbalact.com)

[www.instagram.com/air\\_kitepride](https://www.instagram.com/air_kitepride)



Open air in Corona times: soccer game at Amaro Tan School



Washing hands can also be fun

## SUMMER CAMPS IN CORONA TIMES

Every year, Nehemiah Gateway Albania runs summer camps in Buçimas, Pogradec, and Gjirokastër. Fun is a high priority, and these camps support the goals of NG's Educational and Social and Medical Improvement (SMI) programs while school is out of session. This year, with health and safety a top priority, and with Albanian government restrictions limiting the number of people who can gather in one place, project managers had to adjust their plans to keep providing needed services.

This June, the SMI team held their annual summer camp for children with special needs on the campus at Buçimas. This camp was generously sponsored by a grant from the Town and Country Foundation. The emphasis, as always, was on developmentally appropriate fun, with art projects, games, and music. Distancing measures of the past few months have been hard on the children (as they have been for everybody!), and their joy in seeing their friends and teachers was palpable. Twenty-one children participated, including, Angjelos, age 10, who has been coming to the clinic for five years now to work with the speech therapist on his stutter and language disorder. Public transport was limited because of COVID-19, so Angjelos walked to camp on the first day - one hour each way! Needless to say, when the team at camp learned about this they arranged a ride for him for the duration of camp.

Amaro Tan, NG's school for at-risk Roma, Balkan Egyptian, and Albanian children, usually hosts a camp in June for about 50 children. This year, preschool and kindergarten students were able to come back, and the school

held an optional catch-up class for some of the older (middle-school aged) students, particularly students who were working on placing into high school at Nehemia School and other Pogradec schools.

Amaro Tan also holds a second camp in August for about 50 children—generally with a greater emphasis on outdoor activities. This camp has been sponsored by the Rotary Club of Estes Park for the last three years. This year, the team altered the format to comply with coronavirus restrictions while staying true to the spirit of the camp. 30 children, ages 4-16, participated, and they were split into smaller groups by age. Priority was given based on need, with precedence given to children coming from especially unstable or impoverished home situations. Activities were held at Amaro Tan, in a municipal park by Lake Ohrid, and in the village of Drilon. All participants were fed breakfast and lunch, and were able to enjoy a 3-week break from daily challenges that have become even more fraught in this time of restricted movement.

Meanwhile, in Gjirokastër, the team had to cancel their popular community-wide faith-based camp, as participation exceeded group gathering limits and would have created risk of exposure to COVID-19 for the young participants.

The Gjirokastër soup kitchen continued providing meals and bringing aid deliveries to the children in the school program. The team is supporting the children in blended learning this fall, however possible.

## AT A GLANCE



### GRADUATION

On September 18, Coletha Rugaijamu, Dotto Kitundu, Nembuan Mepukori, and Adelina Hasa received Bachelor of Arts degrees in Economy and Business at Nehemiah Gateway University. In a small, socially distanced ceremony, Dr. Roy Atwood delivered the keynote address from his home in Idaho:

**“Make the Most of Your Time” First, make the most of everything in your life - not just your time - with gratitude. Second, make the most of your time with a personal touch. These really are not difficult things ...”\***

Dr. Peter Makiriyado, Rector of the University, and Herolinda Shkullaku, Executive Director of Nehemiah Gateway Albania, presented diplomas and beautifully handcrafted rings to each graduate. Congratulations and best wishes to Coletha, Dotto, Nembuan, and Adelina!

\* Read the rest of Dr. Roy Atwood’s keynote address here:  
<https://www.ng-usa.org/blog/articles/professor-roy-atwoods-keynote-speech-nehemiah-gateway-university/>



### NG USA NOW ALSO ON THE EAST COAST

Sarah Pita, Development Director of NG USA, recently moved with her family from Estes Park, Colorado to the Philadelphia area—almost 2000 miles away.

Sarah is continuing her work for NG there, and is looking forward to connecting with NG’s friends and supporters on the US East Coast!

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