

# The American Dream: The Story of Albanian Genti Sulaj

By Captain Micah A. Walker

*In an ever-shrinking America—where our every thought, whim, and desire is communicated through cell phones and social networking sites and our eyes are always on the future—we often forget that it was the hard work and dedication of immigrants that laid the foundation for our country. Generations were raised with the belief that the United States of America was the land of opportunity and prosperity. And even as our Nation continues to struggle with the economy and we attempt to rebuild from our first depression in nearly a century, that belief still holds true. This is the story of Second Lieutenant Genti Sulaj and his American Dream.*

Genti Sulaj was born in Tirana, Albania, on 18 May 1980. From an early age, Sulaj exhibited a passion for mathematics, which he inherited from his mother, who was a high school mathematics teacher. He also possessed a sense of duty and a desire to lead—undoubtedly developed from years of watching his father, who was a 27-year Albanian artillery officer. As Sulaj grew older, the skills and characteristics that he acquired from his parents proved to be more important than he could imagine.

In January 1997, political turmoil erupted in Albania. Government-backed Ponzi schemes, which involved nearly two thirds of the populace, caused the Albanian economy to collapse; the country of about 3 million people lost approximately \$1.2 billion. This led to government protests that collectively became known as the “Lottery Uprising.” Following the resignation of Prime Minister Aleksandër Meksi and the subsequent appointment of Bashkim Fino (a member of the Socialist Party of Albania) to the post, the country split—with the north under the control of the Socialist Party of Albania and the south controlled by local criminal gangs and rebels. While all of this was going on, Sulaj was attending high school in Albania. He applied for, and was accepted as, a foreign exchange student in a small town in Idaho; and on 28 December 1997, he stepped foot on American soil for the first time.

Following his May 1998 high school graduation, Sulaj was slated to return to his family and the political unrest of Albania. After completing the first of four flights that were to take him back to his homeland, Sulaj decided to defect and declare political asylum. At 18 years of age, he was alone in Cincinnati, Ohio—more than 5,300 miles from home—with no one to turn to and no place to go. He headed to the streets of Dayton, Ohio, where he slept in alleyways and under bridges and scavenged for life’s basic necessities. After two months, he was saved by the grace of an American couple who took him in.

With his struggles for survival behind him, Sulaj decided that he would like to continue his education. However, he soon learned that his immigration status prevented his admission to several universities. He realized that, to succeed in this foreign country, he would need to work. So, Sulaj secured employment as a cook at an Italian restaurant, then as a customer service representative at a home improvement store, and finally settled on a position with another home improvement store. He was constantly looking for the next opportunity; each of these jobs paid more money and offered more benefits than the last. A year later, after saving enough money to purchase a modest condominium, Sulaj moved out of what he considers his “adoptive” family home.

But soon after the purchase of his personal “slice of America,” Sulaj learned that he would be required to support his younger sister, who had also recently immigrated to the United States from Albania. Although he desperately longed to continue his education, his plans were necessarily delayed once again. Finally, after receiving advice from a church friend in 2002, Sulaj submitted an application for admission to Ohio University. He subsequently met with a campus enrollment counselor and was accepted in the area of mathematics. The delicate balancing act of supporting his sister and paying his college expenses led Sulaj to take out personal loans through various banks. One way or another, he was going to complete his bachelor’s degree!

Just as the pieces of his life began to fall into place, Sulaj was laid off from his job at the home improvement store. And to make financial matters worse, he learned that his parents would also be immigrating to America. The next five years were very difficult, as Sulaj continued to study and support his family. He moved onto the campus, allowed his parents to have complete control of his condominium and all of his possessions, and worked at any paying job he could find. “I gave [my family] everything,” explained Sulaj, “That

is what you do. You take care of those that are important to you, and you sacrifice. I wasn't going to quit school or [quit] supporting my family just because it was hard."

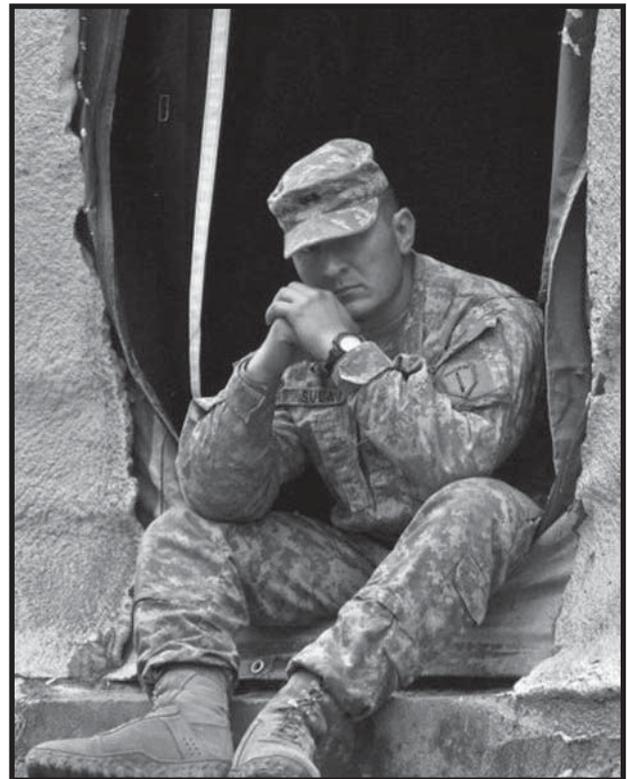
Somewhere along the way, Sulaj reevaluated the events of 11 September 2001 and decided to change his major to foreign policy, with a minor in Middle-Eastern history. He also volunteered to participate in the Reserve Officer Training Corps at Ohio University. Although he could serve only two years, Sulaj used that time to learn leadership skills and better prepare himself for the future.

After graduating and receiving a U.S. Permanent Resident Card (more commonly referred to as a "green card") in 2007, Sulaj considered the possibility of joining the U.S. Army. On one hand, he felt compelled to pay tribute to a nation that had given him so much; but on the other hand, he needed to support his family. Finally, in September 2008, Sulaj enlisted in the Army as a chemical operations specialist (military occupational specialty 74D). After attending Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, he was assigned to the 23d Chemical Battalion, located along the damp, cold shores of Puget Sound in Washington. There, he began to evaluate the prospects of becoming an Army officer. After all, he had a college degree and Reserve Officer Training Corps experience and he fancied himself to be a natural leader. The only remaining prerequisite was U.S. citizenship. Sulaj promised himself that, if given the chance, he would jump at the opportunity to become an officer.

On 18 September 2009, Genti Sulaj took an Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America. After defending the country for the previous 18 months, he was finally an American citizen. Next, he turned his attention to fulfilling the promise that he had made to himself; within a month, Sulaj applied for, and was accepted into, Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

After 12 rigorous weeks of training, Second Lieutenant Genti Sulaj proudly displayed his "butter bar" (a term of endearment for the rank of second lieutenant) and took a second oath—the Uniformed Services Oath of Office.

While attending Officer Candidate School, Sulaj decided that he would serve as a field artillery officer—thereby following in his father's footsteps once again. He is now stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where he is completing



**Second Lieutenant Sulaj**

the Field Artillery Basic Officer Leader's Course. Second Lieutenant Sulaj is also being groomed to lead America's most precious resource into battle. He must maintain a balance of precision and inspiration.

Of course, Sulaj's parents are very proud of what he has accomplished. And despite his own excitement, Second Lieutenant Sulaj knows how hard he has worked and understands the responsibility that comes with his new position. "I am excited to get to work [with] and lead American Soldiers," he says. "I am so grateful and humbled by this opportunity. I am indebted to this country for everything I have, and I will work for the rest of my life to try and give back what has been given to me."

Like so many before him, Second Lieutenant Genti Sulaj is doing his part to shore up the foundation upon which 21st Century America is built. 

---

*At the time this article was written, Captain Walker was assigned to the 23d Chemical Battalion, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. He is now a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Captain's Career Course student at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Captain Walker holds a bachelor's degree in molecular biology from the Florida Institute of Technology.*