



ARIT

NEWSLETTER

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Executive Director's Corner

In May 2006 my wife, Arpi, and I made our twelfth annual trip to Armenia to follow up on the various health, education and welfare related projects that BAFA sponsors. Over the years, each trip to Armenia has given us reason for celebration and this year was no exception. In this issue of *ARIT*, Arpi Haleblian's article, "Unexpected Reception," about the renovation of the Bakhshyan Michnagarg School in Goris, offers you the reasons for all our cheers. This major renovation was the second project after the reconstruction of the Norashen Michnagarg School that BAFA undertook in conjunction with the Armenian Social Investment Fund. Thanks to your generous donations, coupled with a major contribution by Triple X Fraternity, Peninsula Chapter, BAFA was able to physically upgrade the largest school in Goris.

This year it was a special treat to have my nephew Herag and his wife, Lisa, expatriate couple living in Armenia, join us on some of our BAFA project site visits. In her article, "The Poor You Will Always Have With You," Lisa reflects on her visit to the BAFA Soup Kitchens and the homes of some of the poorest of the poor BAFA helps.

Also in this issue of *ARIT*, Francois Antounian in his article, "Sweet and Sour," shares his hopes and concerns about Armenia. Finally, Levon Der Bedrossian in "The Metaphor of the Tree," reflects on his latest trip to Hayasdan, and reports on the physical improvements initiated at BAFA's Nor Hadjn Soup Kitchen.

As Executive Director of BAFA, I thank each one of you for your unrelenting support of BAFA programs, and encourage and urge you to continue to help us assist our less privileged and very needy compatriots.

John Haleblian

The Poor You Will Always Have With You!

It's been almost a year since our family of five has been living in Armenia. And like everything else in life, you get used to the way things are, whether you like it or not.

During our first few weeks in Armenia, we visited soup kitchens run by organizations other than BAFA, participated in programs for "social orphans" in Gyumri, and assisted with distributions to several poor villages outside Yerevan. We saw firsthand how families with little or no income, dependent on others for mere sustenance, actually

lived. My husband, Herag, and I would come home weary and frustrated, and would lay awake at night for hours feeling the anger of injustice. The tears were to no avail, but at least we were motivated to *try* to make a difference, regardless how small.

But time goes by . . . life goes on . . . We always return to our comfortable homes, to our daily routines and responsibilities, to life in middle class suburbia—caring for the kids, running errands, doing "ministry," preparing Bible studies, cleaning the house, enjoying a handful of our favorite restaurants, and occasionally, a night at the opera. And we all forget . . .

I forget . . .

I forget the hungry people starving to death everyday. Once in awhile when I throw the scraps of leftovers into the trash after dinner I am haunted by a particular memory or a face. I forget that just outside of Yerevan, a whole other world exists.

I forget . . .

But many don't. Many have chosen to make it their life's calling *not* to forget—the famous ones like Bono, Mother Teresa, and Bill Gates—and hundreds who are not so famous. Yet, each one, cognizant of the fact that he or

Bay Area Friends of Armenia is a tax exempt, charitable organization with the sole purpose for promoting the health, education and welfare within the Republic of Armenia.

she can't feed *everybody*, makes the decision to feed *somebody*. And this effort makes a difference.

A case in point is Mr. John ("Janig") Haleblian, a founding member and the Executive Director of Bay Area Friends of Armenia (BAFA). As friends of BAFA you already know that with a yearly budget of less than \$90,000, BAFA keeps over 900 people in Armenia alive by providing them with a hot and nutritious meal every day. It may not sound like a big deal to some of us, but not if you ask one of those 900 people. You'll hear them saying: "May God bless you Americans, may He give you success and an abundance of work, so that you can continue the wonderful work being done here."

Although we are supporters of BAFA, our commitment was deepened

firsthand how pleasantly and courteously the staff was serving the day's meal, consisting of a bowl of pasta, the traditional "borsch," two rolls of bread and yogurt with cucumbers. The sight of Janig and Arpi was the cause of much excitement. Arpi Tantig immediately began "working the room" with her "Parev tzez." I was amazed how she remembered peoples' names as well as their personal circumstances.

I, too, was mobbed by many, eager to share their stories (one or two wanting to ask for money), those who wished to express appreciation to BAFA, and others who just wanted their picture taken. At Nork's soup kitchen almost 200 people are served daily, and due to the small size of the facility, they come in two shifts. This soup kitchen also bakes breads and makes "blincheegs" for another site in

years. When her daughter and husband died in a car accident on vacation, Shoushanig was left to raise their children alone—now 14 and 18 years old. Although BAFA is not able to help every family on an individual basis due to limited funding, when the budget allows, a few families may receive a small monetary gift. Shoushanig is one of the "poorest" among these families receiving help. Her "house" consisted of two tattered rooms with no real kitchen, no bathroom or running water, and I don't even know if it had electricity. I didn't see any food in the house, maybe just some sugar, yet she was eager to promise "kuftes" made with cognac for next year's visit. She said: "Ambayman, kal ankam." Although I've seen such poverty before, seeing it again just broke my heart.

Later, at the Erebuni soup kitchen, over 150 people greeted us. Again, I was impressed by the cleanliness of the facilities and food preparation. The meal looked more appetizing than at some cafes in Yerevan. Here too, the site director was gracious and kind, and the overall atmosphere of the place was happy and positive.

Our last stop was Arusiag's home. A tiny old "dadig" who seemed to have more energy than I, guided us up four flights of stairs to her tiny one-room studio apartment, which consisted of a table and two beds. Arusiag lives here with her four grandchildren, the youngest being 13 years old. How they all sleep in this confined space is still beyond my imagination. Arusiag proudly displayed her medal from the CCCP days for being a good and efficient worker (see picture). It was important for her to show us that she was once a "somebody," and didn't need to beg for food or money. Arusiag clutched the money she received in her hand and tearfully thanked Arpi and Janig for their help. This was all very heartbreaking.

It took me a few days to absorb all that I had seen. Granted, even Jesus acknowledged that: "The poor you will always have with you." (Matt. 26:11) Yet despite the immensity of the



Lisa admiring Arusiag Dadig's Soviet Medal

when we had the opportunity to see the organization in action. A few weeks ago when the Haleblians made their annual trip to Armenia, Herag and I joined his uncle and aunt on their visit to the soup kitchens located in Norki Massif and Erebuni.

When we arrived at Nork's soup kitchen around 11 a.m., the line had already begun forming at the door. I squeezed through the doorway and saw

Charbach that doesn't have a kitchen and needs to feed about a 100 more people. As I munched on a freshly fried "blincheeg," I asked the cook doing the frying what time she arrives to work. "Seven a.m.," she replied happily. I didn't think anyone was awake and much less, actually working at that hour in Armenia!

On the way to the Erebuni site, we stopped to visit Shoushanig, a woman Arpi and Janig have known for over ten

challenge here in Armenia and in so many other parts of the world, God still desires our cooperation as individuals. His heart regarding global hunger is clear: “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.” (Duet. 15:11). “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” (Psalm 82:3-4). “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.” (Proverbs 14:31)

As busy Christian professionals consumed by the demands of a growing global economy, we often forget the poor. Of course, “I just forgot,” will not be an acceptable response to the Lord. We must make it our mission to remember—to remember the poor among us, to remember the millions who are starving, and more importantly, to remember that even the effort of one individual can make a life and death difference for one person. We may not be able to put an end to global hunger (although that can be debated), but helping even one person would surely be a good place to start.

Lisa Haleblian

Unexpected Reception

On our most recent trip to Armenia we visited the newly renovated Bakhshyan Michnagarg School in Goris. This complete renovation was made possible through the generous contribution of BAFA supporters and the Armenia Social Investment Fund’s 9:1 matching program. When we arrived a band welcomed us and students cheerfully clapped as we entered the premises. Two lovely youth dressed in colorful costumes extended the traditional welcome—the offering of bread and salt. We cut a piece of bread, dipped it in salt, and ate it—what a privilege it was to partake in this meaningful custom!



Arpi partakes in the Armenian tradition of Bread and Salt offering

When we entered the auditorium led by the principal, we were simply awed. Parents, students and teachers filled the auditorium and the celebration of the renovation of Bakhshyan Michnagarg

were to BAFA. John Haleblian acknowledged the many faithful BAFA donors in United States who had made the school renovation possible.



Renovated Bakhshyan Michnagarg School

School started. The well-organized entertainment program kept us at the edge of our seats—a young choir sang patriotic songs, older students danced, a few recited poems that stirred our hearts, and several played the violin soothing our senses and making us lose all track of time. Every act was a demonstration of how grateful they

The teachers had prepared delicious dishes and we partook in the feast. We were so overwhelmed by the show of hospitality that we got up and joined the teachers in dancing to traditional Armenian music.

We left the Bakhshyan Michnagarg School teachers and students with our

hearts full of happiness and our arms full of bouquets of lovely flowers.

Arpi Haleblian

Background Information

The renovation of the Bakhshyan Michnagarg School project was BAFA's second major renovation/reconstruction undertaking, following the complete reconstruction of Norashen Michnagarg School. These projects were fulfilled in conjunction with the Armenian Social Investment Fund (ASIF). ASIF covered 90 percent of the \$75,000 project and BAFA assumed the remaining 10 percent of the project cost. The renovation of the Bakhshyan Michnagarg School comprised of complete replacement of the roof, total renovation of the interior of the auditorium and the sports hall, and complete replacement of all toilets in the main building.

Sweet and Sour

On our latest trip to Yerevan in June 2006, my wife, Suzy, and I noted a renewed sense of possibilities and hope in the city. We had the wonderful opportunity to visit friends and follow up on BAFA's medical projects. We also had the pleasure of attending the wedding of the daughter of one of the orthopedic surgeons whom BAFA has supported over several years.

I am thrilled to report that the good work our orthopedic colleagues are doing in Armenia today is setting a new standard that all orthopedists are challenged to aspire to—and I say this with no exaggeration. After a meeting with the medical representative of J&J (Johnson & Johnson), a medical equipment company, I was pleasantly surprised that he could quickly name at least half-a-dozen orthopedists who are doing a pretty good job, compared to only a couple just a few years ago.

It is encouraging that these surgeons are continuously upgrading their skills by attending seminars and

visiting centers where more advanced surgical techniques are being introduced throughout the ex-Soviet countries. This represents a noteworthy advancement from the days when visiting surgeons from the US and Europe performed every surgery, while our local colleagues simply observed. I give Kudos for their achievements and extend a big “thank you” to all of you who, through BAFA, helped bring about the beginnings of modernization of orthopedic care in Armenia. We can now build upon these achievements and help our dedicated medical professionals expand their care delivery system. This will entail developing their rehabilitation and physical therapy capabilities, in order to significantly improve the outcome of overall medical and surgical care.

On a more personal note, it was heartwarming to be present at the wedding of a 22 year-old bride. It was truly wonderful to see the smiling eyes of the new couple at their church wedding and to listen to the government registrar's inspirational words at the dinner gathering afterwards. We had the sense that finally, after years of losing its youth to foreign lands, new couples—young professionals are establishing a new “odjakh” (hearth), thus reinvigorating Armenia. The country seems to be on the verge of regaining its vigor, especially given its high percentage of citizens below the age of 25. This is indeed hopeful. We should certainly do everything possible to support this new generation through our education programs.

Despite all the promising signs we witnessed, we cannot forget those who live beyond Yerevan. The elderly and retired in the city and its suburbs have not seen any positive change in their life and remain especially vulnerable. There are still many whose survival depends on the hot meal the soup kitchens provide and the clothes that are distributed periodically. The hard truth is that our BAFA projects and, in particular, our soup kitchens are still vital and our commitment is still much needed.

Unfortunately, the declining value of the dollar is seriously challenging our ability to sustain our soup kitchens'

standard level of service. The dollar-dram exchange depreciation, coupled with the rising cost of food items and other essentials, clearly means that we must increase our giving by at least 25 percent.

Thank you for allowing me to share with you my hopes—the sweet, and my concerns—the sour. As we celebrate all the positive changes in Yerevan and partake in all the euphoria, I urge you, BAFA supporters, not to forget those who still desperately need us.

François Antounian

The Metaphor of the Tree

The metaphor of the “Tree” is an ancient one used widely by all cultures, religions and civilizations. This metaphor took on a special meaning for me on my recent visit to Armenia in April 2006.

On the first morning of my stay in Yerevan, when I opened the window of my 5th story apartment overlooking an immense courtyard, I was greeted by a joyous symphony of birds singing and greeting the sunrise. The trees in the courtyard were leafy and green, sheltering the multitude of birds, and providing the stage for them to enchant me every morning with their magnificent and uplifting song and dance.

One day as I was savoring nature's magic and enjoying the view of a beautiful tree, it occurred to me that for a longest time, I was merely focused on what I saw from the ground up—the trunk, and the branches and leaves reaching upward toward sunlight. It was then that my mind's eye began to see the tree as a whole—visualizing its roots reaching deep in cold, muddy and dark territory, winding around stones and rocks, striving to reach moisture at any cost in order to nourish the branches and leaves that shelter the birds that, in turn, make the morning symphonies possible.

The morning delight that I experienced from my room every day

was just one of the many gifts Yerevan offered me. Another was the experience of walking to Tsidsernapert on April 24 to lay a flower at the genocide monument in the memory of our tortured, massacred and deported kin. On the way, I tied a yellow ribbon in support of our American ambassador, John Evans, who was being recalled because he had used the correct word, “Genocide,” in his reference to the events of 1915. I believe truth is beautiful—the nearly million of our compatriots (young and old, poor and rich, parents with their little ones, and grandparents holding the hands of their “tornigs”) slowly walking towards Tsidsernapert created a beautiful rainbow, revealing the truth of our past and present.

Today, Armenia is a young, independent republic. Yerevan is on the verge of becoming a modern vibrant city with all the opportunities and challenges that change and progress bring. New buildings are being erected, the downtown area is expanding and the traffic jams are becoming commonplace. Cultural life is thriving with concerts from classical to folk music, dance performances, theatre, exhibits, film festivals, world jazz music and more. It’s important to note, however, that amidst all this excitement, for the majority of people, life in Armenia is still difficult and survival is a daily struggle. In particular, the elderly and the children are extremely vulnerable. That’s why I am so deeply thankful that BAFA is responding to the needs of this segment of the population.

On my trip I visited the Nor Hadjn Soup Kitchen to assess the condition of the facility and all the equipment. I was distressed to discover that the electric boilers, the ovens and refrigerators all needed repair and the water heater and the sink needed to be replaced. The cooks, who work very hard to provide lunch for over 270 people five days a week, can use additional 50-liter pots and a 4-wheel pushcart to carry heavy items. In the dining room I found many broken windows. I am pleased to report that since then, in consultation with the BAFA Executive Director, we have initiated the repair and the replacement of the kitchen equipment needed to improve the operation of the Nor Hadjn Soup Kitchen.

BAFA’s work is still relevant in Armenia’s rapidly changing social and economic climate. Keep in mind that in the shadow of Mount Ararat, the elderly have labored for years and given their best to our Hayasdan. They deserve our humble support at this juncture of their lives. On the other spectrum of life, children represent the future of our Armenia and need our support to stay healthy and strong. Through your ongoing generosity you’ve enabled BAFA to continue to support soup kitchens, and various school and medical programs—thank you!

As I reflect, I see clearly that we are all part of the same tree. May our roots go deeper in search of life-giving water, and may our branches and leaves extend toward the sunlight, so that we may forever hear the birds singing.

Levon Der Bedrossian



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Dear Bay Area Friend of Armenia,

Bay Area Friends of Armenia continues to support health, education and welfare within the Republic of Armenia.

We have initiated a new program called Feed Armenia's Future, which is designated to provide our supporters, with a personal connection to the grandparents or children who are being served in our Soup Kitchens.

The key to implementing any, and all of these projects, depends directly on your financial commitment. If you wish to make a separate contribution specifically to one, or more of these projects, please mark the box below and return the form with your tax-deductible contribution to the Bay Area Friends of Armenia.

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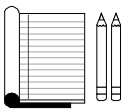


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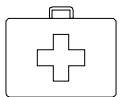
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