

Bergen Community College and the Armenian American Society for Studies on Stress & Genocide, Meaningfulworld, Collaborate on a Centennial Program Celebrating Culture, Survival, Healing, and Transforming Generational Trauma

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On November 3 the Center for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation at Bergen Community College hosted a celebration of Armenian culture set against a backdrop of preventing genocide and healing from intergenerational trauma, which was dedicated to the centennial of the Ottoman Turkish Genocide of the Armenians and other Christian minorities.

The program began with a viewing of *The River Ran Red*, a documentary film by Dr. Michael Hagopian that blends the history of the 1915 Genocide of the Armenians by Ottoman Turks with testimonies from Armenian survivors as well as those of Greeks and Arabs who bore witness to the atrocities and American, German, and other missionaries who were witnessing and documenting the monstrous outrages. Dr. Hagopian traces the route of the forced death march known as the deportation from the Armenian Highlands along the Euphrates River down to the deserts of Der-El-Zor—a journey so agonizing and rife with savagery that death by bullet was the ultimate mercy, which was generally avoided to “save bullets.”



Dr Kalayjian, Mr. La Pointe, Ms. Haedo, Ms. Simmons and the engaged audience

Though at times the searing firsthand accounts of cruelty and suffering made the film hard to watch, it was a moving experience. After all, we cannot be afraid to hear these stories, and it is so valuable that people like Dr. Hagopian do this vital work of preserving these accounts, as with each passing year there are fewer and fewer survivors.

After this emotionally engrossing experience the children and young adults of the Hamazkayin Nairi Dance Ensemble provided contrast to the attendees' sorrow with their uplifting commitment to Armenian cultural tradition. It was so heartening to see these youths dancing in the ways of their ancestors, keeping their heritage alive in the modern world. Their willingness to maintain this connection to their roots is a golden thread of cultural continuity that runs through the generations.

The first dance was a rousing military-themed number with dancers clad in camouflage fatigues, followed by a delicate dance of little maidens in white dresses with wispy blue capes. It

makes one marvel, to see the young girls with their gossamer capes lifting their arms like graceful butterflies, that this is one of the many wonderful things Armenians do when they're not being herded through the desert to die a death not fit for a dog. The spirited dancing of boys and girls together that followed evoked the true grace and art of their cultural legacy. The attendees clapped along to the music, delighted to see the youth exuberantly embracing and perpetuating their heritage. These happy, healthy young Armenians dancing these dances are a testament to the love of Armenian culture for which the martyrs were sacrificed.

The choreographer and producer of the dance presentation was the talented Thovmas Harutyunyan. After the series of dances Ani Tchaghlasian of the Hamazkayin organization spoke to the attendees about the value of cultural continuity.



Hamazkayin Nayiri Dance Ensemble

A passionate presentation on preventing genocide followed, delivered by a particularly feisty and impassioned Dr. Ani Kalayjian. She began by sharing the words of Maya Angelou: “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”

She was emphatic that forgiveness does not mean forgiving genocide. It means letting the poison of hate, anger, and hurt seep out so the wound can heal, and empowerment can begin. If not, there is suffering, and it is undoubtedly transferred to the next generations along with the initial trauma. She also emphasized that we don't have to wait for a moment of conscious awakening on the part of Turks—we can take our healing into our own hands, and it is actually imperative that we do so, every one of us. If not, we will suffer from Horizontal Violence—“crabs in the bucket” syndrome—hurting one another, pushing one another down, and creating divisions.



To round out the program of events, Michael Uzatmacyan played several hauntingly beautiful tunes on an oud while Ohannes Berin served as the percussionist. The strings and beats roused the crowd till first some and then many more stood up and came to the front to dance to the music. The songs were exquisitely poignant, the energy palpable, and both the spontaneous dancers and the audience were fully engaged in the performance experience.



Mike Uzatmacyan & Ohannes Berin

Audience dancing to the traditional music

Afterward conversations took place over refreshments. Connections were made and many expressed a wish to gather in such a fashion more often to partake of heritage and the company of compatriots. But it wasn't just Armenians who attended—since the event took place at the Pitkin Education Center on the campus of Bergen Community College (BCC) in Paramus (Bergen County), NJ, students and faculty who had heard about the event or who happened to be passing by also joined in. Close to 100 people were in attendance. One professor even asked his class to meet him at the event.

The event was organized through a collaboration between Dr. Kalayjian, Founder and President of the Armenian American Society for Studies on Stress & Genocide, Meaningfulworld.com, and Cristina Haedo, Co-Director of the Center for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation at Bergen Community College. Cristina had become acquainted with Dr. Kalayjian's work at one of the Annual Mind-Body-Eco-Spirit Healing Festivals at the United Nations.

The timing was particularly propitious, as 2015 marks the centennial of the Ottoman Turkish Genocide of Armenians and other Christian minorities. And with the sponsorship of

BCC's Center for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation, the idea was crystallized into reality. Professor Thomas La Pointe, Co-Director of the Center, expressed special gratitude to the organizers as well as to the Bergen Country Armenian supporters and affirmed his commitment to making this an annual event and indicated how pleased the Center was to have supported this endeavor as part of its mission to promote peace, justice, and reconciliation.

Ms. Haedo shared: "The evening was full of mixed emotions – the deep sadness that was prompted by hearing the historical atrocities that humans inflict on one another; the energy inspired by the new generation of children; the uplifting dances that reflected a strength in the resiliency of human nature and the incredible strength of a united community that was self-evident as local Armenians came out to join others in the viewing of this powerful program. I felt truly honored to have brought Dr. Kalayjian and to be a witness to this intermingling of students, faculty and community members for such an important event. We will make all efforts to make this an annual program."

Participants shared sentiments such as, "I felt uplifted and learned so much about healing"; "I never knew about the generational impact, the program was extremely moving, and Dr. Ani's presentation was very passionate and powerful." One BCC student stated, "I get it now, I have a lot to learn—such an enlightening presentation." Participants also expressed the desire to partake of more of these events: the generations coming together, the manifestation of a will to persist, the unflinching desire to go on, to keep being ourselves and striving to be our best selves, to emerge from the depths of an unfathomable national tragedy, to endure, and to sublimate our pain into healing, empowerment, and transformation. A summary of the program will be aired on VOATV on 22 Nov at 7 pm, channel 25, NYCLIFE. For more information kindly visit www.Meaningfulworld.com, and the <http://www.bergen.edu/pjr>



Founded in 1990, Meaningfulworld, the Association for Trauma Outreach & Prevention (ATOP), affiliated with the United Nations, has achieved international recognition as a leader in training humanitarian outreach professionals as well as responding to two decades of global and local disasters. Meaningfulworld is committed to global education promoting state-of-the-art scientific theory, peace and consciousness research, 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. Meaningfulworld Humanitarian Outreach teams make a daily difference in 45 countries in people's lives helping to transform tragedy and trauma into healing through post trauma growth, guidance, empowerment, mindfulness, and meaning-making through a new world view. Ask yourself ...Ask your friends...What makes your world more meaningful?

Our Motto: When one helps another BOTH become stronger