

International Korner

Center for International Social Work Studies

Written by: Cari A. Carter

April 22, 2002

A r m e n i a

Experience of a lifetime...

On March 13th 2002, four students from the University of Connecticut School of Social Work boarded a plane destined for Armenia. These four students carried with them a sense of adventure and curiosity, for they did not know what might be waiting for them in Armenia. The four students are Ashley Testa, a first year Policy and Planning student, Carli Howard, a second year Policy and Planning student both placed at the Institute for the Advancement of Political Social Work, Tom Felke, a second year Administration student and Cari Carter, a first year Community Organization student, both placed at the Center for International Social Work Studies. Each student prepared information on their interest to share with the Armenian students at Yerevan State University in Yerevan, Armenia. Interests included political social work, distance learning and refugee adaptation. The students are a part of an ongoing joint project between the University of Connecticut School of Social Work and Yerevan State University social work program.

HISTORY

The project arose following the 1988 earthquake in Armenia. A graduate from the School of Social Work, Garbis Moushigian an Armenian American, spent a year in Armenia working with a children's mental health program, following the earthquake. While in Armenia, Mr. Moushigian met the head of the Department of Sociology at Yerevan State University, Dr. Ludmila Harourtnian. Through discussions Moushigian and Harourtnian decided to take the first step in creating the profession of social work in Armenia by exploring the possibilities of a joint effort with an American school of social work. Garbis Moushigian returned to the United States and approached Dr. Nancy Humphreys the dean of the School of Social Work at the time. The project was underway by 1991 when a six-month training programs was developed by the collaboration. Between 1994-1995 three six-month training program were completed, graduating more than sixty individuals who were prepared to provide social services to the public. With continued help from their U.S. counterpart, Yerevan State University currently offers a 4 year undergraduate program and a master's degree program in the field of social work. This spring, Dr. Humphreys will receive an honorary doctorate from YSU, in honor of her ten years of continued leadership in the joint project. Also, throughout the development of this project, students from the University of Connecticut School of Social Work have been participating in student exchanges. These exchanges are meant to keep the project moving forward, by sharing information, exposing students on both ends to the reality of social work and infusing social work communities with an international perspective.

THE 2002 EXPERIENCE

The 2002 Armenian experience included meetings with YSU faculty and students, NGO's, government officials and practicing social workers in Yerevan. We also traveled to visit community-based projects for children in the city of Vanadzor (about a 2 hour car ride) and a refugee settlement in the village of Karin. The profession of social work could be found in each of these settings along with a passion to provide assistance to vulnerable populations. The following statements from each student capture the experience best:

Ashley Testa: *"I was amazed by the resiliency of the human condition... [this experience] reinforced my international perspective and desire to reach out to the international community."*

Regarding meetings with two organizations that are focused on assisting Armenia with the restructuring of their government: *"We discussed the struggles other countries have in terms of policy adaptation and implementation, creating an economic infrastructure and maintaining a just and accessible government. Also motivating and mobilizing by providing awareness to citizens of that country... as a social worker these are our challenges. I was interested in the success stories and will inform my own practice and recognize models used in other countries."*

Carli Howard: *"I was constantly amazed by the similarities in problems in the United States and in Armenia. For example, they have problems getting social services to be funded adequately – so do we."*

Regarding the need for an international exchange of information between social work professionals: *"...The United States has been traveling down this road for a long time – and one of the best things I took away was that there is so much for us to share with social workers in Armenia."*

Tom Felke: *"After working for several years with families and children of the same age here in the U.S., I have an enormous amount of respect and admiration for the Armenian children and their families. I used to feel terrible about the situation of the children here in the U.S. and while that has not dissipated completely, I realize that the misfortunes that these children have had they are still more fortunate than their Armenian counterparts."*

Regarding the visit to the refugee settlement: *"A quote that has stuck with me since the trip was that of the Azerbaijani mother who when asked how they get along with three people in one room with little food and income responded simply, 'We just survive.'"*

Cari Carter: *"I was most impressed by the purity of the social work profession, since it is just beginning, it hasn't been diluted with regulations and passivity. My passion for the profession was revived, I feel even more empowered to help others make a difference in their lives, while they unknowingly make a difference in mine."*

Regarding meetings with UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees) and the State Department of Migration and Refugees: *"I was so impressed by both organizations and had to pinch myself because I have read so much about UNHCR that seeing them in action was beyond real."*