

## 2005 Visit to Armenia by VOSH members

VOSH: Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity

Report by trip leader, Dr. Joseph D'Amico

Because my wife, Zabelle (Garabedian) is of Armenian descent, we have had a longstanding interest in Armenia; inevitably, we've been following the problems faced by the Armenian people due to natural disasters and to her aggressive neighbors. With the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Armenia became an independent country. While the country enjoys freedom, the stark reality is that Armenia is enduring even greater economic difficulty than when under Soviet rule, even more so in rural areas. Life was difficult before; it became even worse afterward.

At a continuing education meeting given by the MSO a year and a half ago, I had lunch with Linda Bennett, OD, of Belmont. For a number of years Linda had been providing eye care in her Belmont office to Armenian exchange students and their teachers, most of whom had uncorrected eye problems. After our talk, Linda and I met with the exchange organizer, the Rev. Joanne Hartunian of Belmont, to discuss the logistics of planning a combined VOSH/Armenia clinic and cultural experience.

Through Joanne, our group worked with the Yerevan-Cambridge Sister City Association and the Amaras Arts Alliance to make this trip a reality. We could not have undertaken the project without Rev. Hartunian's previous experience and expertise in leading groups to Yerevan, as well as her connections in Armenia.

Our final team included 18 participants: We had 7 ODs: Linda Bennett, OD, Jim Fantazian, OD, Karen Koumjian, OD, Christine Russian, OD, Irving Tanzman, OD, Taline Farra, OD, and myself, Joe D'Amico, OD. (Of the seven of us, three were Armenian and two were married to Armenian-Americans; Linda Bennett had previously provided eye care for a number of the Armenians who came to Belmont through Joanne's Sister City/Amaras programs; Irving Tanzman had hosted an exchange student from nearby Georgia and wanted to combine this VOSH trip with a visit to her family.

Other team participants included Kim Bennett RN and her daughter Sara, age 13; Alexis Koumjian Cheney (Karen's daughter, age 13); Sandra Grant (Jim's significant other); Wanda Hamilton and Caryl Mikrut, friends who read about the trip on the VOSH website; Kate Russian, (Christine's daughter, age 15; Zabelle D'Amico, (my wife); Barbara Tomasian, (my wife's longtime Armenian-American friend); Joanne Hartunian (our trip organizer) and her friend/colleague Peggy Hovanessian.

Our team ranged in age from 77 to 13. Together we made an awesome team and everyone worked hard – very hard – maybe too hard.

We held 6 clinics during the time we were in Armenia; 3 were in Yerevan, at School #106, School #190 and School # 65. Each school fed us a hearty home-made lunch. On two different occasions we split up and went directly from the clinic to the homes of our

translators where we experienced wonderful Armenian cooking as well as Armenian home life. Guide books had warned us that the best cooking in Armenia would be found in Armenian homes if we were lucky enough to be invited.

Our fourth clinic was in Glazdor in the district of Yeghnadzor, a three-hour bus ride outside of Yerevan, enabling us to stop at Khor Virap where a major pillar of the Armenian Church, St. Gregory, was buried alive for 13 years. Along the way we saw the lush and varied Armenian countryside. In Glazdor we experienced the warm hospitality of translator Karine Apgaryan's parents who are beloved farmers of their village. Her mom and friends demonstrated how lavash is made traditionally by village women (baked in an underground oven) and we were treated to her dad's home-made vodka. The family put on a sumptuous lunch and then a sumptuous dinner that evening after the clinic was over. We got back to Yerevan after 11:00 PM.

Our fifth clinic was in Hrazdan, a village about an hour and a half outside of Yerevan. En route our bus stopped at Lake Sevan. The Hrazdan faculty put on another incredible spread of Armenian foods, including lavash stuffed with spicy greens. As we were about to start the clinic, a group of students marched in to music, then performed songs and poems for us. While most of us did not understand Armenian, it was a moving experience to hear these children recite from memory long poems about their country with much feeling.

Clinic was held in a nursery school which was in session so we had an opportunity to mingle with the children and their teachers. As we left that evening, we noticed that next door some 25 or so women were weaving rugs. It was an Armenian rug factory in the same building as the nursery. We took some glasses and gave them to the weavers.

Our sixth clinic was held on Sunday, April 24, in Parpi, about an hour outside Yerevan. The night before we got in quite late as many of us participated in the Armenian Genocide Rally/March/Service. Because it was the 90th Anniversary of the Genocide, it was a major world-wide observance. We became aware of the world-wide impact only upon returning home.

Because of Joanne and Peggy's working relationship with a Yerevan choral director, he allowed us to ride the bus to the memorial, enabling us to get right into the memorial for the service. Thousands of people took part, many carrying tall torches with real fire, others brandishing the Armenian flag. The evening was balmy, under a full moon. A perfect backdrop for such a moving event.

Despite being tired on Sunday and with 3 ODs now en route home, we still managed to see over 170 patients in Parpi. The school is in tough condition, with gaping wall and ceiling corrosion in a number of places. At our request, prior to the trip, Joanne made contact with a Yerevan Eye Clinic which we toured with the director and other staff members. Also at our request, she made contact with a Yerevan ophthalmology school (the Eighth Clinic) and invited their students to work with us. Eight students volunteered

and appreciated the hands-on experience. Three of the women worked especially long hours throughout all of the clinic days.

When Taline mentioned to me that Schiötz tonometry was still used in Armenia, I gave one of the students my old Schiötz. She was so grateful she brought us small gift just before we departed.

Before any of the clinics got underway, we were greeted by children in traditional costume who helped us carry out a salt ceremony. (A piece of bread is broken off a round loaf, dipped into the salt and then eaten by each person). Other children performed songs, dance and music in their school auditorium.

Our entire stay was jam-packed with experiences. While this is not meant to be a travelogue, we'd like to mention a few, including our visit to Etchmiadzin, the Holy See of the Armenian Apostolic Church, where we prayed in the cathedral, had a tour of the treasures and even the pagan ruins below; Gerhardt (a medieval monastery); Garni (a pagan temple); the Vernissage (weekend open market); the National Gallery of Art; Republic Square; Zvartnots (Ruins of a former cathedral); Sardarabard (Monument to the Heroes of the 1919 Resistance); the Opera and Independence Square; an outstanding performance of the opera Anoush in the restored opera house; a moving ceremony at the Genocide Memorial in commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide.

In general, everyone on the mission agreed that the pace of the trip was grueling, yet none of us would have wanted to eliminate any of the things we did or places we visited. Options for the future would be to reduce the number of clinics, eliminate some of the scheduled group dinners, reduce the number of sights visited but spend more time at those we do visit.

Clinic logistics, facts and figures:

For a listing of facts and figures regarding patients seen, glasses dispensed, glasses made up and referrals, see the attached sheets. We were able to see some 1500 people, many of whom had very high prescriptions. Surprisingly, only 24 referrals were made.

We were able to provide glasses for all who needed them. Not being able to ship glasses back to the people for whom we needed special Rxes, forced us to have the glasses made by a local optician. This caused us to go way over budget. Since returning home we have started an Armenian eyeglass fund with VOSH/NECO. Donations made to date are noted on the attached accounting page.

We brought along 2500 new prescriptions in powers ranging from +1 to + 3.25. We also brought along 300 new adult frames and 50 new children's frames, for prescriptions needing to be made up. In addition, with input from Jim Fantazian and through the connections of Linda Bennett with Essilor, the company made up at no charge, 200 minus prescriptions in frames we sent them.

Obviously, with actual clinic experience behind us, we would do a number of things differently. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. However, in the interest of keeping a few notes to guide us in the future, here are a few clinic notes:

Again, since this was our first trip, we based our glasses/frames inventory on our experience in Nicaragua, but it didn't hold true for Armenia. We found that especially in Yerevan, the capital city, there were a high number of minus prescriptions, many of them quite high (and therefore expensive to make). In the more rural areas where we held clinics, the Nicaragua model held up, with presbyopia being the major problem.

Because of difficulties with customs and to support the local economy, we had the glasses made up there. It proved to be more costly than we anticipated and so we were confronted with the need to do fundraising to pay for them when we got back. An accounting of where we stand regarding finances is listed on another attached sheet. I think it is important to note that everyone who participated in the trip paid for his/her own expenses, airline travel - \$2,000 per person.

Each day presented new setup challenges, all of which were difficult, especially where rooms were small and weren't side by side. Where flooring was wood, large rooms/corridors worked well. However, where corridors were large, barren, with bare cement floors, sounds echoed and it was difficult to work in these spaces. Also, in the last site, the clinic was held on the second floor, making access especially difficult.

In some instances, lensometry station, pretesting were too close to registration table, making it difficult for them to work both because of noise and traffic congestion. In the future we recommend having 2 to 4 or more Armenian/English speaking individuals (depending on size of clinic) to handle registration (including patient history), and that table be placed a distance away from pretesting and lensometry. Registration could easily begin a half hour or more before actual clinic gets underway, so long as there is also someone present to handle crowd control. Indeed, there should be a few people assigned specifically to crowd control. This is an important job, given basic human nature to want to be seen first and inevitable confusion about where to go next once the clinic gets underway.

Exam forms were sent to Armenia for translation. We assumed there would be one form, with the layout exactly as the example we sent, with both English and Armenian listed. Unfortunately, each site reinterpreted the form sent so we did not work with a standardized exam form in each location. Normally, history/questions are asked of patients during registration. In Armenia they were handled ahead of time with some data omitted, notably sex and age of individual. In one location, responses to history/questions were noted on one sheet, in English, but actual exam forms were only in Armenian, making it cumbersome to work with.

Translators: We cannot say enough positive about the translators, many of them teachers or English students, who worked with us throughout the trip without complaining. The Armenian language is difficult/complex and even those who had some command of the language appreciated the assistance. A further word of appreciation to Anna Karakhanian

who was our Yerevan coordinator-the lady constantly on the cell, making things work out, and always with a cheery face. We'd also like to single out Karine Apgaryan, whom we left with the unenviable job of overseeing the work being done by the optician. She has handled it as if it were her own business matter, making sure that the accounting is accurate and that the glasses get to the right school.

Transportation: Joanne had budgeted for a bus and driver to transport/wait for us as needed both in Yerevan and beyond. Raffik, our bus driver, was accommodating and always on time. He did not complain when he had to wait and he was an excellent moodah – lamb slaughterer.

Even as fundraising to meet present obligations is underway, we are considering returning to Armenia in the fall of 2007.