

Meaningfulworld Humanitarian Mission to Armenia

Transforming generational trauma, horizontal violence, and trauma of the war in Syria

Katherine Kaze and Dr. Ani Kalayjian

It was a warm sunny day in October when I first landed in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, to begin our Meaningfulworld outreach work. Our work in Armenia began in 1989 immediately after the disastrous earthquake. As our car sped away from the airport, my eyes were greeted by buildings constructed of smooth pink stone placed alongside a number of new construction sites and modern creations. Older citizens from the countryside sold plump fresh fruit on the roadside amid the younger set of well-dressed businessmen and middle-class women. At first impression the city was quite charming – a vivid juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary culture. This was the characterization that would remain with me as the mission progressed. In 10 days' time, I was introduced to a spirited, proud, and resilient people whose past provides a rich backdrop for a future that is still in transition. Through traditional meals, 13 training programs, and many new connections, it became clear that though much work remains to be done, the passion to complete it is also present.

The team consisted of Dr. Ani Kalayjian and myself, and we were joined by Karen Gargaryan from Yerevan. Our first day was dedicated to reflection and organization, with a visit to Dzizernagapert, the memorial monument for the Armenian Genocide. With a burning flame at the center of 12 stone pillars, visitors are made to feel the sense of pride the Armenian people have for their heritage, and a sense of sorrow for those killed during the genocide carried out by the Ottoman Turks. The first half of the week centered on the training of professionals in Yerevan. The first workshop targeted professors of psychology at Yerevan State University's Pedagogical Institute Psychological Department, with representatives from The Intra Mental Health Center, the Caucasus Institute of Gestalt and Family Therapy, the Armenia Round Table Foundation, and the State University. The team also traveled to the Civil Society Institute to meet with a group of mothers who had suffered the loss of their sons to snipers in the Azerbaijani conflict. One participant described the anger she felt at not receiving the support she needed. The women felt helpless and angry at the lack of recognition for their sons' sacrifices, with some having come outside for the first time in a year to participate in our workshop. All participants complained of physical ailments such as high blood pressure and skin disorders of unknown origin after the loss of their sons. The team encouraged the women to empower themselves and share information by engaging in mutual support, make a list of their needs, and make use of the 7-Step Model. It was later established with the Chairman of the Board Artak Kirakosyan that the mothers will be offered free weekly therapy and grief-counseling sessions. In a separate training with youth members of PeaceJam, participants were also encouraged to be part of an "adopt-a-mother" program so the troubled mothers can be connected with a support system.

Our team conducted its next workshop through the aid of the Minister of Health as well as the Armenian Red Cross. Close to 50 medical doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and other health care professionals attended, providing lively discussion about the idea of transforming the pain and suffering of the Genocide, the negative impact of the Soviet Regime, the devastating earthquake, the 20-year-long war with neighboring Azerbaijan, and leadership challenges after the nation's independence. They specifically expressed physical pain, backache, stomach acidity, insomnia, as well as anger outbursts and extreme frustration and sadness.

At the Nar Dos School in Yerevan, students aged 7 to 9 were drawn from their respective classes to attend a special workshop. These students were refugees of the Syrian war seeking to rebuild in a new home. The most frequently expressed negative emotions were worry, anxiety, and embarrassment. Some expressed feelings of missing their home in Syria and their friends. In an expressive drawing exercise, approximately one-fifth drew their home in Syria and expressed a yearning to return home. Overall the children seemed happy, and their teachers were giving them a lot of positive attention. Additionally we worked with the teachers and their principal. Plans were solidified to continue to provide the school with much-needed supplies, including gym equipment and chalkboards.

We then met with psychology and linguistics professionals and social workers at FAR and World Vision. Here a spirited yet agitated discussion regarding the current leadership and political scene in Armenia revealed feelings of helplessness in the face of corruption and dismay at not having a platform for protest. The team encouraged participants to focus on things that they do have control over, like starting an Armenian psychological association and strengthening that organization across Armenia in order to build leverage as a strong professional organization. Truly, it is only united that we will stand strongest.



Left: Medical Professionals at the Red Cross, Center: Nar Dos School collaboration, Right: Meeting with AUA President Boghosian

Reinforcing a commitment to initiate positive change, the team also met with Dr. Bruce Boghosian, president of the American University of Armenia, to discuss incorporating gender studies in a meaningful capacity at the university. Dr. Boghosian shared the view that domestic violence was a salient gender issue and a poignant starting point for such a program. Through his network, Meaningfulworld will begin the dialogue that is essential for generating a program on gender studies at the university in collaboration with Barnard College.

Further on in the week the team traveled two hours away to Vanadzor to conduct a workshop with psychologists, social workers, and the community at the Armenian Constitutional Rights Protective Centre (ACRPC). A passionate discussion about the issue of domestic violence arose. Participants commented that domestic violence was more prevalent in urban areas and villages and among less-educated communities. They expressed dissatisfaction that domestic violence was not at the forefront of social issues, and the males who were present reaffirmed that it was instead viewed as a cultural norm in line with gender roles assumed across Armenia and neighboring Eastern European and Caucasus states. The team encouraged those present to break away from cultural norms, beginning in subtle ways such as inviting their husbands to share in domestic responsibilities (e.g., setting the table), just as these women share in providing for their economic needs. The idea is to slowly introduce new gender roles through gentle and peaceful action in order to awaken others in the community.

We attended the Second International Congress on Armenian Studies under the title “Armenian Studies and the Challenges of Modern Times,” dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (NASRA), at the Presidential Building of NASRA in Yerevan. After an opening speech by the nation’s president, followed by

words from other distinguished guests, Dr. Kalayjian presented on how to transform horizontal violence as well as the generational transmission of genocide. The model was well received, but following Dr. Kalayjian's presentation a member of the audience (Professor of Philosophy) harassed and yelled at a female speaker for misrepresenting information about Turks and Armenians. This act of horizontal violence demonstrated what Dr. Kalayjian was asserting in her presentation: "pulling down syndrome" is very much alive in Armenia today, even among highly educated circles. Feelings of distrust, stemming from years of Soviet oppression, have transmitted generationally.

The team conducted a series of direct meetings with leadership, Ministers, as well as other NGO officials, ie: Arpi Vartanian, Director of the AGBU, as well as the Syrian Armenian Relief Organization and its Director Lina Halajian, to reinforce our collaboration and coordination of assistance for the refugees.

To conclude the week, we traveled two-and-a-half hours on a bus with the LUYS Foundation to a border village known as Tsapatagh in order to work with a refugee community of about 200 people who had been displaced from their lands. Many in the town are without running water and proper infrastructure. Here lies resentment, negative feelings, and ever-present horizontal violence. We conducted two separate trainings, one with children aged 7 to 16 and the other with the adult faculty and principals of the school. The children were lively, healthy, and positively engaged by the program. The adults, who at the beginning were angry, sad, and blaming one another and the leaders, experienced a great transformation. By the end of the workshop anger melted into empathy, sadness turned into big smiles, and hopelessness transformed into concrete plans for improving their situation.



Syrian refugees at the Nar Dos School

Aid to elderly refugees in Tsapatagh

Syrian children's workshop

Across all workshops feedback from participants was amazingly positive. Many reported gaining an understanding of new and relevant concepts such as generational transmission of trauma, horizontal violence, and EQ. Participants expressed interest in physical healing methods, with specific inclination toward mindful walking meditations and chakra balancing through physical movement. Salient comments included feeling "reborn," "renewed, refreshed, released of burdens," and "important, connected, and empowered." Others commented that the workshops awakened in them the value of service to humanity and reaffirmed the importance of self-care and expressing love to self as well as one another.

Over the course of the mission the team worked with six universities, one school, 12 organizations and centers, and three governmental organizations; working directly with 331 professionals and indirectly with 1,500 in 54 different organizations and governmental bodies. Meaningfulworld successfully conducted 13 workshops, presented in the Second International Congress on Armenian studies, and initiated several action points for the future in Armenia. These included the establishment of a Meaningfulworld branch in Armenia headed by Karen Gargaryan and continued mentorship and collaboration with partnering organizations and

professionals through Skype supervision. Meaningfulworld also initiated the possibility of internship and humanitarian service opportunities with the psychology community in Yerevan and fostered dialogue about forgiveness and the creation of Forgiveness and Peace Gardens to reinforce their daily practice.

As we looked out the window of our departing flight toward the peaks of Mount Ararat receding in the distance, we reflected with gratitude on the work that was accomplished. Thanks to the new relationships forged and old partnerships renewed, Meaningfulworld looks forward to returning to Armenia next year with a targeted outreach program that will build upon the work performed during this mission. Our outreach will continue to focus on training psychological professionals and conducting healing sessions with vulnerable groups – seniors, refugees, young women – as well as the continued donation of necessary goods through partnership with International Sikhs. We were inspired and invigorated and we learned a lot. Although physically tired, we felt spiritually empowered and strengthened. The whole experience reinforced our motto: When one helps another, both become stronger.



Team preparing lunch on way to Vanadzor



Armenian fruits and sweets



After workshops in Tsapatagh

****Special gratitude to all our collaborators in Armenia and the United States. As well as our Editor, Seta Papazian.**

Founded in 1990, the Association for Trauma Outreach & Prevention (ATOP) Meaningfulworld, charitable organization affiliated with the United Nations Dept of Public Information, has achieved international recognition as a leader in training humanitarian outreach professionals as well as responding to two decades of global and local disasters. ATOP is committed to health and global education promoting state-of-the-art scientific theory, peace, forgiveness, consciousness research, internship, and the development of technical skills to train mental health professionals, teachers, psychologists, art therapists, nutritionists, alternative medicine practitioners, clergy, nurses, mediators, interfaith ministers, and lay persons committed to service the self and humanity. Meaningfulworld Humanitarian Outreach teams have helped rehabilitate survivors from over 45 calamities, making a daily difference in people's lives helping to transform tragedy and trauma into healing and meaning-making through post trauma growth, resilience, emotional intelligence, mind-body-eco-spirit health, visionary leadership, empowerment and artful collaboration through a new world view.

Our Motto: When one helps another BOTH become stronger

www.Meaningfulworld.com, info@meaningfulworld.com