

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Lumjana Shehu. She is the Balkan project lead for the [Manabu Movement](#), which is empowering children to become advocates of a kinder, more inclusive, and sustainable future. She is also the marketing and communications manager of TUMO in Tirana, Albania, which is a tech education center that puts teens in charge of their own learning. Having spent her childhood moving around as an Albanian refugee from Greece to Canada, to the U.S., she is now back in Albania and is passionate about empowering Albanian youth with remote work skills, certifications, and opportunities to find location independent work globally.

Lumjana, welcome to the show.

Lumjana Shehu: Hello, Matt. And thank you for having me.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited to have you here today. Let's just start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording this from today and the fact that we have agreed to make this a wine night.

Lumjana Shehu: Yes.

Matt Bowles: Unfortunately, we are not in person. I am actually on the East coast of the U.S. today. I am in the Blue Ridge mountains of Asheville, North Carolina. And I have just opened a bottle of Pinot Noir from the Willamette Valley in Oregon, in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. And I'm going to be drinking through that throughout this episode, but where are you today, Lumi? And what are you drinking?

Lumjana Shehu: Nice. I love your setting. So, I'm actually drinking a hundred percent local Albanian wine. We have a family friend who makes it literally in his garage. And it's actually very nice because with Albanian wine, everybody makes them in their garage. It's either going to be really good or a little bit sketchy. So, this one is a good batch. And I'm now in Tirana, Albania in my apartment.

Matt Bowles: Well, let's talk a little bit about Albania. I have to say I have never been, and I've spent a decent amount of time in the Balkans. I have been to Serbia, to Bosnia, to Croatia, to Montenegro. I have not yet been to Albania, but I have interviewed people on this podcast. Multiple people that have listed Albania among their favorite countries in the world. So, it's very high on my list. And I want to just start off allowing you to sort of share a little bit about your homeland, give some love and talk about what is it like in Albania and why should folks definitely come visit and check it out?

Lumjana Shehu: So, Albania is literally a hidden gem. Of just breathtaking landscapes. Like you got your beaches, but you also have your mountains. There's something for everyone. And above all of that, there's also very warm hospitality. So, Albanians love when people come to visit, they will stuff you with so much food and they'd love just talking about their culture and kind of exchanging that kind of culture and information.

So, it's great. And we also have the Shala River, which is like the Thailand of Albania. But yeah, if I could sum it up, I would say that Albania isn't yet so mainstream. So, what you get here is very raw natural beauty, which is amazing. Like right now you can't really see, but from my apartment window on the horizon, you see buildings and then you see the mountains, so that's something that you rarely find in other places. And yeah, it's wonderful.

Matt Bowles: That's so awesome. I'm super, super excited to come and hang out with you in Albania. You're up to some really amazing stuff too. But before we get into all of the incredible stuff that you're up to, you want to do a little bit about your backstory. Can you share where you were born and the

context and timing of that, and then talk a little bit about your early childhood and what your experience was?

Lumjana Shehu: Of course. So, I was born in Gjirokastrë, Albania, which is a wonderful little town here. I was born in 98, but Albania since 97 was in a civil unrest due to some pyramid scheme failures that happened in Albania. So, it started as a small rebellion. People weren't getting their money back. The government allegedly was involved, and they weren't really supporting people.

And from that small rebellion, it kind of grew into an actual civil war. So, things were rocky. There was an economic crisis and people panicked. So. My parents had me and as soon as they had me, they left me with my grandma and they were like, no, we cannot find a future here. They came from middle class families, but really neither of them finished even high school.

So, they were like, okay, things are really not looking good here. So, we're going to move to Greece because a lot of people at that time were doing that.

Matt Bowles: And then what age were you when you lived in Greece? What was that experience like for you? And then what, ultimately caused your family to move out of Greece?

Lumjana Shehu: Yeah, so I moved into Greece almost a year later. So, for me, I can't really remember back settling into Greece because I was too small. But for my parents, I know that it was unsettling because their newborn didn't really know them. So, they were struggling in a new country, but also they were struggling with this baby.

My grandma was practically my mom at that point. So, I know from then that it was really tough at first, but Greece, honestly, I remember Greece and schooling. There was great. We had our friends, we settled in nicely, but what happened around 2009, 2010, there was also an economic crisis in Greece. I think looking back, my parents were kind of getting flashbacks from what happened to Albania.

So, they were like, okay, panicked. This does not look good. We need to figure out what we're going to do. Do we want to stay here? And at the time we had some friends in Canada and those friends, they were like, "Hey, why don't you guys like apply for a work visa and come here? Because everything is great here. You guys are probably going to settle in quite nicely".

So, my dad goes through the whole work visa application. He finds a company, they hire him. They go through the process of getting the visa and he eventually gets it. So, while we were kind of thinking was, okay, my dad goes, he settles in, he checks out this new job, this new country, and eventually we'll join him.

But what actually happened and my dad went to Calgary, that's where his job was. And what happened when he got there was the company was a scam. So, he gets there and there is no company, no one's picking up the phone. No one's really giving answers. And he was just completely confused. Thankfully, I believe he had a friend, not really like a close friend, but he had a friend there that he was able to reach out to and, "Hey, I'm kind of stranded, I don't know what to do".

So that friend helped him settle. Into Calgary and for my parents, they just didn't see a future in Albania. So, what we actually ended up doing here in Greece is we found this lady who was willing to sell her passport to us. And she had two daughters and herself. So, we bought three passports just so that my mom, my sister and I could cross the border to Canada.

Yeah, I was only 11 at the time. So, I don't think I fully grasped the concept of what was happening. It was definitely weird, but I was like, okay, I'm going to go meet my dad. And I missed him at the time.

Matt Bowles: So, talk a little bit about that experience at that age. What did your parents tell you about what was going to happen? And then how did it actually. What was your process like moving to Canada in that way?

Lumjana Shehu: Yeah. So, my mom was basically listened, girls, my sister was only five at the time. We have to act as if we are these girls that are on the paper where think about it as if you're playing. We're going to be role playing and we have to act as if we are these girls.

And we are kind of putting all our risk into this because we're going to go to dad. And I remember actually a day before we left for Canada, I had some schoolbooks and I was taking one with me and I was like, I saw my name on the front page and I was like, Oh wait, I have to put in my new name. So, like I crossed it out and I wrote the passport name just to make sure that everything was all right.

So yeah, what happened is, so we bought normal tickets, right. As if we were going to go there for a visit. So, we get on a plane, we arrive to Toronto, Canada, because at that time, my dad had moved to Toronto because we, our friends initially were there. And as we get out of the airport, we go through the line, and we come across the immigration officer.

And at first it started as usual routine questioning. But what was unique about our case was that from appearance wise. My sister, the girl that was on her passport, was 17, whereas she was actually 5. And me and my mom kind of looked alike, but not really. We're a little bit closer in age, but that was like the one thing where like, oh my god, like, how is she going to pass through at 17?

So, he starts as routine questioning, and I'm the only one who can answer his questions, because I was the only one that spoke English, because I had learned some of it in school. And I think, honestly, from the start, he knew. Like, he knew something was off. Which, I mean, looking back, like, no shit. Like, how are you going to pass a five-year-old as a 17 year old?

He wasn't really stuck. He didn't even mention that part. Even though, from the questions that he asked me, it started getting so detailed. Like, how old are you? When's your birthday? Where are you coming from? What's your life in Greece? Like, he was kind of trying to catch me in a lie and asking all these questions, but he never mentioned that my sister, you could clearly see he was five, but on that passport, she was 17.

And then my honestly, my gut feeling is that he knew he didn't bring in even a translator. Like I spoke English, but not really that well. So, in my mind, when we discuss it, I feel like you saw these two little girls and the mom. And he was like, okay, I'm just going to let it go. I'm going to let it pass. And we were stressed.

So, you could tell that we weren't there just to visit. But yeah, he asked all these questions. And at the end, it was this one question. He was like, okay, you answer this and I'll let you go. And I was like there, I was like waiting. I was so stressed. I was like sweating. And I was like, okay, what question is he going to ask now?

And he goes, "do you have your ears pierced?" And I was like, okay, that's weird. Yes, I do. And it was just this totally coincidental thing, because in the passport picture, the girl that I was posing as, had her ears pierced and she had this like dice earrings. And he was like, okay, if you have your ears pierced, like that's the final detail.

You can go. And I was like, yes. He was like, okay, go. And that's kind of how we got into Canada.

Matt Bowles: Wow. So, you reunited with your father and then what was your experience like in Canada at that time?

Lumjana Shehu: From all experiences. And even though it was a total culture shock for me. I think it was the smoothest one, and I think it's because Canada is such a melting pot of different nationalities and people.

They have their systems clearly organized and laid out for new people coming in. So, yes, it felt weird. I didn't really speak English. My mechanism was just laughing whenever someone asked me a question I didn't understand. I would just, like, laugh. I didn't speak the language. I didn't really understand a lot of stuff, how they work.

Totally different from Greece. But! The people at school and the locals were very understanding that we were immigrants and coming from a different country. So, it never felt, Oh my God, I'm not accepted here. The tough part was just total culture shock. How do you settle in and start this totally new school system?

Think about Greece. We would go every morning, we would pray. And every Friday, like once or twice a month, we would go to church. Because Greece is super religious. And then you go to Canada and first of all, we had a lot of new courses at school that hadn't even kind of addressed in Greece, like world religions and teachers were coming in dressed up like super into the lessons they were doing.

And I was like, okay, that's cool. But what's happening. Totally different thing. So yeah, it was tough in the sense of the extreme opposite of what I was used to. And I couldn't really talk to people about my situation. I couldn't tell them how I got in there. We applied for refugee status, and we just had this, I don't know, it was like this idea that like if you're a refugee you've done something super wrong.

So, I felt like I couldn't share that with people. I felt we had done something very wrong, and people would be like judge me for that. So that was tough because it took me a really long time to tell people, Hey, this is what my story is truly like, but yeah, we settled in. We applied for refugee status. We went through the whole process and actually when we applied for the refugee status, not only did we apply with a reasoning of, Hey, we actually came here initially legally, but we also applied with the reasoning of we come from a country has total civil unrest.

There's a lot of blood feuds and we thought that we were not safe in Albania. So, when we were applying for that refugee status, in our mind, we were applying with a very valid reasoning. And we spent a lot of time in immigration offices. We got a lawyer, got reference letters from school, be like, Hey, she's a good student.

We want her here. So, it was like this long legal process until we had our final port date. And when we had our final court date, our lawyer, who looking back wasn't as great as we thought, but he was like, Hey, so, okay, we have our court date tomorrow. You guys, please don't come dressed well. Don't talk too much.

We don't want to seem too confident to them. You don't want to look like you have your things all figured out because it looks bad. What you really want to do is show them that you need help, and they have to feel sorry for you so that they really allow you to stay in the country. So, what ended up happening is we go into this court date and we're dressed like in jeans and t shirts.

And we're not really talking much. You were letting the lawyer do all the talking, which looking back, it felt like we made it seem as if we just didn't care. So, I really truly think that on that day, that judge wasn't really able to get our full story and understand that yes, this people like are actually not okay from the country and they want to stay here.

And on the other hand, it was the first time in Canada where we kind of got hit with a real judgmental label because the judge immediately was like, Oh, you're Albanians? No, I don't trust you. I don't trust your documents. I know your government is corrupt and you guys always do this. Albanians always come in this way.

So, I don't trust a thing coming out of your mouth. Honestly, that was the first time that had happened in Canada, or no one told us of this like image of Albanians and coming from this country. So that day was a shock to us. And we got a while later, we got a reply and it was obviously a rejection. And that lady was so dead set on rejecting our citizenship that she probably had some kind of rejection template.

She hadn't even crossed out the information from the previous case. So, all the information in that rejection letter was instead of Albania, it was Israel. There were other names instead of our names. So, she was so set on a rejection that she didn't even take the time to properly go through that document and look through our story and give some valid reasoning.

Matt Bowles: Wow. So how did your family respond to that once the rejection was official and you got it in writing and that door had closed? What then did your family decide to do?

Lumjana Shehu: So, my parents had this thing. They've had it like since we were small, where whenever we had to go through something, they would sit us down as a family and it never mattered what age we were.

It was never like, Oh, they're three, they're five. They're 11. They don't know what's happening. No, they would sit us down. It would explain the situation clearly. And they would say, okay, we're thinking of doing this. What do you think? So, at this time we're sitting down in our living room. For me. And for the whole family, I guess, well adapted at that point, because it had been several years that even though we got a rejection, it wasn't sinking in that we weren't able to stay in Canada.

In our mind, I had like laid out the university I wanted to go to and like all of that. But yeah, that didn't happen. And when it really settled in for me was when we had that conversation in our living room, because they were like, listen, this means we have to go back to Albania, but we can't go back to Albania.

Like it's bad there. So, what we're thinking is let's try going to the States. And how we're going to do that is we would cross a field, get across the border. So even, I remember even me being like, yes, I just have one thing. And that thing is that we're going to go, but I want to take our dog with us. And they were like, okay, let's do that. I was like, not willing to leave our dog in Canada.

Matt Bowles: So, you had family in the United States. Like what was the actual plan for crossing the border? And then how did that go? Okay.

Lumjana Shehu: Yeah, we had family in the United States. They were like, hey, we're willing to help you guys settle in. If you could do this, Albanians, wherever they are, they're very willing to help other Albanians.

And you'll hear me say family a lot. Some of those people are distant cousins, but they were truly family because Albanians, wherever they are, they want to help each other. They don't ask questions. They don't judge like, oh, why are you coming in this way? They just want to help you. So yes, we had family there.

And we also had heard cases of people crossing this field from Calgary to Montana. And from all these legends and myths, we were hearing like, hey, grab a blanket. Make sure you're dressed warmly because it's super cold. You're going to have fences. You're going to climb over stuff. It's going to be tough. So, we have our blankets, we have our coats, and we have a backpack.

And in my backpack, it was my dog instead of my clothes, because I was literally carrying him, like, in my backpack. And we were, like, ready, and we got there. And I'm not kidding you, it was like a 30 second, one minute run. It was so fast, there were no fences, no need for blankets. We just got to Montana, and it almost felt weird.

Is this how easy it is? And then we were in the United States, we were in Montana, but we grabbed a car from Montana to Chicago where our family was.

Matt Bowles: And then how was your experience in Chicago? How long were you there? What was your next move?

Lumjana Shehu: Yes. So, it was a little bit tougher than Canada. Looking back, I don't know why, maybe for me, it was just, I was a little bit older.

So, things were getting a little bit more serious and not just as fun. But at the same time, it was because it felt like I had. Just kind of figured out my friendships and I'd made friends, and I'd settled in and then everything was taken away from me. And now we had to start from zero again. So, settle in a new house, settle in a new school, make new friends.

So, it was not easy. It was also wintertime. And moving places during winter is a little bit more difficult because it's cold. So, there's not much activities going on. You have to stay inside, which is not great for adapting to a new place. So, we go to Chicago. I almost closed off at the time. Like, I remember even at school, it was a lot, lot tougher for me to make friends.

I stayed to myself. We had a lot of drug issues at school. We had a lot of kids who had mental health issues. And for me, that was quite new. Not totally new, but there was a lot more of it. So that coupled with the fact that I had just gotten there, made it really tough for me. But even for my parents, they had a tougher time finding work, just overall, we just didn't seem to fit in there.

And what actually ended up happening is we had our friends back in Canada say, Hey, we have this really, really good lawyer. I think he could really make it happen for you guys here. So just find a way to get back. We have talked with him, and he will get your citizenship. He thinks your story is very cool and he can make it happen.

And once again, my parents sat me down, they sat me down with my sister. They were like, Hey, this is what the case is. We know it's tough. Do you guys want to do this? And once again, we were like, yes, let's do it. And it was because I was like, I wanted to go back to my friends. I want to go back to my school.

So, what we did this time is we actually paid a truck driver crosses back to Canada. I cannot explain to you. I don't even know if I fully. Grasp the concept of what we were doing. So, there's this like huge

trucks that carry huge containers and they have this one compartment behind the passenger and driver's seat that is usually for the driver to sleep.

So, what we had to do is ask for parole there. And he would drive us across the border with his container stuff. It was honestly up to fate. Even when we were talking with him, he was like, I cannot guarantee anything. Because there are routine checkups. And they could figure out that you guys are there.

And if they figure that out, you're on your own. I'm not covering for you guys. So, we are all cramped in this small compartment and we are just looking into each other's eyes and just hoping while we're crossing the border that no one stops us because we really didn't know what was going to happen there.

It didn't. Once again, we crossed the border, we passed, and it was just this feeling of exhilaration, of almost disbelief. What are the chances? But yeah, we're back in Canada. We're back in Toronto. I was so excited to go back to my friends and I was so excited that I didn't want to go to another school, but my parents couldn't find an apartment in that area.

So that year, what ended up happening is I lived away from my parents. It was the first year living away from my parents because I lived with a roommate with this lady. Her apartment was near my school, so I could go back to my old school, and we go back, everything feels amazing. We sat down to talk with this lawyer.

He's telling us like, hey, you guys have a great story. There's no way they're not giving you, their citizenship. We're paying him. Things just go down from that because the lawyer ends up actually being a scam. One day he gets our money, and he just doesn't pick up his phone. We can't find him. No one knows where he is.

No one knows his name. We're just stuck. What happened then? It was like, okay, what do we do now? We just decided to keep living there and see what we could do. So as my dad was going to work, he was driving. What happens is while he's parking the car, he bumps into a street sign. This lady from across the street sees that.

And because in Canada, everything is like very straight to the rules. She calls the police and she's like, hey, this guy bumped this street sign, and you guys should come check it out because they're construction workers. Maybe there's something fishy going on. So, the police come and they're like, hey, this is routine checkup.

Probably guys probably have no issue, but we just want to show up and see that everything is okay. And everything was okay. The only problem was my dad couldn't show him any driver's license or any papers at all because we had a deportation order on our heads. The moment that the officer realizes that he has arrested him, he's hold on a second and you have a deportation order.

So, my dad ends up going to immigration jail.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk about that experience for you? When your dad got arrested, what was the overall financial impact on your family and everything else? But also, the emotional impact on you at that age, what was that period of your life like?

Lumjana Shehu: It was difficult in every aspect. First of all, obviously my dad wasn't working anymore, so we couldn't afford the rent. So, we ended up being homeless. My mom and my sister live with some

friends of ours, and I had to live with my best friend. Looking back, I'm even grateful for that. We have people to keep us in for a few months and let us stay with them.

But it was tough for me to get from, hey, everything is great. We're back. My friends are here too. Oh, hold on a second. I don't have a house. My dad is in jail. And emotionally, it was even more triggering. That was when I started getting anxiety. I started having panic attacks because just visiting my dad and having to go through jail and visiting him through the glass barrier was something I had only seen in movies, and I couldn't understand how it could happen in real life.

And in my eyes, my dad had done nothing wrong. But just sacrifice as he's staying there, he stayed there for eight months. And he only did that because he was able to talk with the officers. The officers loved his story. And they were like, hey, listen, we're going to deport you tomorrow. Or we could give you some time so that your kids could go through schooling.

And he was like, no, absolutely. I want them to finish school. I don't want to have to up and move them again in the middle of school. Let them finish the years. I'll stay. Stay here. It's okay. That's what he ended up doing. And I'm thankful for that. It's not even about me finishing school, but I'm just thankful that he had the love and the passion to make himself go through eight months of immigration jail.

And okay, I don't want to make it super dramatic. Immigration jail is not as bad as actual jail, but he had to see a lot of tough stuff there because all the people are going into immigration jails, but people who did not want to go back to their country were super sad, super depressed. He made himself go through that for eight months. Just for us.

Matt Bowles: Wow. And then what happened at the end of eight months?

Lumjana Shehu: So, then we had to go back to Albania. It was just again, a state of disbelief. Everything we would hear about Albania was like, I don't know, horrible corruption, crime. Everybody was like, don't come back. So, to me, it was this huge monster, and I was like, were, like, I'm going to prison. And this idea in my head was as if I was going back to, I don't know, a field of war.

But we had to do it, and we ended up going back. So, we come to Albania, because my parents aren't originally from Tirana, so Once again, start from scratch, get a new house, go to a new school, settle in. For me, it was tough because I didn't know the language. So, my parents spoke Albania in our house, but we weren't really attached to the culture because we were worried that if we were, it became too attached to the culture in Albania, then we wouldn't adapt in all these different countries.

But that meant that when I went back that I spoke zero Albania, I could understand it, but I could not speak it. It was a total culture shock. The school system was different, people were different, so those first couple of years, I'm not going to lie, it's not like I came back, and I was like, ooh, home, and I've never lived here, so it wasn't home.

It felt like, once again, picking it up, leaving people behind, starting from somewhere new. My sister had an even much more of a tougher time, because She had to go through a lot more years in the Albanian schooling system, which I'm going to be honest, it's not the greatest. And my parents had the toughest time because they had done everything.

They had lost so much to give us a better future and for them, it was just like, okay, failure, like we're back here and we're worse than what we started. So yeah, coming back with like the first couple of years was not easy, but it got a lot, lot better.

Matt Bowles: Talk about that. How did the experience evolve and improve over time?

Lumjana Shehu: Yes, so for me the turning point was getting my Vodafone internship, like kind of coming into contact with the work market in Albania. And the reason is because the youth in Albania is very demotivated about the country. So, the last year of high school that I did here and throughout university, people that I was surrounded with were talking just shit about Albania.

We want to leave. We don't want to do this. Everything sucks. Everything sucks. And I believe it also comes from this history of suffering that has made people stick to a mindset of complaining, despite the fact that a lot of things have improved in Albania. But then I went into my internship, and I met all these people that actually liked Albania.

They were like, you know, it's not that bad to live here. So, I was almost forced to do a reset because I also didn't like where my mental spot was at because it was also negative. So, I was like, okay, it can't be that bad. Let me tackle this country as if it's any other in your country. And let me try to learn about my culture, learn about this country.

I hadn't seen any cities, any towns. So, I started this phase of exploration of what Albania was about. Turned out pretty great.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. Can you talk about that exploration after your Vodafone internship and that experience, what were some of the next steps for you?

Lumjana Shehu: Yeah. So, I explored the country and like I said, the raw nature was beautiful.

You can find nature in the States and Canada and all these other places, but you kind of have to drive long hours to get there. Whereas here, wherever you turn, you can see the mountains, you can go near the beach very closely. So, I started falling back in love with Albania. And then after Vodafone, I actually came across this new project that was going on, which was TUMO Tirana.

TUMO is a technology educational afterschool center that puts kids to sleep. in charge of their own learning, as you said. So, students learn eight disciplines that kind of intersect between art and technology. So, you know, you have programming, but you also have graphic design. And they do that in a totally different system from what school in Albania is usually at.

So just to summarize it, school in Albania is you memorize, and you repeat. Memorize, repeat. They don't really evolve your critical thinking skills. You read what's happening in the textbook, you say it back to the teacher. TUMO has this methodology. It doesn't come just from Albania. TUMO is originally from Armenia, but it's also in Paris, in Berlin, it's opening up in Los Angeles.

So, the methodology, the way that it works is through self-learning and workshops. So, students are working on concrete projects, they're working individually and, in a team, and at the same time that they kind of, that they build their tech skills, they're also be building their soft skills. So, entrepreneurship, communication, and all of that.

So, when I saw that, I was like, wow, that's really cool. Oh, my God. And I'm in the field of marketing. And even though I went through university, a lot of the stuff that I've learned in this field has been through self-learning. It's mostly been through online courses and people in this field that I could talk to rather than actual school.

So, when I saw this, I was like, I would have loved to have had this and I need to work there. So, I ended up applying and yeah, now I'm the marketing and communication manager at TUMO Tirana. And again, it helped me also fall in love with the country. So, it helped me work in my field, but also in a project that could help me empower the youth through this new way of learning and these tech skills.

And in TUMO, what ended up happening is we hosted the first digital nomad festival in Tirana. And there I got to meet Andreas Wil Gerdes, who is a digital nomad. He's also a founder and entrepreneur and an overall wonderful human being.

Matt Bowles: Shout out to Andreas. Absolutely. Incredible guy, big shout out, much love. So, talk about that. How did you meet him and what came out of it?

Lumjana Shehu: Yes. So actually, before I even met him, my colleagues called me up and they're like, "Hey, we have these people that are coming from the digital nomad phase. And they want to check out the venue before it actually happens", which was actually pretty routine for us.

So, they're telling me that Andreas is going to come to meet up with me. And I go to the reception and who's actually waiting for me is Maya. And Maya was his 11-year-old daughter. And she's like, "Hey, I'm here to meet you. Go through a tour with you" and I was like, oh, okay and youth here like in Albania, just to like to put it into context youth can be kind of shy.

It's mostly due to the schooling system. So, when I saw her, I was like, oh, okay. So, we took this tour and I'm talking with Maya, and it was like talking to a friend. She had liked all these amazing stories to share, and she was so eloquent. And I was like, my God, like, how is this happening? And then Andreas comes through for the tour.

And we spent some time throughout the whole digital nomad festival where we got to discuss several issues. And one of the things I love about Andreas is that he's very, um, passion driven and inspirational. So, he doesn't just look at the money, money, money, money, money, but he looks at a lot of the impact that comes from a lot of work.

And one day I was telling him the Albanian youth is super talented. Like they get these tech skills, like they're building brands, they're designing. It's all super amazing. But the one issue they have is finding jobs locally. That is for two reasons. The first is due to age. So, businesses here, you know, they want you to go through the usual, like you're 18, you go to university, then you get some years of experience, and we have you at like 25, 26.

The second is because there also aren't a lot of job opportunities in, for example, 3D modeling, in animation, in all the skills that we teach at TUMO. So, I was talking to Maya Andreas about this, and Maya was like, why don't you just teach them to work remotely? And I was like, oh, hold on. Yeah. That kind of makes sense.

Like they have the tech skills that they could put to use through freelancing. And then it was just like roller coaster of like, okay, how can I make this happen? And Andreas was like, why don't you meet? Tihana. Tihana is her and Andreas have co-founded the [Manabu Movement](#). And just to give some information to people, the Manabu movement is a youth foundation where what we want to do from Manabu is listen to the youth.

So, we listen to their dreams and their beliefs, and we are only there as adults to make those true. So, they're leading the way, and we want to make them happy. We want to empower them. So, with the Manabu movement, we're like, let's start this virtual assistant program in Tirana. The aim is to help

these youth set up their business, their virtual assistant skills, their client acquisition, communication skills, and put all the tech skills that they have to use through freelancing.

But we're like, okay, but how do we do that? Like we need someone that could help us teach them how to be freelancers because especially for Albania, it's a totally new concept. We have some people who know about remote work, but it's really new. And actually, I think even past the digital nomad fest was one of the biggest things about Tirana where they're okay.

Locals got to kind of interact with this idea of digital nomading and remote work. So, Andreas was like, you know, I know this wonderful human being and her name is Hannah and she has one of the best courses for virtual assistant.

Matt Bowles: Yes. A big shout out to Hannah Dixon Maverick Show listeners knows Hannah Dixon because she has been on the podcast, so that is amazing. Tell us your Hannah Dixon story.

Lumjana Shehu: Yeah, so we meet Hannah and we're like, Hey. We want to do this and this and this in Albania. Maybe it sounds a little bit weird, but we really want to empower the youth. And Hannah was like, no, it doesn't sound weird at all. Like, I'm in, we'll give them the course. So now what student with the group, the first group of students that we had is what they did is they went through Hannah's course and this course is powerful because it gives them access to 27,000 virtual assistants.

That helped them build and improve their business. So, the interaction in that community is insane. And they go through that course, and I help do the handholding locally. So, we meet up once, twice a week to talk about what we did or what the course was about. Did we understand it? Can we apply it to real life?

And now we have 10 students who have set up their Instagram pages, have set up their portfolios and they are ready to work as freelancers.

Matt Bowles: I love that. And I love it because you know, the concept of location independence and being able to work fully remotely gives you so many options.

A lot of people think about it as the freedom of mobility, the freedom to travel around the world and live where you want and work where you want, but it also gives you freedom. To choose not to travel and to stay in your homeland and to have a thriving, prosperous economic future without needing to leave.

And so, I think that's really amazing that you are empowering the youth with all of those options, if they want to stay in Albania and build a business and all that, or if they want to be a digital nomad and travel around, they have all of those options available to them. So that's amazing.

Lumjana Shehu: Yes, for me, it's what we talked about. So, most of the youth, they think they have to immigrate. Like if we really want to do something in this world, we have to immigrate outside of Albania, but it's not true. Albania has a lot of great opportunities. And like you said, as freelancers, yes, you have the option to travel and please do, but you don't have to do it by getting on a boat to go to London.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. And the digital nomads are coming to Albania. I mean, some of the major work travel programs like remote year, for example, which I have patronized have recently added Tirana Albania to one of their destinations and remote workers from around the world are coming to Albania because it's so amazing and they want to experience it, and they want to work from there.

Lumjana Shehu: Yes. And I think it's wonderful because. Not only can digital nomads and remote workers come here and remind us as Albania. So, we have a wonderful country that people love visiting us. But also, the great thing about digital nomads is that they can also come in and share know-how and do how with the locals.

Because like I said, the locals usually get stuck in that mentality of like, oh, there's nothing to do in Albania. Like we can't do anything, but we have all these nomads and remote workers who are coming in. And they're like, no, you guys like, you could do so much here. There are so many business opportunities.

And like I always say, Albania, because we don't have a lot of the, we're not first adapters for a lot of technological stuff, but that means that we have the opportunity to see first adapters, see what works for them and immediately apply it.

Matt Bowles: Let me ask you to reflect on a few things over the course of your journey.

Now, looking back in terms of the stories that you've told, you have experienced a lot of different types of. Travel. You've experienced forced migration and deportation. You've also experienced leisure tourism and work travel. I know you were just in Italy last week. You've experienced the digital nomad life and all of that. So, when you now think about the concept of travel. What does travel mean to you today?

Lumjana Shehu: Travel to me is just a profound exploration of cultures, of connections and personal growth. So, for me, it's about adapting and meeting these cool cultures and people and growing together. I can let someone know, "Hey, I did this, and we do this in Albania", but I can also go to like, I don't know, Barcelona and I see super cool stuff that I've never seen before.

So, I'm not a very much, I don't know, hotel resort type of person. When I travel, I travel because I want to find those small corner stores and talk to the people there and just see how, okay, from one week for two weeks or for one month, how can I adapt to this place?

Matt Bowles: I also want to ask for your reflections on your Albanian identity. So, when you think back about what being Albanian meant to you during these different periods of your life, including obviously the period after you returned to Albania up till today, how has your Albanian identity evolved and what does it mean to you today?

Lumjana Shehu: So, I was very. Embarrassed to be Albanian at first. Now, a lot of cases, we see the news with London, it's still tied to all of these immigrants coming illegally and doing this bad shit in our country. So, at first, I was very much embarrassed. And even when I was traveling from place to place to place to place, I wouldn't tell people I'm Albanian, but I would tell them I'm from the last country I just came from.

So, you know, I'm from Greece, I'm from Canada. Because it was easier. Like I said, everybody and news had made Albania a monster. Now, although from all the travels and my immigration story, I'm not super patriotic. I don't think the country where you're born ties you to like this place. I think it's the people and your experiences that make you.

But I am happy to say that I am Albanian, and I am happy to share a lot of interesting and cool new stuff that we have here as well. So, it's definitely evolved and I'm definitely a lot more comfortable just to say that, yes, I am from Albania.

Matt Bowles: I also want to ask you just sort of reflecting back on your story and up until the present, how do you think about the concept of home?

Lumjana Shehu: You know, I struggled for a very long time. Because I could never say that a specific house or a specific place was home. I was lost for a long time and in a couple of years we would go to a new home, a new school. So, I could never say I have this childhood home. Which usually like kids and people I was surrounded with had one.

Looking back, again, I don't think home is a house or a place. Home is my best friend from Canada, but also my best friend from Greece, but it's also my family who sacrificed that went through this story with me. So, home to me, again, it's the people, it's the experiences, and it doesn't have to be this one set place or house at a time.

Matt Bowles: How has your experienced as a refugee. impacted your perception, maybe empathy, maybe relation to other people around the world that are in those refugee positions, like when you see news about refugees from anywhere, from Syria, from, you know, all these places around the world, how do you connect with those people's experience based on your own?

Lumjana Shehu: I get very emotional about it. I don't see them as these people who are doing something wrong or who are illegally, you know, moving across countries. I see them as these people who are suffering from where they're from. And just this past couple of days, we saw, unfortunately, the boat of Syrians that was going to Greece and it sunk.

Stories like that, people that I hear that go through this stuff really touched me on a personal level because of my story. And that's why I'm so closely tied to this program because if I think about 10, 20 years, I don't want people to have to like to go to these means to travel just to find a better future.

I want them to have opportunities in their country, but also have opportunities outside their country and just feel okay to be and feel safe. wherever they are.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. I want to ask you one more question, just building on that. And then we'll wrap this up and move into the lightning round.

You are now obviously very plugged into the digital nomad community. There's a lot of ways that people can come and experience Tirana and Albania, whether it's through an organized program like remote year or a digital nomad festival, or just come on their own and post up and hang out. How can people support. And contribute to the initiatives that you are involved with, that you've been talking about during this episode. How can digital nomads or other people make a contribution?

Lumjana Shehu: So, there's two things; first, it's a mentoring circle. So, I invite any digital nomads or experts. To come in and share know-how and do-how with our students, the closer they are with other freelancers or experts in other fields, the more they can get experience and be able to get their career journey started.

The second thing is funding. So funding, and I'm not talking just money to get them to do these courses, but I'm also talking software. Like not all Albanian kids have a good phone, a good laptop to do their work. It could be software. It could be hardware or just funding.

Matt Bowles: All right. We are going to link all of that up in [the show notes](#). So, folks can just go to one place at the maverick show. com. Go to the show notes for this episode. There, you're going to find

direct links on how you can learn more about and participate in and contribute to these incredible initiatives. All right. Lumi, at this point, are you ready to move into the lightning round?

Lumjana Shehu: Yes, I am!

Matt Bowles: Let's do it! The Lightning Round! Alright, what is one book, maybe that has significantly impacted you over the years you'd most recommend people check out?

Lumjana Shehu: Atomic Habits by James Clear. Love it.

Matt Bowles: That is a good one. Who is one person, currently alive today that you've never met, that you'd most love to have dinner with? Just you and that person for an evening of dinner and conversation.

Lumjana Shehu: Stephen Bartlett, he's a British entrepreneur. And it's not because I like the entrepreneurship hustle mentality, but it's because he brings entrepreneurship to an emotional level so people can understand that it's not just hustle, no sleep, it's actually work and sacrifice. And people go through a lot of stuff in their entrepreneurship journey. So, I like the way he thinks, and I'd love to have a conversation with him.

Matt Bowles: All right. Knowing everything that you know now, Lumi, if you could go back in time and give one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self, what would you say to 18-year-old Lumi?

Lumjana Shehu: I'm definitely an overthinker. So, what I would say to her is yes, you've planned everything out and you thought you'd be somewhere else, and you don't see now where you're going to be. But the world has something even more amazing waiting for you and you're right where you're supposed to be. So, enjoy the moment. Don't think so much.

Matt Bowles: All right. Of all the places that you've now been in the world, what are three of your favorite destinations you'd most recommend other people should definitely check out?

Lumjana Shehu: I would have to say Barcelona. I just love the vibes of that city. I would have to say Budapest was one of the ones that I didn't really have high expectations, but it was so wonderful. And Toronto, I know it's like this city, like lifestyle, but it's just, it has wonderful people there. So.

Matt Bowles: I agree. Let me, I actually went to high school in Buffalo, New York, which is about a two-hour drive from Toronto. So, we were up there all the time. It is a really amazing city. Super diverse people from all over the world. Really, really incredible place. So, I think that's awesome. All right. Last question. What are your top three bucket list destinations? Places you have not yet been highest on your list.

Lumjana Shehu: For so long, all digital nomads that have come to Tirana have told me go to Bansko, Bulgaria. So that was like on my mind for a long time and I'll be there in August. So, I'll put that in the list. I would have to say Japan is another one just because I would love to see how like the technology there intersects with their culture and Iceland has always just, it looks beautiful. So, I would love to go there one time.

Matt Bowles: Awesome pics. Yeah, I was in Bansko last year. I spoke at the Bansko Nomad Fest, and I've been a couple of times. So that's a really cool pic. And then Japan is just incredibly special and unique. I've been to Japan probably three times, I think by now. And it is just a really special place so if you're ready to plan that trip, hit me up Lumi and I will give you some tips.

All right, at this point, I want you to let folks know how they can find you, how they can follow you on social media, connect with you. How do you want people to come into your world?

Lumjana Shehu: So, you can find me Lumjana Shehu, but you can find me on [Instagram](#), on [LinkedIn](#), I'm on all of social media. And I would also urge you guys to check out Manabu VA program to check out what we're doing in Albania. That's on Instagram as well. And if you want to find out more about Manabu; manabumovement.org, the website has all the cool information about that.

Matt Bowles: All right. We are going to link all of that up in one place. So just go to themaverickshow.com. Go to the show notes for this episode. There, you're going to find all of the social media handles to connect with Lumi, to connect with the Manabu movement, the websites, to learn more about it, to learn how you can contribute and all of that good stuff in one place.

Lumi, this was so amazing. Thank you for coming to the show.

Lumjana Shehu: Thank you so, so much for having me. It was like literally a friendly discussion, wine. It felt very, very natural. So, I love this.

Matt Bowles: This is how all podcast interviews should be. You see, this is why I do most of my interviews over wine.

Lumjana Shehu: Next time I expect you to come to Tirana and I'll be the one asking the questions.

Matt Bowles: We definitely got to hang out in Tirana for sure. Albania is crazy high on my list. You and I need to hang out. We need to do wine in person, and we need to kick it in Albania. So that is definitely in the works and that will happen very soon. I'm looking forward to it.

Lumjana Shehu: Perfect. I'll save a bottle of local wine for you.

Matt Bowles: I love it. All right. Good night, everybody.