



# ARIT

## NEWSLETTER

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### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

I am pleased to report that this year BAFA was fortunate to have two anonymous donors who helped us undertake two special projects. The first project contributed to the complete renovation of Yerevan Number 5 Mushegh Ishkhan Michnagarg School, which I describe in my article, *BAFA Partners with ASIF (Armenian Social Investment Fund)*. The second project allowed us to supply “made for measure” shoes to the children of our BAFA Soup Kitchens and the poorest children in the six schools BAFA supports in the Aragatsotn region. Sadly, during the severe winter months, there are still children in remote villages of Armenia who do not attend school due to lack of proper shoes.

This summer, several of BAFA Board members visited the various BAFA Soup Kitchens. Among them, Ruth Alahydoian, had the opportunity to visit all of our BAFA Soup Kitchens and offers her observations in her article, *Providing a Lifeline, Literally and Figuratively*. Also, Andrea Kablanian and Paul Strauch, the teenage children of two of our BAFA Board members, reflect on their visit to BAFA's Nor Hadjn Soup Kitchen in their article, *Just ONE Meal a Day—Could YOU Survive?*

Also in this issue of *ARIT*, in *Grace During Hard Times*, I share the story (as recounted by my cousin prior to his death) of a brave medical doctor. It is about an

amazing woman's graceful struggle with life under the worst of circumstances.

Finally, Suzy Antounian in her informative and compelling article, *Meeting Uncommon Heroes—Canvassing Non Governmental Organizations in Armenia*, reports on the state of NGOs in Armenia. She describes the newly created BAFA Donor Circle that assessed and selected NGOs (based on their demonstrated leadership, accountability and record of achievement in the areas of health, education and welfare), for supplemental funding.

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*

### BAFA Partners with ASIF (Armenian Social Investment Fund)

During the last few years, as part of BAFA's Educational programs, we have partnered with the Armenian Social Investment Fund's (ASIF) 9:1 project in the reconstruction and renovation of schools.

ASIF is a joint project between the Republic of Armenia and the International Development Association (IDA) of the World Bank (WB). Since we are often asked about the organization and its mission in Armenia, I'd like to present the following direct excerpts from ASIF and World Bank publications.

From 1996 until now ASIF has supported more than 600 micro infrastructure projects, including schools, clinics, and basic water and irrigation works. Combined with parallel investments being made in rural roads, dams, and enterprise support, the ASIF has made an important contribution to sustaining agriculture growth and reducing the country's poverty rate, from about 56 percent in 1998 to about 30 percent in 2005.

### Highlights of ASIF projects

- 300 schools rehabilitated or newly constructed in the earthquake zone; the largest contribution from a single agency in support of the Government's Earthquake Recovery program.
- Badly needed furniture provided for about 500 schools
- Heating systems constructed or repaired in approximately 100 schools
- Water supply services rehabilitated or constructed in 62 villages. As a result, the ASIF contributed significantly to the increase in access to safe drinking water in rural communities from 65 percent in 1998/1999 to 74 percent in 2004.

### Total Financing—Delivered in Three Phases

ASIF I (Jan 5, 1996 to Dec. 31, 2000): Total cost was \$20 million, of

**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.**

which IDA/WB provided \$12 million, the Government \$1 million, private sponsors \$2 million, local communities \$2.5 million, and the Netherlands and UK a combined \$2.5 million.

ASIF II (Oct. 23, 2000 to August 31, 2006): Total cost was \$28.14 million, of which IDA/WB provided \$20 million, the Government \$1.43 million, private sponsors \$2.71 million, local communities \$2 million, and the Netherlands and UK a combined \$2 million.

ASIF III (Dec. 20, 2006 to June 30, 2011): Total cost was \$33.3 million, of which IDA/WB provided \$25 million, the Government \$6.67 million, private sponsors \$0.13 million, and local communities \$1.5 million.

ASIF has played a critical role in Armenia raising the living standards and improving basic infrastructure for the rural poor. Ongoing programs target priority investments in the poorest communities in remote or mountainous areas. BAFA's partnership with ASIF has been focused in the education sector.

BAFA's first joint project with ASIF was the 2002/2003 total reconstruction of Norashen Rafik Haroutiounyan Michnagarg School, which made possible for 280 children to move from the most deplorable facility, to their reconstructed three-story building, furnished with new desks and chairs. The total cost of the project was \$144,000.00. Under ASIF's 9:1 program, BAFA contributed \$14,400.00.

Our second project with ASIF was the 2005/2006 renovation of the Bakhshyan Michnagarg School in Goris. This 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. BAFA covered 10% of the total cost of \$75,000.00 project.

We are pleased to announce that we have just completed our third joint project in the renovation of the Yerevan Number 5, Mushegh Ishkhan Michnagarg School (see photo). The \$143,578.00 project covers the construction of a new roof, a heating system and the renovation of toilets. We are grateful to a generous donor, who wishes to remain anonymous, for undertaking BAFA's 10 percent share of the total cost.



*Mushegh Ishkhan School*

We thank all BAFA donors who have contributed to our various education programs— supplying eyeglasses to children, supplementing teachers' salaries and supporting the reconstruction of schools. Your passion and commitment to education is deeply appreciated.

John Haleblian

### **Providing a Lifeline, Literally and Figuratively**

This summer, my husband, Armen, and I made our long overdue trip back to Armenia. It had been 16 years since my last visit and 11 years since his. We had kept abreast of developments in Armenia from afar and were looking forward to once again seeing up close how the country had evolved. We had witnessed the end of the Soviet era and the subsequent low point in Armenia's recent history. We expected many improvements – from a state-of-the-art airport to the 24-hour availability of water and electricity—and we were not disappointed. Today, Yerevan is a bustling, vibrant city, in the midst of a construction boom, with people working and making a decent living. Outside of the capital, however, life is not quite as thriving. Nevertheless, people seemed to be making ends meet with the support of relatives working in Russia or elsewhere abroad, or from some income generated from the small businesses or working farms.

As a BAFA Board Member, I was eager to see the soup kitchens that I had heard so much about. We visited all four of our soup kitchens – two in Yerevan and two in towns on the outskirts. I found that each kitchen has a slightly different story, but at the core they all have one thing in common—they are the lifeline to the truly needy and hopeless. While our daily meals provide sustenance

for the bodies of Armenia's most vulnerable, the knowledge that these meals are offered by caring Armenians, is nourishment for their souls.

**The People we Serve** – *needy, appreciative*. I was frankly not prepared to see the number of needy people our soup kitchens serve. After spending time in central Yerevan among the employed, the tourists from the Diaspora and the wealthy locals, I had forgotten about the indigents who don't have the advantages of these city dwellers.

**The Elderly** – Some of the elderly I met were tired of their lives and ready to move on. Most have any family members to help them, or what families they do have, are barely able to feed themselves.

**The Non-elderly** – Among the disadvantaged of our soup kitchens were people with physical or mental needs that prohibit them from functioning independently. The government-sponsored institutions cannot take care of them, and their families are struggling to make their own ends meet. The meal at the soup kitchen sustains them and is the highlight of their day.

**The Jobless and Hopeless** – I believe that among the needy of our soup kitchens there are many who would work if they could. But it is clear that factory jobs and numerous other positions that many towns and communities throughout Armenia relied upon, are not coming back. Due to lack of education or connections, or advanced age, many people are unable to find jobs and are hopeless. With no children or relatives to support them or land to sustain them, many are dependent on our soup kitchens to get them through their otherwise bleak days.

**The Meals** – *nutritious and hearty*. Each soup kitchen prepares a slightly different meal on a given day, depending on the ingredients available. During our visit, they all served a stew made with seasonal vegetables, along with a grain dish, tomato and cucumber salad or cabbage and carrots, and a drink. After the meal, some fill jars to take home either for the evening meal or for someone else back at home.

**The Facilities** – *functional, clean, adequate, rent-free*. The facilities are all former restaurants or cafeterias. Although

worn out, they are reasonably clean. We are fortunate to have access to these facilities free of charge. In some cases, the owners also pay for some or all of the utilities.

**Norki Massif** – Just to the northeast of central Yerevan, this soup kitchen is small and serves meals in shifts. This kitchen will soon be relocating to another site owned by the same owner.



*Baking bread at Norki Massif Soup Kitchen*

**Erebuni** – On the southern end of Yerevan, this soup kitchen is large and pleasant. A local businessman who has made his riches in the Russian oil business owns the facility, allows us to use it rent free, and helps cover some of the other expenses.

**Nor Hadjn** – Northeast of Yerevan on the road to Lake Sevan, Nor Hadjn is a small community that used to support a diamond-processing factory. The factory is still in use, but with just a fraction of the workforce. The factory's cafeteria/community center is used by BAFA for the mid-day lunches, and is rented out to the community for other functions in the evenings and weekends.



*The dining hall of the Nor Hadjn Soup Kitchen*

**Ashtarag** – Northwest of Yerevan, on the road to Aparan, Ashtarag was once a busy factory town. The facility here is bare bones, barely functional, but adequate.

**The Workers—hard working.** The ladies who cook and serve meals work hard and

seem genuinely caring. With jobs few and far between for women who are not young and trained in new technologies, our kitchen workers are appreciative of the steady income. Each sight also has a head chef / manager overseeing the operation.



*Distribution of food at Ashtarag Soup Kitchen*

**BAFA Oversight – critical, dependable.** Every dollar contributed to BAFA is directed in full to earmarked projects. All administrative costs are covered by BAFA board members. Regular visits by the executive director and members, translate into hands-on oversight. We see that meals are provided, the needy are legitimately qualified for the service, and that our resources are used wisely. Our presence reinforces our fundamental commitment and demonstrates our sincere compassion. With each board member visiting the soup kitchens, we bring another set of eyes and ears to BAFA's oversight and extend a hand—our human touch.

What we witnessed, heard and experienced in Armenia has raised many questions for us to ponder and discuss: "What is the best way for Armenia to progress economically?" "Can the political system ever be truly democratic?" "How many more cafés does Yerevan really need?" While the answers to these questions will remain unclear for some time, the answers to the following questions are crystal clear: "Are the resources we send to Armenia being used wisely?" "Are the people our soup kitchens serve truly needy?" "Are we reaching enough people?" The answers are yes, but we can do more. Although there are many charitable organizations working in Armenia, few provide the direct sustenance that the BAFA soup kitchens consistently offer. But unfortunately, with the declining value of the dollar, our contributions are not keeping pace with the increased cost of supplies and labor.

The need is real—the meals that our BAFA soup kitchens provide represent a

lifeline, both literally and figuratively, to the disadvantaged. While the nutritious meals keep many alive physically, the community created within BAFA soup kitchens along with the knowledge that we care enough to provide the meals, keep many alive spiritually. We provide the hope that they are not forgotten.

*Ruth Alahydoian*

## **Just ONE Meal a Day, Could YOU Survive?**

We are two Bay Area high school students, Andrea Kablanian and Paul Strauch. We had the opportunity to stay in Armenia for an extended period this past summer, and this is an account of our experiences visiting BAFA's Nor Hadjn Soup Kitchen with our mothers and other BAFA members.

When our small group of Armenian-Americans arrived to the soup kitchen, we were warmly greeted by the villagers who were eagerly waiting. After a hospitable welcome, they ensured that our group (Americans who have everything we need), were well fed and taken care of in a place that takes care of people who have nothing.

We were led upstairs where we openly conversed with the local villagers who were eating lentil soup and freshly baked bread. During the course of our conversations, the locals seized the opportunity to relate their tales of hardship, poverty and illness that so greatly dominate their lives. The children in this large and impressive old soviet factory hall were energetic and ran to get into our pictures, while their elders were busy packaging extra food to bring home to those even less fortunate.

All of the villagers were very kind and welcoming and we couldn't help but feel that we could and should be doing much more for them. We had the opportunity to talk to two reserved old men whom Andrea recognized from her previous visit last summer. One of them reminded her of her own grandfather, not only physically, but also because of his clear sense of strong Armenian pride. It was clear that his state of impoverishment, loss of one eye, and walking difficulties had forced him to acquiesce to the soup kitchen's aid, violating his sense of dignity

and independence. It was sad to learn that his only enjoyment in his life was an occasional cigarette. He told us that he did not even have enough money to buy a razor. The harsh reality is that he has no choice but to accept the daily meal provided by the only soup kitchen within miles of his home.

Following our conversations, the staff ushered us into the back room of the kitchen where we were offered soda drinks, a luxury item for the impoverished, and tasted the delicious bread. Although we greatly appreciated this special hospitality, we could not help but feel guilty drinking sodas knowing that this would be considered a rare treat to the children on the other side of the door.

Later, we would once again experience a sense of guilt when we distributed 24-pack Crayola Crayons and paper. This would hardly be reason for excitement for a typical American child, but here in the Nor Hadjn soup kitchen, this simple gesture left expressions of quiet surprise on the faces of otherwise hyper kids. Grandparents and parents pushed, shoved and yelled to get to the front of the line to secure a share of the supply in order to make their children happy. In the midst of this chaos, we were reminded how far small acts can go.

Inevitably, we left the soup kitchen slightly depressed, with a mixture of feelings of guilt and satisfaction. We left Nor Hadjn eager and committed to help Armenia more.

*Andrea Kablanian & Paul Strauch*

## **Grace During Hard Times**

I first heard of Akhtala (an Armenian village near the Georgian border), from my cousin Morris who had started his medical practice there, as part of his post-graduation service in the Soviet Union. I had the opportunity to visit Akhtala, on behalf of Bay Area Friends of Armenia (BAFA), to determine if we could help the schools there. Afterwards, we went to see the hospital where my cousin had started his medical practice as a young doctor. The memory of my visit to Akhtala compels me to recount a story that Morris had shared with me.

About 20 years ago Morris and his family immigrated to the United States

and started his medical practice here. Sadly, soon after his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, Morris developed cancer. After lengthy therapy, it became clear that his case was terminal.

I visited Morris when he had just returned from Hayasdan. He told me that when he realized his end was near, he wanted to return to Hayasdan one last time. His old friends back home offered to entertain him. But all he yearned to do was to tour, with a few friends, the places he had grown up. Thus, they set out tracing back on the familiar paths of his youth, including Akhtala.

When I told Morris that I had visited Akhtala, he was curious about my trip, and our conversation eventually led to his recounting of one of the most stunning and memorable stories that I still cherish, and that I am pleased to now share with you.

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A friend and I decided to spend a day visiting Garni and Geghard. On a clear day when one can clearly see Ararat from the Arch of Charents, we started driving. Half way to our destination, we noticed two elderly ladies walking with bags in their hands. We stopped.

- "Can we give you a ride?" we asked them.

- "Oh that will be very nice," one of them replied.

- "Where are you going sisters?" I asked.

- "We are collecting green herbs which grow wild on the roadside," they replied.

After we drove some distance, one of them noticed a bountiful patch of green edible herbs and asked us to stop. We bid them farewell and continued on our way.

A few hours later, our way back from the majestic cave Monastery of Geghard, we noticed the same two ladies heading toward Yerevan. We stopped again.

- "Where are you going?" we asked.

- "We collected enough wild herbs and are going home to cook them," they answered.

- "Would you like us to give you a ride, on the one condition that we stop a short while at the Temple of Garni," we added. They agreed.

While we were visiting the magnificent reconstructed Temple of Garni, the two ladies were following us from a distance, happy that they would not have to walk all the way back to Yerevan.

Back in the car, one of the ladies asked me: "Are you an archeologist from America?"

- "No sister," I answered.

- "I thought you must be an architect since you were inspecting the temple in such detail," she said.

- "No, no," I said. I am a physician, as a matter of fact, a graduate of the Yerevan State Medical University."

- "So am I," she replied.

- "Which graduating class?" She asked.

- "I am a graduate of the class of 1971," I told her.

- "Me too," was her reply.

I brought the car to a screeching halt. Jumped out and said, "Get out. Let me see who you are."

We faced each other—this old-faced lady and I. Her eyes gave it all away. I shouted, "Sato?"

- "Morris?" She replied with sheer astonishment.

We hugged each other and cried on each other's shoulder. The old looking lady was my classmate, aged beyond recognition—a physician who, due to unfortunate circumstances, was obliged to pick wild herbs from the hills outside Yerevan, walking hours to secure the necessary nutrition for her family.

We drove back to Sato's house in Yerevan, reminiscing the golden days of our youth and discussing the present, which had dealt us each a bitter fate—hers, poverty and mine, terminal cancer.

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Morris died two months after my visit. I do not know what has become of

Sato. But for me, she personifies grace during hard times—an amazing woman dealing with life gracefully, under the worst of circumstances.

Whenever I see the men and women (many with similarly difficult conditions as Sato's) in our BAFA Soup Kitchens, I am humbled. I deeply understand, all over again, the need to continue our invaluable support.

*John Haleblian*

## **Meeting Uncommon Heroes - Canvassing Non Governmental Organizations in Armenia**

*BAFA Donor Circle Trip June-  
July 2007*

Since the independence of Armenia we have learned of its many challenges, especially its strenuous transition from communism to a market based economy and the resulting poverty and social dislocation for a large segment of the population. As Diaspora individuals and organizations took it upon themselves to help bring about social change in the country, there were recurring questions: "Why don't they do something about their social ills themselves?" "If we can have charitable organizations in the Diaspora, why can't they have them in Armenia?"

This summer a group of friends and BAFA supporters went to Armenia to learn more about Armenia's non-governmental organizations or NGOs, also known as social sector (or civil sector) organizations. In most democracies NGOs aim to fill the gaps left open by the government sector and the private sector. These organizations are a critical link to strengthen democratic practices because they empower citizens to get engaged in social change and build community around social issues. When linked up with the policy making process, these can be a powerful trigger for bottom up social change. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) started as a small grass roots NGO and sparked a movement that led to nationwide legislation against drunk driving, saving thousands of lives. Many of the consumer protection measures that

we take for granted today, started as NGO initiatives that have led to changes in policy and business practices; OSHA and the EPA owe their existence to the long activism of many in the civil sector.

There are thousands of such NGOs registered with the Ministry of Justice in Armenia, perhaps as many as 4,000. For the most part these are indigenous organizations that came into existence with the Karabagh movement or later with independence, and are operated under Armenian law on a non-profit basis. They aim to serve a variety of charitable or educational purposes. Some provide a safety net for the poor, support orphans, and provide skills training. Others educate the public on social and health issues, advocate for new legislation, and enable citizens to seek their full legal rights. Despite their large numbers, relatively few organizations among them demonstrate the necessary leadership, mission and business model to make them viable. Among those that do, many lack the funding and donor attention to make them as effective as they could potentially be.<sup>1</sup> These organizations often survive on annual budgets as low as \$15,000 - \$20,000 without any certainty for income from year-to-year, and thus have very little capacity to plan their programs with any sense of substantive cohesion.

During our trip, our purpose was to identify<sup>2</sup> and meet with some of the promising organizations that could present good opportunities for donor support and in particular organizations that:

- < demonstrated a commitment to lasting social change and a measurable impact on their targeted community;
- < had an engaged leadership, committed to the organization's mission and its operations;
- < invested in local capacity;
- < demonstrated entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity;
- < engaged the community they intended to serve and partnered with relevant stakeholders;
- < demonstrated a capacity to deliver on their stated objectives and a track record of successful execution;
- < reached beyond Yerevan to regions across Armenia; and
- < earned the trust of their beneficiaries, their peers and funders.

In line with BAFA's mission, we were

interested in organizations that promoted the education, health and welfare of Armenia—those that promoted economic opportunities and rural development, empowered women, and focused on the environment.

Over the course of 7 days in Armenia a group of us met with 14 different NGOs and their leaders.<sup>3</sup> Although several of us had been to Armenia multiple times, our meetings proved to us how much we still had to learn about the country and its social dynamics. We were far from the cafés and the construction optimism of the city even as we met with people in Yerevan and beyond. These meetings put us face-to-face with the ailments of a society that is overcome by poverty and systemic dislocation, but one that is nevertheless struggling to help itself. We met bright, dedicated and visionary individuals, many of them women, who are committed to social change and whose work has a direct impact on the individuals they try to help and the issues they tackle—the vulnerable youth, the orphans, the battered women, the rural poor, and the environment. They are passionate about their work and about their country. They believe they can make a difference and act on that belief, regardless of how difficult it is to raise awareness and funds for certain issues and make a measurable impact. In today's philanthropic literature they would be called "social entrepreneurs." For us they simply emerge as remarkable leaders, unsung heroes who combine the focus and determination of a CEO with the drive of an idealist—patriots in the best sense of the word. We were deeply inspired and humbled by their example.

### *Investing in the Vulnerable Youth*

"The Communists did not kill religion. They took away my people's dignity," said one of the leaders we met. We were made all too aware of the risks encountered by the vulnerable youth. We learned about the heart wrenching stories of Armenian women tricked into trafficking by trusted acquaintances who go as far as marrying them to get them to Dubai and then disappear, thus leaving them without their passports in the hands of those who force them into prostitution. The most vulnerable seem to be the

orphans who reach adulthood and are forced out of the orphanages every year. They are ill prepared to live on their own without a family network, the vocational skills or higher education that could gain them a job. Orphan girls become vulnerable to prostitution and boys often end up in jail. While there is a great deal of donor support going from the Diaspora to the orphanages, there is much less donor attention devoted to helping adult orphans transition to adulthood and independence.

This point was brought home again and again during our visits with two organizations that work with orphans: *Diramayr Hayastan* run by the Catholic Sisters Academy and the *Cross of Armenian Unity* in Etchmiadzin run by a devoted local founder. Both had plans to provide vocational education which give orphans a competitive advantage in Armenia's labor market. Gone are the days when orphans were taught carpet weaving and crafts. Today's needs are for skilled workers who are computer literate and have specialized skills that are in demand in the country.

Another NGO, *Democracy Today*, provides modest grants to women as start-up funds to help them begin small private enterprises. While these grants are monitored by the organization, they give the opportunity for a start in life without burdening the grantees with the interest payments involved in micro-credit. The *United Methodist Committee on Relief* (UMCOR), working with government and other international funders, has undertaken programs to build local capacity to fight human trafficking. It had provided training for social workers, employment agencies, medical personnel and border guards to improve their capacity to identify potential victims and connect them to UMCOR's hotline. They publish a variety of posters and conduct public service announcements to raise awareness on this issue. They also assist victims reintegrate into society through legal, medical, psychological, employment and other types of counseling. It is a labor intensive, uphill battle.

We attended a teacher training workshop organized by *Aids Prevention, Education and Care NGO* (APEC) to help teachers work with adolescents with

mental health problems and reduce their risk of exposure to HIV. They also work with school teachers and teenagers to strengthen peer education among the youth so that they can promote safer health practices to prevent the spread of HIV.

We were quickly reminded of the many vulnerabilities youth face and the need to invest in them with an integrated strategy.

### *Empowering Women*

A recent study on domestic violence and abuse of women in Armenia reported that: "60% of respondents agreed that 'domestic violence is a widespread problem in Armenia.' Nearly half of the respondents know, on average four women who have been victims of domestic violence. Six in ten of these respondents indicated that victims are their acquaintances... The top five reasons given by respondents as the explanations for domestic violence are drug and alcohol problems, unwillingness of women to leave the men who abuse them, poverty, unequal relationships between men and women, and abusers' lack of education, followed by experience of violence in the family during childhood, sudden financial problems or job loss, and victims' lack of education."<sup>4</sup>

The *Women's Rights Center* is a Yerevan based NGO that is actively engaged in combating domestic violence and abuse of women. It provides victims with legal and psychological support, a 24-hour hotline or *Tejkidz* in Armenian. It helps the women find jobs, enabling them to transition into new lives should they so desire. The center works with law enforcement agencies to help them recognize incidences of domestic violence. It is currently working with women's groups and women parliamentarians to help pass a law on domestic violence. The center is led by a determined and creative doctor who is undaunted by the financial challenges that her plans may represent. She would like to secure a permanent site to shelter victims of domestic violence who need a place to stay with their children for a transitional period. Her more immediate and low budget campaign is to reach out to women by advertising her hotline on grocery bags. She gets it, and sounds just like one of our own activists from San Francisco.

### *Investing in the Environment*

In 2005 many environmental NGOs in Armenia came together in a campaign to resist the exploitation of one of the last unspoiled forests in Armenia and were successful in diverting road construction from the Shikahogh Reserve in the South of Armenia. Their success is a rare example of how civil society in Armenia could withstand the unfettered expansion of greed and corruption. Their opposition also made it clear that alternative paths to development could be found when serious pressure is placed by Armenian activists and supported by high profile Diaspora Armenians.

While many of us were familiar with the wonderful work of the *Armenia Tree Project*<sup>5</sup> and *Armenian Forests NGO* due to their Armenian American founders, we were less familiar with their grantees and partners in Armenia who are local NGOs. *Armenian Women for Health and Healthy Environment* (AWHHE) raises public awareness of toxic pollutants to help the government decrease the risks of harmful impact and to promote a healthy and sustainable environment. *ECOLur* provides ecological journalism to monitor environmental hot spots and connect the dots in raising awareness between the mass media, public officials, NGOs and society. *The Association for Sustainable Human Development* holds special consultative status with UN ECOSOC. It promotes the concepts of sustainable human development by publishing a variety of assessments and reports in Armenian and engaging the youth in environmental work.

While we were all too familiar with the shrinking of green spaces in Yerevan, we learned about the tough challenges ahead in the rural areas. Some are the result of the shrinking capacity of the state after the Soviet collapse. Others are due to years of neglect, and more recently, due to poor decisions in trading nature for jobs. We learned about the lack of sewage and solid waste disposal systems in the rural areas of Armenia, the decrease of soil fertility, and the collapse of the water supply system. More immediately however the concern is to save the environment in the north of Armenia, especially around the village of Teghut, from an ecological disaster likely to occur

if copper mining is allowed to proceed with a large scale strip mining of operation. Hundreds of hectares of mountain forest are threatened and toxic pollutants, resulting from open mining risk severe damage to the environment and public health.

### *Building Rural Communities*

From my childhood I remember Lebanese villages coming alive in the summer and many reverting back to their core and hibernating in the winter. What would remain is the village church with its priest, the village school, the few grocers and cafés and the villagers whose work was directly tied to the land or the village itself. Later as I traveled in the French countryside, I was struck by the pull of the village church as the center of town long after the Church had stopped attracting villagers for religious purposes. As we visited Armenian villages, the absence of a village center and the absence of the church were striking. It was as though nothing pulled the village together. While some villages in Armenia had a historic existence and an organic growth, others had been decreed into existence by Soviet central planning. The communist apparatus would decide to place a factory, build a village, offer incentives for people to settle, build a community hall and school. And presto, there was the village in the five year plan! However today, with the loss of factories and jobs in such villages, the links tying the community together have all but fallen. The villagers who have lived there for many years may not even have originated there.

*Shen*, a local NGO established as an outgrowth of the Karabagh movement, helps such villagers reconstitute their lives and their village around agriculture. *Shen* leases several hectares in a village on a long term basis and pays the villagers to work on the land. The rights to the lease are transferred to a non-profit organization whose board includes elected representatives from the village. Excess profit from the land reverts to the non-profit and the board allocates it in a manner that best suits the needs of the village – be it construction of roads, community center, or the purchase of a fruit drying facility. This communal

business model has now been proven in 6 villages, and *Shen's* work has resulted in many villagers staying in their village, plowing their own family lots, and bringing life back into the village.

The *Children of Armenia Fund* is another example of successful rural revitalization guided by a professionally run NGO. It has a bottom-up approach to address the critical needs of the community in an integrated fashion in building first rate school facilities, tending to the care of children, rebuilding the health care infrastructure, and connecting individuals to the services that enable them to help themselves with private initiative. They work on a cluster of villages that are within proximity so they can benefit from economies of scale. They also connect different villages to services in an effort to reach a broader number of people. In the village of Karakert where their work has been most intense, life is starting to sprout up – a village center is coming together, homes reveal busy courtyards and hay is plentiful on each roof.

There are many NGOs whose work in Armenia supports rural development. We could not possibly learn about them all, but learned of two examples. One is the *Ecumenical Loan Funds for Human Development (Eclof)*, a non-profit loan fund, originally set up in Europe to provide credit to help rebuild churches after World War II. Now *Eclof* provides micro-finance for small-scale income generating projects in the developing world. The other, the *Federation of Agricultural Associations (FAA)* similar to a local trade association, links farmers' organizations across Armenia. It seeks leverage on their behalf when purchasing agricultural products in bulk, marketing Armenian products abroad, and advocating for their rights and issues.

Unfortunately, our trip was only seven days long and had to come to an end. We had planned it as a donor circle. At the onset each participant agreed to contribute \$1,000 as a charitable contribution into a common pool to be re-granted to the one NGO that our group would select at the end of the trip. Our group included five women who came to Armenia and two who contributed equally, but could not join us. The trip was organized on an entirely volunteer basis with no portion of the contributions used to defray any expenses related to the visit.

When we returned home we were faced with the difficult challenge of selecting one

recipient. We simply could not. We also could not split the contribution amount in two because we were all too aware of how little \$7,000 gets in Armenia. Instead, we decided to do the only thing we could to support the work of such inspiring leaders—we increased our individual contributions to \$2,600 for a total of \$18,200. And we knew we should do more because we felt that all the organizations we investigated were worthy of our support. We were delighted to find that there were homegrown organizations that had taken hold of their own destiny. All we needed to do is to support them.

We learned a great deal about Armenia on this trip, but most importantly, we now have faces and stories behind the issues and are emotionally vested in that reality. After all, we could have easily been one of the trafficked victims, one of the orphans, or one of the villagers. Sheer luck had it otherwise. We could however support those who are best able to make a difference. While we cannot support all the worthy organizations working in Armenia, we are happy to provide information to others who may be interested. We also hope to expand our donor circle to include others willing to make the financial contribution and/or take a trip next year to follow up on progress and expand our circle of knowledge. This is yet another way to carry out BAFA's core mission: to support the health, education and welfare of Armenia.

### **(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> The *NGO Center* in Armenia lists many of these organizations on its website [www.ngoc.am](http://www.ngoc.am) The *Center* was started as an initiative of the Armenian Assembly of America. It has since spun off as an independent NGO directed to support other civil society organizations in Armenia by providing them with training, advisory services and technical assistance. Because of its experience in grant administration and financial reporting, the *Center* is often tasked to administer grants provided by international funders to small local NGOs that may not have that capacity.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to all those who helped us identify many organizations, and specially, to Jeffrey Tufenkian of *Armenian Forests*

NGO and Eliza Minasyan of the *Jinishian Memorial Foundation. Armenian Forests NGO* is a project of the *Tufenkian Foundation* and is based in Yerevan. It aims to protect forested areas, expand healthy forest areas and enable the transition to sustainable forest management. The *Jinishian Memorial Foundation* is an Armenian foundation supported by the *Jinishian Memorial Program*, a charitable trust administered by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. The *Jinishian Foundation* in Armenia provides economic, social and spiritual assistance, and supports grassroots and local NGOs through partnering and collaboration.

<sup>3</sup>The list of organizations and their contacts are included in this newsletter.

**List of organizations and websites:**

Aids Prevention, Education & Care (APEC)	N/A
Armenian Forests NGO	<a href="http://www.armenianforests.am">www.armenianforests.am</a>
Armenian Women for Health & Healthy Environment (AWHHE)	<a href="http://www.awhhe.am/index.htm">www.awhhe.am/index.htm</a>
Association for Sustainable Human Development	<a href="http://users.freenet.am/~ashd/">http://users.freenet.am/~ashd/</a>
Armenian Center For Contemporary	
Experimental Art (NPAK)	<a href="http://www.accea.info/main.htm">www.accea.info/main.htm</a>
Children of Armenia Fund	<a href="http://www.coafkids.org">www.coafkids.org</a>
Cross of Armenian Unity	<a href="http://www.cau.am">www.cau.am</a>
Diramayr Hayastan	<a href="http://www.armeniansisters.org">www.armeniansisters.org</a>
Eclof	<a href="http://www.eclof.org">www.eclof.org</a>
ECOLur	N/A
Federation of Agricultural Association	<a href="http://www.faa-ule.am">www.faa-ule.am</a>
Jinishian Memorial Foundation	<a href="http://www.jinishian.am">www.jinishian.am</a>
NGO Center	<a href="http://www.ngoc.am">www.ngoc.am</a>
Shen NGO	<a href="http://www.shen.am">www.shen.am</a>
United Methodist Committee on Relief (Umcors)	<a href="http://www.umcor.am">www.umcor.am</a>
Women's Rights Center	<a href="http://www.wrcorg.am">www.wrcorg.am</a>

<sup>4</sup> Dallakyan, Ani & Danielian H. Lucig. Report on Nationwide Survey Findings: Domestic Violence and Abuse of Women in Armenia. Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis, American University of Armenia. Yerevan, May 2007.

<sup>5</sup>ATP is based in Watertown and Armenia. Its work focuses on the following initiatives:1) planting trees at urban and rural sites, 2) environmental education and advocacy and 3) community socioeconomic development and poverty reduction.

*Suzy Antounian*



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***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**

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Please Check Applicable Categories



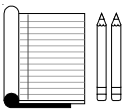
**SOUP KITCHENS OF ARMENIA**

\$50     \$100     \$200     \$500    Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**FEED ARMENIA'S FUTURE**

Adopt a grandparent    Monthly  \$20,    Annual  \$240 \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Adopt a child    Monthly  \$20,    Annual  \$240 \$ \_\_\_\_\_



**EDUCATION PROJECT**

\$50     \$100     \$200     \$500    Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_



**MEDICAL PROJECT**

\$50     \$100     \$200     \$500    Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (    ) \_\_\_\_\_