

Teach for Armenia Presentation at St. Sarkis in Dallas/Fort Worth

By Mary Mukhtarian

The St. Sarkis Church in Dallas/Fort Worth hosted an inspirational presentation of the Teach for Armenia Fellowship Program on Sunday November 5th. The Kechejian Hall was packed with members of the community who wanted to learn more about this initiative, and also to find ways to support it.

Narek Ghazaryan, Director of Public Affairs, who moved from San Francisco to Armenia for this program, kicked off the presentation by explaining that Teach for Armenia Fellowship is a 2 year teaching program for the diaspora's top talent to teach at educationally underserved parts of Armenia. These exceptional young men and women are then expected to help unlock the professional and leadership potential of students who have no current alternatives. By recruiting young teachers to inspire innovation, new teaching methods, and access to the latest educational resources, Teach for Armenia actively works towards stemming the brain drain of Armenian talent by creating opportunities for all, students and teachers alike, to improve their extraordinary leadership skills, and contribute to the continued development and modernization of the program.

Teach For Armenia is currently serving 5700 students in 35 communities in 6 regions of Armenia, all served by 71 Fellows. The program was started in 2013 by Larisa Hovannisian, Founder and CEO, who applied the methods used by the 25 year old Teach for All worldwide program. The core values that Teach for Armenia espouses include: Striving for Excellence; Constant Learning and Growth; Dedication and Resilience; Integrity and Humility. Teachers are selected for their leadership skills as well as educational background. After teaching for 2 years, the teachers are sent as ambassadors to other countries to recruit the best and brightest to unlock the potential of Armenian minds.

Three of these ambassadors, Satenik Petrosyan, Rudolph Harutyunyan, and Zina Ghukasyan were on hand to speak of their personal experiences with challenges and rewards of the program. Satenik spoke of the determination of the students to go to school even while the village Vazashen was being shelled, because they knew this was an opportunity for them to get educated and improve their lives. Rudolph related the pleasure of students who for the first time learned to write their names in that 200 person village. Zina wanted her students to use critical thinking, so she began by asking them simple questions like: "What are your dreams?" She was shocked to find out that the students had no dreams, no plans for a future, and certainly no expectation of making it into the future. She worked hard to change their mindset, and eventually they began to dream of a park in the village. It took 18 months, but the park was created including benches. The children learned that when they dreamed and believed in themselves, their dreams would eventually come true.

There was a general sense during the presentation that Teach for Armenia had already positively impacted the lives of less fortunate villages outside of Yerevan. Narek commented that these students needed someone to believe in them to unlock their true potential.

For St. Sarkis, the connection was not only emotional, but deeply satisfying, because two of our parishioners, Sam and Syla Simonian, who founded the TUMO Center for Creative Technologies in Yerevan, were in the forefront of supporting this Fellowship, and still serve on its Board of Directors. Teach for Armenia touched the hearts of everyone at St. Sarkis, especially since it sounded like the selfless dedication of many Americans who had donated their expertise as part of the Peace Corps to help others around the world.

Father Ghevond Ajamian summed up the feeling of the community when he thanked the representatives of Teach for Armenia calling them Tarkmanitch (Translator) just like Mashdotz, who had begun by teaching the children first in order to change the country.

The program has a website www.teachforarmenia.org which is grateful for qualified applicants as well as any donations.