

KUDOS FOR TEAM KOSOVO

Two young Americans stood on the deck of a ferryboat on the Adriatic Sea and watched as lights appeared in the distance, revealing the coastline of Albania. It was dusk, and in the fading light of a spring day, the young men were able to make out the hulls of abandoned ships half-submerged in the harbor of the port city of Dures. Military helicopters hovered overhead.

The year was 1999 and ethnic cleansing was underway in the neighboring Yugoslavian province of Kosovo. The Americans were film student James Saldana and photographer Jeff Norman, who had traveled from their Chicago homes to film the exodus of Albanian refugees from Serb-controlled Kosovo. The refugees were flooding Albanian border towns in a desperate attempt to escape the carnage that had left thousands dead.



A child stands in the ruins of a residential area in Kosovo. Photo by Todd John.

As the ferry docked in Dures, a groundswell of noise overpowered the sound of the helicopters overhead. Saldana and Norman felt a flash of fear as they realized that the noise was thousands of people yelling. Refugees, packed like sardines behind a series of fences, were shouting with a desperate fury that was focused on the ferryboat entering the harbor.

The crowds of refugees wanted one thing, and they all wanted it at once: to get out.

If the ferryboat captain had not taken their passports from them, the two students might have decided to turn back. As it was, they made certain that their video cameras were well-hidden beneath their coats, then followed their fellow passengers off the ramp and into Albania.

"There was an air of danger there, and we definitely felt it," says Saldana. He and Norman shot most of their film and conducted interviews in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Kukes, a town on the border of Albania and Kosovo. The first family they met introduced them to families who spoke English, and soon the filmmakers were recording wrenching stories of the refugees' experiences.

The two remained in Kukes for several weeks, shooting as much footage as they could before returning to Chicago. Their budget was so tiny that they often relied upon the refugees for food. Saldana was arrested twice, once by Albanian soldiers when he was filming on a military landing strip, and again by Arab soldiers at a neighboring refugee camp. He managed to talk his way out of both situations.

Over the next two years, Saldana graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago and raised funds for his film. He eventually recruited a volunteer crew of six other students, christened the crew "Team Kosovo," and headed back to Kosovo on a shoestring budget in 2000 during the NATO occupation. Team Kosovo returned once more, traveling to Macedonia in 2001 with the 82nd Airborne division.

Several SIUC students worked on post-production on the film with Saldana, by then a graduate student in SIUC's [Interactive Multimedia program](#). Early in 2002, he and fellow SIUC graduate student Richard Carsley, the film's co-producer, submitted "Our Road to Kosovo" to the [Angelus Awards](#) competition, the nation's most prestigious student film festival.

It was named a finalist in the documentary category, beating out dozens of other entries, many from better-heeled film programs. "Our Road to Kosovo" had its world premiere at the Directors Guild Theater in Hollywood last November.

"Albania is not a tame place," says Saldana, "but I wanted the story of the refugees to be told."

--Claire O'Brien (excerpted with permission from a **Southern Illinoisan** article)

For more information, see the Kosovo project web site at <http://idc.siu.edu>.

[Spring 2003 Contents](#) | [Perspectives Home](#)