

Homeward Bound

At the corner of Abovian St. and Sayat Nova St. in Yerevan, I, along with my fellow Birthright Armenia volunteers would regularly meet. From there, we would decide which direction to take. This time, we continued on Abovian St., passing small shops and cafes, noticing the boys looking at the well-dressed girls; the grandpas playing chess and grandmas looking down from their balconies. We wandered to Republic Square, where a huge crowd had gathered around the fountains – the waters dancing to *Time to Say Goodbye* by Andrea Bocelli. The next morning, I would be leaving the city I had called home for a few months.

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Atop Tatev Monastery, in sheer silence, I sat alongside Birthright Armenia volunteers from around the world. Tourist season still months away, it was just us, the ancient monastery, the lush green grass, crisp air and blue sky. Tatev was the first stop on our journey to discovering Artsakh. “Artsakh is gorgeous, with incredibly green landscapes. At times the colors look neon. It was really a time where you let go of any type of stress or worry and couldn’t help but connect with the nature, the history of the ancestors who walked on these lands thousands of years ago, and with the people with whom you share love for this land,” said Mandy Messer, a volunteer from Michigan. Mandy, who preferred to go by her middle name, Ani, volunteered for seven months at TUMO, an educational organization, aimed at teaching technology and art to high school students in Armenia. She is a third generation American whose mother is Armenian. “I wanted to volunteer in Armenia because I wanted to get to know the pulse of life there and its people”, she said. “Living in Armenia, you have a completely different perspective on the world. Every situation is framed differently. It was an incredibly stimulating experience.” She continued, “I didn’t realize until I got back that Armenia was an environment that allowed me to pursue a lot of my personal interests: being a part of nature, picking flowers, doing cartwheels, hiking up mountains, climbing waterfalls, repelling down mountainsides, camping – we became part of the land.”

Birthright Armenia offers free Armenian language classes to those who do not speak it. “Learning the language, in and of itself, was a creative process. I had to understand what it meant to ‘think in Armenian,” said Mandy. I remember the first day Mandy walked into the Birthright Armenia office; her host-mother asked her to call home once she arrived at the office. Though she repeatedly said, “Yes, yes,” she did not understand her host-mother’s request. Mandy spent every spare moment learning Armenian. Today, she regularly keeps in touch with her host-family and the friends she made in Armenia; their conversations – all in Armenian. Birthright Armenia summer volunteers work in Gyumri – the second largest city in Armenia. The city, though hit by a deadly earthquake in the late 1980s, has a great spirit. The architecture in the city is awe-inspiring. The artistic iron work on doors and windows are truly one of a kind. The volunteers in Gyumri create a strong bond with its people and with their fellow volunteers. “I would always tell my friends and family in Argentina that there are no tourists in Gyumri. When the people see a non-local in the street (it’s easy to recognize: the clothes, the shoes, etc.), they gaze at that person desperately. In that moment you are a foreigner to them. But, once you talk to them and



get to know them, they change your label. You are no longer a foreigner, you are now their brother. You are Armenian like them, you understand them,” said Juan Karagueuzian. Juan was born and raised in Buenos Aires to Armenian parents. In the four months that Juan was in Gyumri, he volunteered at Huys Orphanage where he helped with homework and taught Spanish. He also established a pen pal program between the orphans in Gyumri and Armenian youth in Argentina. Juan said, “I think that every person traveling to Armenia is making a difference.” He spoke about what a child told his friend and fellow volunteer, Cynthia El-Khoury (a Canadian volunteer in Gyumri). The child asked her, “I do not understand why someone from the other side of the world would come to Gyumri just to play with us!” Simple connections such as playing with orphaned children gave people hope and understanding that they were not alone, that there are people from far off lands that care about them. Juan added, “Armenia and this experience had a huge impact in my life, in every possible way.” To sum up his experience in Armenia, Juan said, “Everyday was better than the day before.”

Not far from Gyumri is the border between Armenia and Turkey. At this particular point, the city of Ani is visible. A river divides the two lands. On one side were the ruins of Ani, on the other were over 50 Birthright Armenia volunteers gazing at their history, their ancestral history, as visitors, on a Saturday excursion. The volunteers took photos and asked questions about what was to happen with their ancient kingdom. Some picked flowers, which later traveled with them back to their countries and are now hanging on their walls – placing a piece of Ani in their homes. “I had studied Armenian literature, geography and history in school for 12 years. I thought I knew everything there was to know about Armenia. I was so wrong. I learned more about Armenia in the few months I was there than in the 12 years of Armenian study,” said Shuntt Tanielian of Beirut. “My experiences in Armenia strengthened this bond that I could not fully understand in school. I now comprehend what my teachers meant by our motherland, our history, our art...” For three months, Shuntt volunteered at the Italian Polyclinic Center and



Austrian Kinderspital in Gyumri as a lab technician, and at the Armavir Hospital. Though Shuntt spoke Armenian, he spoke with a different dialect than that of Gyumri and Armenia in general. “I asked for a bath towel, and got tissues instead. I would ask for a floor rag and in its place, I got a bath towel.” He had to quickly learn everyday words such as towel, toothpaste, tomato, potato, etc. Shuntt had a life changing experience while in Gyumri. “My biological mom had failed to make me eat meat for 20 years. I don’t know what my mighty host-mom did, but I am now a meat eater! As she would say, ‘We don’t have Armenian vegetarians! Trust me when I tell you that we are all carnivores!’”

It was a rainy spring morning in Armenia, as we headed on an excursion to Geghart Monastery. In one of its chapels, Zaruhi began to sing Armenian liturgical hymns. The place, very serene, suddenly witnessed great energy as the acoustics in the chapel resonated her words. Zaruhi Avetisyan was born in Armenia and moved to Perm, Russia. Birthright Armenia is not only for Diaspora-born Armenians. Though there are age requirements, Armenia-born volunteers who currently live outside the country are welcome, as well. Zaruhi wanted to “see Armenia from the inside, apart from what I saw from my relatives. I wanted to connect with other young Armenians and understand our commonalities and differences.”

She volunteered in Yerevan from March to May 2009 at the American University of Armenia’s English extension department and at the Speghani Choir where she sang and helped with German and English pronunciations. “I wanted to help build up the country and make it better and stronger, and have an immersion into real Armenian culture. To be connected with local Armenians and other Armenians from around the world and give each other the sense and understanding of belonging to one nationality.” Music, art and dance is everywhere in Armenia. Most families have pianos in their homes. At Vernissage – an open-air arts and crafts market, local artisans sell paintings, crafts, handmade jewelry and antiques. There are a variety of concerts in Armenia – ranging from classical to Armenian folk to modern rock. An Armenian dance group



(Left) Mikayel Hovhannisyian guiding a tour in Dadivank.

Note

Birthright Armenia provides the opportunity of a lifetime to Diaspora youth for personal, lifelong and meaningful connection to the Armenian homeland. Diaspora Armenians from the ages of 20-32, who can trace their Armenian heritage to at least one grandparent may apply for the program and must be willing to volunteer in Armenia for at least eight weeks. Volunteerships are performed in a wide choice of sectors, from architecture to medicine, and are tailored to the individual's preferences. The program offers free language classes for those who do not speak Armenian. It also offers a travel fellowship and guarantees free housing within its network of host-families; local families who open their homes to Diaspora youth and treat them like an extension of their family. Weekends are filled with adventure-based excursions. Birthright Armenia organizes meetings with leaders in local businesses, NGO's and civic awareness circles to discuss and grasp a better understanding of reality in Armenia. To learn more about Birthright Armenia, visit www.birthrightarmenia.org.

(Below) Volunteers enjoy a Saturday excursion at Talin and Noravank.



(Right) Zaruhi Avetisyan as a Master of Ceremonies at a boxing match in Yerevan.



(Far right) Juan Karagueuzian believes that watermelons in Armenia taste much better than in his native Argentina.



where they volunteered. Areg Maghakian of San Diego, Calif. and Nyree Abrahamian of Toronto are two former volunteers who currently live and work in Armenia. These two Diaspora Armenians, originally thousands of miles apart, met in Armenia, got engaged, and were married at the majestic Saghmosavank on August 15, 2009. "We met at the Birthright Armenia office where we had gathered to go to a forum. I had just arrived in Armenia a few days prior, and was overwhelmed by all the new people I was meeting, but Areg stood out because he was kind of goofy. A few days later, we went on a Birthright excursion to Artsakh. It was a long bus ride. We talked a lot. The rest is history."

Though volunteering in Armenia allows you to get a feel for what life is like in the country, adjusting to living there long-term while finding work is difficult. The most complicated transition for both Nyree and Areg was that they would be away from their families. At first, it was tricky to find work in Armenia. Now, Nyree works at the National Competitiveness Foundation of Armenia as a Project Coordinator. Areg is currently the Associate Director for Armenia Tree Project in Yerevan.

Birthright Armenia has been an indirect matchmaker to 14 couples – two of which are currently engaged. Fourteen participants currently reside in Armenia and, overall, 25 participants lived long-term in Armenia after their volunteer experiences. Since 2004, over 500 participants from more than 20 countries have dedicated in excess of 100,000 hours, gone on over 34,000 miles on weekend excursions, stayed a total of 16,000 days with host families, and spent more than 3,000 hours in Armenian language classes. The participants of Birthright Armenia have come from various countries. The program has hosted volunteers from the United States, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Denmark, the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Sweden, Germany, Jordan, Russia, Australia, Lebanon, and Syria, among others. Birthright Armenia allows you to explore your Armenian identity in Armenia. ©

offers free dance lessons once a month open to all. Dance enthusiast, Jennifer Pichard of France attended one of these lessons. The dance instructor was keenly impressed by Jennifer's dancing abilities and asked her to practice regularly with the group. A French-born, quarter Armenian, who had never danced Armenian folk dance, performed with the group, on stage, in front of over a thousand people. "This showed me that besides verbal communication, dance is another way to pass on messages" said Jennifer. On one of our excursions, we went to a village near the region of Talin. There resided families who originated from Sassoun and Mush. They opened their home to us. We dined, drank and spoke with descendants of Sassoun. The grandmothers and mothers were on a quest to marry off their sons and grandsons to the female volunteers. One of them said, "As long as you follow my rules, you are welcome to marry one of my sons." After dinner, they taught us their dances, most of which Jennifer already knew. The older members of the family were correcting those who did not understand the dance moves. Not everyone on that excursion spoke

Armenian, but through food, good company and dance, we understood each other perfectly. Jennifer's grandmother was Armenian and the reason she volunteered in Armenia was because "it was the best compromise not only to discover my grandmother's motherland, but also to be useful to Armenia. It remained the best way to immerse myself in the culture, to mix with locals and to learn the Armenian language." She volunteered with Made in Armenia Direct, an Armenian arts & crafts shop, and at Shen, a non-profit organization that empowers remote villages in Armenia by providing work. "I implemented an experimental project: the culture of lavender as a new source of income for the rural population." Jennifer had a major part in the company because she built stronger ties with France. She plans to return to Armenia to be sure the lavender project is doing well. The majority of Birthright Armenia participants have stated that they will return to Armenia in the future, and many have already done so. Some former volunteers return to Armenia either to work or to volunteer for a longer term; many of them are hired by the organizations