

Send Your Kids to Armenia, Says Armenia Travel Author

Volunteer, Study, to Build a Bridge to the Homeland

By Bedros Safarian

(FAIR LAWN, NJ) -- The co-author of the best-selling travel guide “The Stone Garden Guide: Armenia and Karabagh” spoke to a crowd of more than 170 people on March 18 at St. Leon Armenian Church of Fair Lawn, NJ, and encouraged them to send their children to study or volunteer in Armenia as a way of helping the country to thrive.

The author, Matthew Karanian, made his comments as part of an illustrated presentation and photography exhibit. The presentation was one of several that he made during March on the East Coast.

Karanian said the purpose of the book tour was to inspire more members of the community to become “engaged” in helping Armenia to prosper.

“I’m not a travel agent and I don’t have any special interest in promoting tourism to Armenia just for its own sake,” said Karanian. “I want you to go to Armenia because if you go, I’m sure the experience will change your life and inspire you to help Armenia to prosper and thrive,” he said.

“Send your kids and grandkids to Armenia,” Karanian told the group in response to a question about how one can help Armenia without just writing a check.

“If you have children who are in college, send them to Armenia to study for the summer, or to volunteer. If your kids are younger, take them with you,” Karanian said. “The experience will make them life-long advocates of Armenia and they’ll forge lasting relationships with the people there.”

Daily living conditions in Armenia are likely to be less comfortable than they are in the US, especially for visitors who avoid the tourist class hotels. But the sacrifice of material comforts is educational itself, says Karanian, and will “contribute to a greater appreciation” of the challenge of supporting our homeland, he says.

Clearly, Karanian’s opinion is influenced by his own experience. He and co-author Robert Kurkjian first traveled to Armenia in 1995 to teach at the American University of Armenia (AUA). They have each returned each year since then. And Kurkjian’s children, the youngest of whom is 3 years old, have all traveled to Armenia and Karabagh.

Karanian recently completed three years of service as Associate Dean of AUA’s law



program and as the Director of the university's Legal Research Center. He practiced law in Connecticut for 10 years before turning his attention to Armenia. Kurkjian served for several years as the founding Director of AUA's Environmental Conservation and Research Center. They are both Armenian Americans who grew up on the East Coast and now live in the Los Angeles area.

"Except for a brief blip in 1918, this is the first time in hundreds of years that Armenia has been independent," he said. "Why wouldn't you want to go and help?" he asked.

"The Stone Garden Guide: Armenia and Karabagh," contains a section on volunteering, with a list of organizations that accept volunteers. "And language isn't a barrier," Karanian said. "The American University of Armenia sometimes has opportunities for professional volunteers and everything is done in English. In Yerevan, almost everyone speaks English."

Karanian's presentation at St. Leon Armenian Church was one of several events on the East Coast during March. He also spoke at St. Thomas Armenian Church in Tenafly, and at the Armenian General Benevolent Union in New York City. Later this year his tour will take him and co-author Robert Kurkjian to St. Vartan Cathedral in New York, to the Armenian Library Museum of America in Watertown, Mass., and elsewhere in the US and Canada.

The highlight of the presentation is a 35-minute slide show that features photography from throughout Armenia and Karabagh. The images depict the stark differences between urban Yerevan and the most remote parts of Karabagh.

"It's true that Armenia is an open-air museum, but it's also so much more than that," said Karanian. "It's also a thriving, modern, Republic." With those comments, Karanian proceeded to show images that looked as if they had been made in New York or Florida, rather than Armenia: a young man riding a jet ski on Lake Sevan, a bikini-clad woman dipping her toe in the water at a Sevan resort, and a woman shopping at a fashionable Yerevan boutique.

"These images accurately depict one part of Armenia, and are just as accurate as the other images of historic sites or time-worn villagers that you have come to expect" he said. The photographs were a sample of the 135 images that appear in Karanian's and Kurkjian's book.

Their book, the Second Edition of "Armenia and Karabagh" has been the best selling English language book about Armenia since its release in September. The previous edition was Award Finalist for Best Travel Guide in 2005 by the Independent Publishers Association. Sample pages of the book are available online at www.ArmenianTravelGuide.com.

"Armenia and Karabagh" is available for \$29.95 postpaid from Stone Garden Productions; PO Box 7758; Northridge, CA 91327 (Tel. 1-888-266-7331). A list of retail stores where the book is sold can be viewed online at www.StoneGardenProductions.com.

