



ARIT

NEWSLETTER

Volume. XIV , Number 1

FEBRUARY 2007

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

In 2006, Bay Area Friends of Armenia marked its fourteenth year of helping the people of the Republic of Armenia. In this issue of ARIT, the BAFA Board of Directors presents a comprehensive fourteen-year account of how your support has contributed to advancements in health, education and welfare. We also thank you for continuing to be the most faithful "Friend of Armenia."

This year, like all Non Governmental Organizations working in Armenia, we were challenged by the continued re-valuation of the Armenian currency from 445 Dram down to 375 Dram to a Dollar, marking a drop of almost 16 percent in the purchasing power of the Dollar. Thanks to our donors who increased their donations, we were fortunately able to sustain our projects at the same level as the previous year. Every time I visit our BAFA Soup Kitchens in Hayasdan, I thank God for our supporters' commitment. I know too well that without BAFA, some of our elderly would perish.

For your review, in this issue of ARIT we provide BAFA's 2006 financial report. Additionally, we feature various articles including: *Yerevan Diaries September 2006: Snapshots and Flashbacks* by Suzy Antounian, about some of the grave realities of life in Armenia; *My Mission Trip in Armenia* by Jenny Balabanian, an account of her life changing experience in Armenia; and *It's Never Too Much* by Lucineh Kassarian, on the power of giving.

Throughout the past year, we received numerous notes and letters from our faithful donors, encouraging us in our humanitarian endeavors. I am pleased to share with you one of them. It is a heartwarming expression of gratitude from Sylvia and Stephen Melikian. It is a note that represents the sentiments many of you have kindly shared. Thank you Sylvia and Stephen.

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

John Haleblan

BAY AREA FRIENDS OF ARMENIA – A FOURTEEN-YEAR ACTIVITIES REPORT

In this issue of ARIT, we are pleased to provide our faithful supporters of the Bay Area Friends of Armenia a comprehensive report on how your donations have been used to advance health, education and welfare within the Republic of Armenia.

I. Welfare Projects

Since its inception, the welfare of the elderly has been one of BAFA's primary concerns. As our financial table (on page 4) indicates, BAFA has raised and transmitted **\$905,050.00** to the Soup Kitchens program during the past fourteen years of operation. Currently the program serves almost 900 retirees and children, one meal a day for five

days a week, at its four Soup Kitchens located in Norhi Massif and Erebuni areas, Yerevan, Nor Hadjn, Ashtarak, and the auxiliary location of Charbach. Fund for Armenian Relief manages our Soup Kitchens where a crew of 20 cooks and serves food at various locations.

Although the latest report, *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper Progress Report - 2004-2005 - First Term*, by the government of the Republic of Armenia in collaboration with International Monetary Fund (June 2006), indicates that the poverty level of Armenia has dropped from 55.1% in 1999 to 39% in 2004, the poor continue to live on \$2 per day. This makes our BAFA Soup Kitchens program a continued necessity for the survival of this most vulnerable segment of society.

II. Support to Schools

This year, in cooperation with Armenian Social Investment Fund (ASIF), BAFA renovated the Bakhchyan Michnagarg School in Goris. BAFA supplied 10 percent of the \$75,640.00 project. Official renovation celebrations were held during May 2006. Currently, we are working with ASIF on the renovation of a third school in Armenia, the Mushegh Ishkhan Michnagarg School Number 5 in Yerevan. The anticipated cost of the project is \$125,000.00 of which BAFA will cover 10 percent.

Unfortunately, the educational system in Armenia continues to be in real crisis. As the *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* reports, the average salary of teachers in

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.

2004 was 30,681 Drams per month, about \$85 per month at today's exchange rate. Minimal funds are allocated for the upkeep of schools, which are deteriorating due to lack of repair. Additionally, there are no funds for school supplies such as books, paper and pencils. Through your support we have been helping "Michnagarg" schools by contributing approximately \$1,000.00 to each. During the last several years we have visited 45 schools and transferred to their principals the sum of **\$109,275.00**. These funds are allocated to supplement teachers' salaries and to purchase school supplies.

In 2006 we were pleased to continue providing breakfast to children at Melik Kyugh "Michnagarg" school, helping students concentrate on learning rather than on their hunger.

III. Medical Projects

BAFA Board physician members continued to provide remote e-mail-based patient consultations to our American-trained Armenian physicians. Materials and supplies secured from different sources, including those provided via Dr. Dave Atkins' Operation Rainbow organization, have been sent. These in turn, are being shared with physicians at other hospitals in different regions outside of Yerevan. Also, one of our trained physicians is demonstrating the use of the equipment with colleagues in those remote hospitals.

Under the supervision of Dr. Anna Hovakimyan, we sustained our eye/vision project, performing eyes examinations for students and teachers at BAFA supported schools. This project also served the elderly at our Soup Kitchens and covered the cost of eyeglasses.

Since BAFA's inception, you have contributed a total of **\$1,318,400.00** of which **\$1,208,300.00** "dollar for dollar," has been used to support health, education and welfare related projects in Armenia. The balance of the **\$110,100.00** is kept in reserve to sustain our Soup Kitchens throughout the year. As is the case with most humanitarian organizations, the majority of gifts are received during the month of December. This reserve ensures that we are able to meet our \$11,000.00 monthly commitment.

Understandably, you have often asked, "How can you manage to transmit

'dollar for dollar' all of the donations to Armenia? Don't you have operational expenses in the U.S.?" The answer is yes! BAFA employs a part-time secretary. BAFA board members cover operational expenses (personnel and office-related) incurred in the U.S. This included the production and distribution of our DVD, *A Virtual Tour of BAFA's Projects in Armenia*. During the past fourteen years, BAFA board members have contributed a total of **\$211,400.00**. They regularly cover their own travel expenses to Armenia to monitor the various BAFA sponsored projects

None of the achievements of BAFA would have been possible without your generosity. BAFA Board members deeply appreciate your being a dedicated "Friend of Armenia" during the past fourteen years.

On a final note, we'd like to bring attention to the unfavorable Dollar/Dram exchange rates (36 percent depreciation of the Dollar over the course of three years). Due to the devaluation of the Dram, coupled with the rise in the cost of living in Armenia, we need to increase our Dollar transfer for projects in Armenia by about 50 percent. This is imperative if we are to sustain our programs at current levels. We urge you to be mindful of this reality when you consider your next donation.

Again, thank you for your unwavering commitment to BAFA.

BAFA Board of Directors
December 31, 2006

IT'S NEVER TOO MUCH!

How many times is considered too many to visit Armenia? This could be a challenging question for both people who have visited Armenia once, perhaps a decade or more ago, and for those who make the trip annually. Today, it is still very commendable to allocate the time and funds to visit the motherland, a country full of dichotomies—comfort and poverty; schools with barely any supplies and digital conferences; peace and political distress; churches and internet cafés; Bentleys and beggars; high quality restaurants and Soup Kitchens. So how many times is considered too many to visit Armenia? Is once enough?

How much is considered too much to donate to Armenia? This could be a challenging question for both people who have donated once and for those who donate

regularly. Everyone knows the need is grave and ever present. It all boils down to the following—the helpless and the helpful. But in this case, do we know who's who? Are we the helpful or are we the ones who need help to learn more about the realities that surround us? Are we aware of how our donations have been used? Do we know how many souls have been touched positively? Are they the helpless or are they the ones helping us realize that life can rise above the mundane?

Indeed, life is full of surprises and expectations and we try to fulfill as many of our wishes as possible. I suspect that during this past holiday season, many of us went overboard with useful and some not so useful purchases. During this time, many of us also made important decisions about which causes to support, and committed to writing a check. We may not have fully realized it, but this act of giving, in some sense, bought us the feeling of warmth that often accompanies a good deed. Of course, this is commendable, but is it enough?

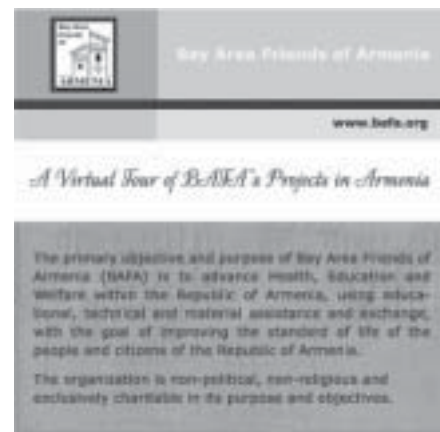
It is important to remind ourselves and other caring friends that throughout the year BAFA supports soup kitchens, schools and a myriad other projects. BAFA board members regularly visit Armenia to ensure that all your contributions are put to greatest possible use. Throughout the year, BAFA keeps you informed of its activities via its newsletter and other communication vehicles. And this past November and December, BAFA board members organized and funded private showings of a DVD, "Virtual Tour of BAFA's Projects in Armenia."

We had no idea that these video presentations would be to be so informative and helpful. You, the donors, made us aware of your important questions and concerns, and we had a chance to offer in-depth account of BAFA's activities in Armenia. Thank you to those who brought your enthusiastic participation to these gatherings. We appreciated your interest in celebrating BAFA's accomplishments and recognizing critical challenges ahead, including the revaluation of the dollar and its adverse impact on delivery of services.

We hope that through our presentations we compelled you to continue giving and giving at higher

levels. After all, there is never too much giving when the need is so urgent. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all of you, our donors. Your generosity brings light and warmth to many elderly and children, and gives them reason to live, to love and to believe.

Lucineh Kassarjian



BABA DVD sleeve



BABA DVD presentation at Melikians



MY MISSION TRIP IN ARMENIA

It was in late April when my parents started planning a trip to Armenia for September 2006. I had always heard of all the poor and needy children in Armenia and was aware of all the blessings and essential necessities they lacked. After praying for many days, I decided to coordinate a mission trip to help students in Armenia, in conjunction with my parents' trip. So I approached John Haleblian to help me find a school for my "mini" mission.

John informed me of the distressing situation of the school in Kegharod village, which was destroyed during the 1988 earthquake in Spitak. Until three years ago, students in Kegharod attended school in a very dilapidated facility. Recently, they relocated to a new building provided by the Armenian government and the support of the Knights of Vartan organization. BAFA also helped the school meet its immediate needs. The most essential need was for indoor toilets to ensure hygienic standards and comfort, in a region where snowfall starts as early as October.

From May to September, as I planned to put together school supply packages for eight grade students, I anxiously awaited for the day I would meet my peers in Kegharod School, and to see their joyous expression when they received the school supplies. Since I am a student at Valley Christian Junior High, a mission-oriented school, I had the outstanding and generous support of the principal, administration, teachers, and the students. I was not only able to collect abundant supplies for the eighth graders, but I had three suitcases full of school supplies, enough for the ninety students in Kegharod School.

September 22nd was a life-changing day for me. Dr. Leonid Manoukian drove us from Yerevan to Kegharod. We arrived at Kegharod School after passing through many historic sites in the Aragats valley. The Principal welcomed us with warm hugs and kisses, and a bouquet of red velvety roses. I was impressed when I saw the entrance of the school decorated with English and Armenian posters flanking the Armenian and American flags. I visited the seventh and eighth grade classes. I will never forget the

Distribution of BAFA Funds for Health, Education, Welfare & Advanced Science

In Republic of Armenia 1993 - 2006 (x \$1,000)

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total 93-2006
Distribution															
Soup Kitchens	43.5	66	58.2	47.4	52.5	57.5	54.6	54.3	69.9	73.6	74.5	76.1	83.1	93.85	905.05
Medical Projects	0.5	10.6	0.9	12.2	4.1	16.2	1.6	10	15.9	0.8	8.2	15.9	6.3	4.25	107.45
Support to Schools	0	1.4	4.2	6.5	11.5	12	15.6	15.9	31.3	30.4	16.5	9.9	23.6	17	195.80
Total Annual Distribution	44	78	63.3	66.1	68.1	85.7	71.8	80.2	117.1	104.8	99.2	101.9	113	115.1	
Total Distribution 1993-2006															1208.3
Additional Unused Funds on 12/31/06															110.1
Total Funds Collected															1318.4
Board Donations to Cover Office Expenses	18.8	11.8	11.2	10.3	12.6	12.6	11.3	12.8	12.4	15	19.1	16.1	19.3	28.1	211.4

YEREVAN DIARIES OCTOBER 2006: SNAPSHOTS AND FLASHBACKS

faces of the students, glowing with rosy cheeks. Everyone was dressed very neatly.

The students welcomed and invited me to attend their Algebra class, thinking that math would be a common language between an Armenian born in the US and an Armenian born in Aragats valley. They were surprised when I spoke Armenian and was able to communicate with them. Math was not the only common language, after all. I instantly bonded with my peers. I felt my genes gravitate me toward the Armenian students, without any hindrance. We shared stories of our lives at school and outside of school. I wanted to be one of them when I heard how they help their parents in the farms after school, breathing the fresh chilly air diffused from the snowy summit of Aragats.

The students' faces gleamed with joy when they each received the stuffed pencil boxes together with other school supplies and Armenian Bibles. I will never forget the thrill their faces expressed the moment they opened the pencil boxes. My heart overflowed with a myriad of emotion—love, joy, contentment, satisfaction and belonging. I had never realized how much I had, until I explained to the students the use of highlighters, and how whiteboards and dry-erase markers work. I was especially touched by the generosity of the school principal when she set up a banquet style lunch for us. This multi-course meal included different types of Armenian breads, salad, desserts, and “khorovadz.” This was truly Armenian hospitality.

Spending a few hours with my peers in Armenia and creating strong bonds with them, made my trip truly life-changing. I hope to go back with another mission soon. I believe that every Armenian, young or old, according to his or her own capacity, should take a mission trip and participate in re-building Armenia.

Jenny Balabanian

Jenny is an eight-grade student in San Jose and the daughter of a past BAFA Board member.

“*Bari Kaloust Suzy Jan, vontses? Francois'n Vontse? Garo'n vontse? Mayrig'et vontse?*” said Vartan, as he greeted me at the airport when I arrived in Yerevan after a long flight.

Vartan had been our driver since 1993 when we met him during a bleak and cold autumn the memory of which still sends shivers all over my spine. At the time we had stayed in a rented flat in central Yerevan, which gave us our first snapshot of life as a local resident. The apartment left its indelible mark. It had all the trappings of the Soviet era and exhibited the standard furnishings available to its middle class owners – the shiny laminate bookshelves from Poland exhibiting rows of treasured Russian and Armenian books, china cabinets filled with crystal from Czechoslovakia, appliances from Yugoslavia, the piano, *de rigueur* in any educated household, and, of course, the ever present single channel radio in the kitchen broadcasting government news and alerts. Given our learned mistrust of the communist system, we were never sure whether the radio sent two-way signals.

The apartment was a testament of the pride and dignity of its owners who could no longer afford to live there. The lady of the house kept a furtive watch on every object as she conducted her routine visits to accommodate her new tenants' needs. Her heart remained in her home, and these walls that witnessed the stories of several lives, now only pictures hanging from them. We felt like voyeurs unable to decipher the stories and complexities locked in all these inanimate objects. We wandered in the apartment, tried to situate objects in time, projected our judgement onto their practicality and esthetics but quickly moved on to our present with a sense of loss, but no regret. Without its inhabitants or its defining life, the place seemed like a museum in a time warp. Our concerns were more immediate – we were freezing. The apartment had no heat, and very little electricity or water. To this day our memory of the apartment remains predicated by our most primordial instincts and attempts to overcome the cold. Fortunately there was Vartan to

help us with all our needs and unlock our questions. At the time, he too, was in the daze of the country's transition. Certain flashbacks are unavoidable!

As I waited for my luggage, I could recognize several Diaspora Armenians visiting with each other, caucusing, complaining and patronizing. In this tight but familiar baggage claim area in what is now the airport's old arrival terminal there was a happy frenzy of people, carts and luggage. Fragments of lives were recounted in a hurry by people whose scattered lives spanned across different countries and several identities. They wanted to be sure to close the parentheses left open since the last time they saw each other. They keep coming to a country they are keen to love and love to criticize so much. But there they were – some for a week, others for two months. Some were there for a reason, others were just there because they liked spending the fall in Yerevan. Some had the hurried symptoms of people on a mission while others, retirees and vacationers got into the pace of Yerevan as soon as they hit the airport: they went native immediately. Yerevan in the fall has increasingly become a meeting place and a crossroad for Armenians from all over the world. Its streets and cafés generate the most unexpected encounters. Armenians who go there often have built their Yerevan community – other Armenians from disparate walks of life inspired by idealism or opportunity, mission or adventure, a search of purpose or self – but who all come together out of a common bond and commitment to the country and its people.

The receiving area outside the airport was jammed with local residents expecting to greet their visitors: black shadows pacing and puffing in the dawn light. Their hushed conversations had everything to do with the spiraling cost of living, the devaluation of the dollar and the latest political scandal or rumor. There was no sense of eagerness or anticipation among them. The weather was warm and breezy and the dawn air filled with a dry smell of dust and burned leaves so characteristic of the fall in Yerevan. Vartan's welcoming smile, his readiness to help and his discrete presence were the first reassuring signs that I was once again back home in Yerevan.

“*Polor'n al lav en Vartan, dou inchbes es? Luda'n inchbes e? Yerekheke inchbes en?*”

“Deh, gamats gamats. Vochinch.”

September 2006 marked the 15th anniversary of Armenia’s independence and there were several activities planned for the occasion. I was fortunate to attend some of them such as the Armenia Diaspora conference and Aznavour’s concert in Republic Square. Aznavour had come with a long lineup of performers from France, including Michel Legrand and Helen Segura who reminded us of their Armenian heritage. At 83, despite his wavering voice and his all too predictable repertoire, Aznavour stood taller than ever. All roads around Republic Square were jammed with people whose genuine outpouring of affection was palpable. He was definitely the star despite the presence of other dignitaries at the concert such as Presidents Robert Kocharian and Jacques Chirac, and their large retinue of high-ranking officials. People had come to see the man for his talent and his art; they had memorized his songs and wanted to sing along. They were there to show respect to a man who had stepped up to the plate when their country needed him and who had done so much to raise its profile. It was their way to say thank you, and for the first time, to hear Aznavour utter his appreciation to his public in perfect Armenian. I am sure that for many, this will remain as one of the enduring snapshots of the 15th anniversary celebrations.

But certain flashbacks are unavoidable. This was the second time I had seen Aznavour perform in the presence of two presidents – the first being in Paris in January 1998 in the presence of Presidents Jacques Chirac and Levon Ter-Petrossian shortly before the latter’s resignation. As I took my place for the latest concert I looked around hoping against all hope to see President Ter-Petrossian among the invited guests. I thought for a moment that the spirit of the celebration would provide enough magnanimity to include a former president and project a sense of humanity and decorum rising above the political fray. But sadly, that was not the case. While we see several former presidents at special occasions in the U.S., such an occurrence will unfortunately be unlikely in Armenia’s political culture for some time to come.

For the first time in years I ventured to attend church at St. Sarkis. I had heard

that the Armenian Bishop of Baghdad was to celebrate mass and that the nascent Armenian Iraqi community of Yerevan would meet there. Since independence this was the first group of Armenians from the Middle East to seek asylum in Armenia. Since *Nerkakht*¹ was such a negative experience during the Soviet period I was eager to learn about their challenges and adjustments.

Attending mass in the Apostolic Church in Armenia is a conflicting experience for me because of the extremes I have witnessed over the years. I have been humbled and inspired by some of the most fervent prayers of the elderly and the dispossessed in far out regions. These are places where life is the harshest and churches stand more as a cold testament to time and architecture than a warm and well-serviced place of worship. The few I had seen praying there did so with such devotion and intensity, that it seemed as though they were praying for all the rest of us who were not present. On the other hand, in more frequented churches I have been dismayed by the general mllée that results from the layout of a church that has little or no benches. Here, people seem to be in constant motion, conversation and disorder. Furthermore, the side sales transactions of tourist guides or candles inside the church would eclipse the spirituality of the place. Therefore, I was most surprised by what I saw at St. Sarkis that day – young city girls wearing blue jeans, their heads covered, kneeling on the floor in prayer for the whole duration of the service. I could hardly see anyone conversing inside the church and was surprised to see even adult men kneeling in prayer. When one woman mistook me for a long lost friend from Iraq and asked my name, a young man quickly turned to us and said:

- *“Khnrtrum em, Khankaroum ek elli.”*

He was right of course, and I apologized. I was inspired by his deference and respect for the sermon. Could this be a sign of change? Hard to believe given the rampant consumerism, jarring greed and avid materialism that have dominated Yerevan’s social culture during the last few years.

As Vartan took me to church he gave me his quick assessment on the Iraqi Armenian migrants. He had met a few of them and told me that they had difficulty making ends meet.

- *“Life is tough for them” he said “votch vok tchi esbaghvoun nerants hed. I tried to*

do what I could for a couple of them but was not very successful. If you know a way to help them, please do so.”

As always, Vartan was right. There were about 250 families that had moved to Yerevan since the war in Iraq. Those who had come with personal finances were able to start businesses in Yerevan. Others who did not have much money or were forced to leave in a hurry did not have any safety net in Yerevan. While the Government has facilitated their stay in Armenia and they are allowed to work, there was little or no governmental support structure that facilitates their transition into Armenian life. They needed legal assistance to navigate through various Armenian regulations, they needed lodging assistance to help them bridge the initial period of adjustment, and they needed guidance in finding jobs. Sadly, by coming to Yerevan, they had lost the sense of community with their fellow Iraqi Armenians. While they came together as a group in Armenian community centers in Iraq, they did not have such a facility in Yerevan. They were beginning to lose touch with each other and felt increasingly isolated, especially in light of the fact that there were no affirmative efforts to connect them to the local Armenians either. They needed to get organized as a community in Yerevan to support each other and better advocate for their collective needs. While many wished to make Yerevan their final destination, the existing challenges were forcing them to seek alternative immigration venue in North America or Australia.

Since government assistance was insufficient, I asked around in Yerevan to see if social organizations may have stepped up to the plate. None were clearly identifiable in Armenia. Upon my return I learned that neither the Armenian Relief Society nor the AGBU, both of which have offices in Armenia, had dedicated programs or fundraising to facilitate the resettlement of Iraqi Armenians in Armenia. There were individual efforts undertaken by Armenian Americans who were from Iraq and some assistance was provided by the Iraqi Armenian Relief Fund² out of Los Angeles. According to its representative, this fund pays for the travel of Iraqi Armenians from Aleppo to Yerevan and provides \$1,000 per person on a one-time basis. The fund reports having assisted the resettlement of 30 Armenians from Iraq to Armenia, with

many more applying to go.

Outside the church I mingled with young Iraqi Armenian boys whose youth enabled them to be un-phased by their parents' challenges. They were in their late teens and early twenties, either working or still in school, and were mixing three dialects and three identities at once – they were Iraqis, Iraqi Armenians and Yerevantsis. Theirs was already a burgeoning subculture establishing its roots in Yerevan. They were a snapshot in time much like the pictures I had seen as a kid of distant relatives that had emigrated to Armenia in 1948. They were part of a city whose center is increasingly becoming an Armenian mosaic. A friend of mine whose roots in Yerevan run several generations deep once told me that he missed seeing the face of *real Yerevantsis*. "I miss my old city, its people and its culture" he said. While I rejoice to see Armenians from around the world find a life for themselves in Armenia, I could also empathize with his sense of loss. He too had lost his community to emigration and a complete shift of lifestyle and values.

Given the increasing instability in the Middle East, should we not expect more Armenians to leave from countries like Iraq, Lebanon and perhaps Syria? Should they not be encouraged to move to Armenia and should we not facilitate their transition? Should we not consider allocating community resources now still available in those countries to support such relocations? Is it wise for communities in the Middle East to continue owning so much real estate and investing in new construction in countries whose political future remains uncertain? Should we not instead devise a more nimble and agile strategy to support key segments of the population willing to move to Armenia? Why were there no significant fundraising efforts in the Diaspora to support those Iraqi Armenians who wished to resettle in Armenia? Armenia has lost so many of its own to emigration since independence, could we really afford not to make it work for those who now wish to move there?

I left Armenia, however, with a different problem looming large on the horizon. Friends of mine had asked me to research the state of HIV and AIDS in Armenia to see if any help was warranted.

As I started asking various medical professionals whose work was peripheral to this epidemic, I was told that AIDS was not a problem in Armenia and that other healthcare challenges were more critical. I was also told by cynics that AIDS had become an issue in Armenia only because the funds made available by international organizations had created a cottage industry of local grant seekers and NGOs working on this issue. Given the interaction of Armenians with Russia and Ukraine that are themselves experiencing a full blown AIDS epidemic, this logic did not hold for me. In countries around the world, periodic or temporary migrations of people away from their home country and back in have resulted in the spread of the epidemic. Typically, people who migrate contract the disease and bring it back home. Why shouldn't a similar migration of Armenians to Russia and Ukraine bear similar results? I sought to meet with several agencies working on HIV testing, prevention and education. The picture that emerged is that of a calm before the storm.

I asked Vartan what he and his family (including two wonderful kids in their twenties) had heard about AIDS known in Armenia by its Russian term, *SPID*.

- "Suzy jan," he said somewhat embarrassed, "we talk about things as a family and we are well aware of its danger and its transmission. Sometimes I also hear programs on radio or TV but they are rare. Armenians don't like to talk about these things. They say there are some rare cases but I, for example, don't know anyone who has *SPID*."

He may well have known, but did not realize it. My conversations revealed that there were 429³ registered HIV cases in Armenia. Since registered cases are only the tip of the iceberg, international organizations and notably UNAIDS have developed matrices to project a realistic estimate of those likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS. These are based on the number of registered cases, the profile of known HIV infected persons, population migration and the social realities in the country such as the level of poverty and education, drug use, the extent of men having sex with men (a definition known among international organizations as MSMs and including men who are bisexual) and commercial sex work. Based on these projections it is estimated that 2,800 to 3,000³ people might be infected in Armenia. Among the registered cases the majority or 76% are men and 24% are

women.

HIV is currently concentrated among injecting drug users (IDUs) in the society at large, IDUs in prisons, and those who practice unprotected sex – an issue of special concern due to the apparent rise in commercial sex trade. While the disease appears to be limited to these at risk groups, the existing education and prevention programs only reach a small fraction of them. The rest may either be unaware of the risk they are taking daily, unaware of their health status or unwilling to subject themselves to testing. Without knowledge of their status they can continue to infect other partners and spouses. Less is known about the infection rate among MSMs since some of them are homosexual and resist testing and disclosure for fear of the social stigma attached not only to the disease, but also to their sexual orientation. Regardless of the at risk category to which individuals may belong, HIV in Armenia is mainly transmitted through injecting drug use, and in the past few years, increasingly through heterosexual practices.

Realizing the seriousness of the problem the Government of Armenia has enacted legislation to provide a better framework for testing and prevention. To its credit, the Government has established the National Center for AIDS Prevention (NCAP)⁴ whose goal is to implement and coordinate HIV prevention activities in Armenia. This Center conducts epidemiological surveillance for HIV and AIDS associated diseases, exercises control over the quality of all HIV testing laboratories, provides anti retroviral treatment as well as treatment for opportunistic infections deriving from AIDS. The center also provides methodological support to HIV/AIDS prevention programs, trains physicians and paramedics about HIV prevention and diagnosis, trains teachers and different groups in AIDS education, and organizes the publication of educational material. Yet despite the Center's broad mandate, government funding for the implementation of these programs is insufficient. Also lacking is the broader political leadership or will in the country to coordinate a nationwide campaign promoting testing, counseling, prevention, care and support and, most of all public education and outreach.

The task has fallen on the social sector and the majority of funding for the

existing programs has come from international organizations that have taken on various projects. By far, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) is the largest funder. It is based in Geneva and supported by the governments of developed countries and foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Global Fund has approved approximately \$7,250,000 as a five-year grant to Armenia, due to end in October 2008. The Global Fund supports Armenia's "National Program on HIV/AIDS Prevention." Since the Global Fund is not an implementing organization, it works through World Vision International – Armenia Branch, the Principal Recipient of the grant, provides the funds to various Ministries and local NGOs, based on proposals and implemented plans designed in partnership with the Government of Armenia, and oversees the uses of these funds. Additional funders include UNAIDS, UNICEF and other UN agencies.

The support from the Global Fund has helped establish a modern testing laboratory infrastructure countrywide. AIDS Testing is conducted on a voluntary basis through 153³ Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) sites located across Armenia, mainly incorporated in the facilities of Armenia's public health care system. Donated blood is tested for HIV on a mandatory basis and access to VCT services is reportedly expanding for pregnant women. However, regular patients passing through the health care system are not automatically tested for HIV. A person who tests positive in a test site is referred to the National Center for AIDS Prevention (NCAP) for a second testing, treatment and counseling. As of the date of this article, 42³ people are receiving free anti-retroviral medicine provided by the Global Fund.

Donor funds have also supported several local NGOs that work at the grassroots level to reach out to those at risk, to those who live with HIV and AIDS and to the public at large. Their work is indispensable. They collect data and gain the confidence of those infected or at risk. They raise awareness and provide education about HIV and AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), they promote prevention programs and healthy lifestyles. But they operate on a modest budget and consequently reach a small percentage of their target groups.

They are limited in their capacity to scale up and to leverage the media for nationwide impact. While their work needs to be supported and expanded, their long-term sustainability remains unclear for they are heavily dependent on funding from the Global Fund whose work in Armenia beyond 2008 is uncertain. All this is at a time when the disease is in its propagation stage and the incidence rate appears to be alarmingly high.

Social attitudes and lack of understanding about the disease may be the biggest challenges to surmount. Various polls and interviews show that the majority of people do not have a real understanding about its transmission or its prevention⁵. Ignorance about the disease's transmission, coupled with male macho behavior rooted in Armenian culture, lead to negligent behavior, thus multiplying the risk of exposure especially for women who have less negotiating power in relationships. Sex education in schools, particularly HIV and AIDS education, is not a mandatory part of the national curriculum. NGOs often have to incentivize teachers to include this in their discretionary teaching periods. Training courses on HIV/AIDS prevention issues have thus far been included in 414³ secondary schools in the country and "Life Skills" subjects are taught in 384³ schools. Other courses emphasizing "Healthy Life Styles" are taught in 30³ schools with UNICEF support. Not all schools in Armenia are covered by these programs. Some of them are only pilot projects while others have been introduced into the classroom informally due to the efforts of NGOs. More is needed to systematize and sustain the national curriculum and reach out to teenagers since they are increasingly at risk, given the more open mores in society and the younger age at which they are introduced to sexual practices. Given parents' unease to address these topics at home, teenagers often rely on their peers to seek answers. One NGO in particular has stepped into this field by reaching out to them and expanding peer education among teenagers and university students. This organization trains teachers and conducts summer schools with teens to promote prevention and healthy life styles.

Information through the media is spotty and limited to the few days surrounding World AIDS Day in December. There is not sufficient funding or capacity to provide sustained long-term media education programs and campaigns. The lack of understanding about HIV and AIDS also aggravates the stigma that is attached to the disease, thus preventing those who are

infected to come forward. People known to live with AIDS often encounter social isolation from family and friends and sometimes even outright discrimination. All these problems are compounded in the regions or *marzes* outside Yerevan where poverty is extreme and family members include migrants who have been working abroad for many years. Most importantly, there is need for advocacy to make HIV and AIDS education and prevention a higher priority for lawmakers and political leaders in Armenia.

As I was taking leave from one of my meetings in Yerevan, my host drove the point home. "While the current prevalence is low in Armenia, let us not forget that about 1 million Armenians left Armenia to go to Russia and Ukraine during the past 15 years. The infection rate in these countries is about 1% of the population. If 1% of the Armenians have been infected while away, that means there could be 10,000 or more infected people who are free to come and go to Armenia." Should we not worry about that? My friends who were worried about this phenomenon, eventually chose to support AIDS education programs. A partial list of NGOs working on AIDS issues is included at the end of this article.

When Vartan came to pick me up from this last meeting, he had done his homework. He already had an AIDS brochure in his car and proceeded to tell me that he had read it and that it was not right to have such young people be at risk. "*Mi pan bedk e ambayman anel.*" he said.

He drove me to the airport the next day, and for the first time ever, I felt that Vartan did not resist when I called the baggage handlers. He made me promise to come back soon and made sure I got through security. He then discreetly waved goodbye. He was always our last snapshot before leaving Yerevan.

Ten days after my return his wife called in tears to tell us that Vartan had a heart attack and died at the age of 49. We were dumbfounded, as it was so sudden. We will miss him terribly. He will be in our flashbacks the next time we renew our journey at Zvartnots airports and in so many other places.

Vartan was right. For all these young people at risk, "*Mi pan bedk e ambayman anel.*" His life was a promise cut short too early and theirs could be as well.

Suzy Antounian (January 12, 2007)

1. *Nerkakht* is the term describing the repatriation of Armenians from the Diaspora to Soviet Armenia during the period 1946-1948.

2. More information is available at <http://www.iraqiarmenianrelieffund.com/>

3. The data was provided by the National Center for AIDS Prevention (NCAP) and confirmed as of January 12, 2007.

4. More information is available at <http://www.armajds.am/>

5. For a comprehensive study of HIV/AIDS in Armenia see "HIV/AIDS in Armenia: Socio-Cultural Approach" Papoyan Arshak, Arakelyan Anoush & Bakshinyan Elmira; UNESCO 2005. You can access this publication by visiting <http://www.unesco.org> and looking for documents and publications under Armenia.

Partial list of organizations implementing HIV and AIDS related programs in Armenia or providing information about HIV and AIDS in Armenia. Should you be interested in supporting any of them we encourage you to learn more about them and their work. BAFA neither endorses nor recommends a particular organization. Since most do not have websites we would be happy to provide you with their addresses.

Armenian Organizations

Armenian National Aids Foundation (ANAF)

Operates a capacity building resource center to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS. Organizes and implements training programs among key groups of trainers and caregivers, provides care and support to people living with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; raises awareness and organizes the publication of printed material.

AIDS Prevention, Education and Care NGO (APEC)

Membership organization that conducts peer education program on HIV and AIDS prevention among teenagers, in secondary schools and in universities. It conducts surveys among the youth and trains them to become peer educators. Conducts drug

prevention and STI prevention programs among Injecting Drug Users. They work in Yerevan, and most marzes.

AIDS Prevention Union NGO (APU)

Conducts outreach and prevention education with female sex workers in Yerevan and Abovyan.

Benefactor of the Family NGO

Conducts outreach and prevention programs among female sex workers in *Shirak* region.

Education in the Name of Health Preservation NGO

Conducts outreach and prevention programs among men having sex with men. They work mainly in Yerevan.

Gavar State Medical College

Conducts outreach and prevention programs among female sex workers in Gavar.

Hope and Help NGO

Conducts outreach and prevention education with female sex workers in Vanadzor.

Kapan State Medical College

Conducts outreach and prevention education among female sex workers and Injecting Drug Users in Kapan.

Real World Real People NGO (RWRP)

<http://www.realwrp.net/>

Provides care and support to people living with HIV/AIDS. It aims to improve their quality of life by providing social, psychological and legal support, rendering assistance in employment, increasing access to medical care. They work in Yerevan and 3 marzes.

International Organization

European Monitoring Center for Drug and Drug Addiction

<http://profiles.emcdda.europa.eu>

The Global Fund to Fight Aids Tuberculosis and Malaria

<http://www.theglobalfund.org/en/>

United Methodist Committee on Relief

<http://www.umcor.am/>

UNAIDS

<http://www.unaids.org/en/>

[Regions_Countries/](http://www.unaids.org/en/Regions_Countries/)

UNESCO

<http://portal.unesco.org/en/>

UNICEF

<http://www.unicef.org/>

World Health Organization

<http://www.who.int/en/>

World Vision Armenia

<http://www.wvarmenia.am/>



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Throughout the past year, we received numerous notes and letters from our faithful donors, encouraging us in our humanitarian endeavors. We are pleased to share with you one of them. It is a heartwarming expression of gratitude from Sylvia and Stephen Melikian. It is a note that represents the sentiments many of you have kindly shared. Thank you Sylvia and Stephen.

503 Euclid Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94118

December 28, 2006

Bay Area Friends of Armenia
POB 3584
Daly City, Ca 94015

Dear Fellow BAFA Supporters:

This year we increased our donation to BAFA in recognition of the critical needs BAFA meets for the most vulnerable segment of Armenia's population. The continued devaluation of the US dollar should not require BAFA to reduce meals, but rather, encourage all of us to dig a little deeper into our pockets. The one latte a day which we enjoy without a second thought would provide 3 to 4 meals in Armenia. While this is a well worn method of making appeals to the public it does illustrate that we can do so much with so little.

BAFA is the little engine that could, and did. Thank you for your efforts on behalf of all of us.

Sincerely,



Sylvia and Stephen Melikian

Yes: I wish to make a Tax-Deductible donation to B.A.F.A.

Dear Bay Area Friend of Armenia,

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

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.

BAY AREA FRIENDS OF ARMENIA

P.O. Box 3584

Daly City, California 94015-0584

Phone (415) 681-7148

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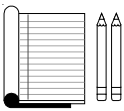
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