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 by Andrea Bocelli. The next morning, I would be leaving the city I 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 mountain sides, 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 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 1980’s, 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 Armenian 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 deeply. 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 Hays 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, “Every day 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 – 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 Avanesian. “My experiences in Armenia strengthened this bond that I could not fully understand in school. I now comprehend what many teachers meant by our motherland, our history, our art.” For three months, Shuntt volunteered at the Italian Polyclinic Center and Austrian Kinderstipend in Gyumri as a lab technician, and at the Armenian Hospital. Though Shuntt spoke Armenian, he spoke with a different dialect than that of Gyumri and Armenia in general. “I asked for a full bath towel, but got tissues instead. I would ask for a floor rag and in 5+ places, 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 Geghard Monastery. In one of its chapels, Zarushi began to sing Armenian liturgical hymns. The place, very serene, suddenly witnessed great energy as the acoustics in the chapel resonated her words. Zarushi Avanesian was born in Armenia and moved to Peru. Birdsbirth 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. Zarushi 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 March 2009 at the American University of Armenia’s English extension department and at the Speghian 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 Verinace – 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
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. Volunteering is 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.

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 100 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.