

Saying Good-Bye...February 12, 2006

How do you say good-bye? Or, how do you get on with life after the loss of someone near and dear?

For the second and third times during my service here, I said good-bye to good friends. And it hurts somewhere deep inside me, even though I always like to appear to be rough and tough, capable of handling anything. I admit that I am just a big, old, mushy, teary-eyed sentimentalist inside. Admitting this fact is no surprise to my friends; that I say it out loud probably is a surprise!



Me & Marcia at the Armenia-Georgia just before Christmas. Photo by N. Nalbaldian

The first good-bye I had to say was when Marcia Evans, an Individual Volunteer in Mission (VIM) from Florida, made a last-minute stop in Armenia just days before heading back to Georgia to board a plane to rendezvous with her husband in England. We lived together nine weeks here and then she went to Georgia for seven weeks. I visited her with Michael Cooney at Thanksgiving and we devised her surprise return here right before our Christmas...and her final departure from the South Caucasus.

It was a surprise to all the UMCOR and Aregak people who befriended her while she was here. But it was also a huge surprise to the folks – Armenians and ex-pats – she befriended at Emile's Irish Pub in Yerevan center.

When I gave her a final hug at the Armenia-Georgia border, I suddenly felt all lonely. Though we were not physically together, we were only a short phone and five-hour drive away. Oh, how I came to love Marcia. And in that momentary hug, I missed her already.

Within the past 10 days, however, I had more good-byes to say. The first was Michael Cooney (remember, I mentioned before that his last name in Armenian language is like FIRETRUCK, but with a few letters missing...so we call him Mr. Mike.) The second person who left was Michael Halbert, the regional finance director for UMCOR in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Mr. Mike is 73, Irish Catholic, one of 12 children and a great friend. Marcia and I met him when we were first invited to The Irish Pub. He had spent nearly every night for the past two years there while working on a municipal water project for an American based non-governmental organization (NGO). A Rhode Island native, he has lived in

Mr. Mike with Zara Yesayan, who also left UMCOR this past week for a new job at a French auditing firm.



different parts of the United States and began traveling the world as a contract employee after retirement. Mr. Mike had been sick since around Christmas, so I made it a point to try to email him at work or see him at the Pub nearly every day. What a blessing it was to befriend such a man, and I wish him joy and contentment as he re-connects with life at home.

Mr. Mike's plane had barely cleared the record-snowfall Armenia landscape has received this winter when it was time to bid adieu to Michael and Tamara Halbert. I shed a few more tears, trying to keep them private because so many people here expect me to be sunshine in their foggy, snowy, worried lives here.



The Halberts (center) Tamara and Michael at the UMCOR Christmas party before leaving for Georgia.

above the U.S. Department of Agriculture office and its local spin-off NGO Center for Agribusiness and Rural Development. There's also Canadian Aaron Harden and his wife, Ada, from Mexico who are friends from church. And there are other ex-pats I meet at various functions.

But Marcia, Mr. Mike and Michael were great friends and interesting people to spend time with, each with their own stories to tell. It was hard to see them go. And for a moment, I was sad and felt lonely. Yet, I remind myself daily that they are not gone forever. They just not physically my life – just like I'm not physically in everyone's life back home. Thanks to email, though, we can share stories and insights at a few strokes of the keys and a click of the mouse. And we can even call, just to hear each other's voice and to make sure we're OK.

These experiences also make me think about permanently losing loved ones. My great-aunt Vera Dorfmeister died just before I came here. Gary's aunt Arline died while I was here. The woman in the apartment on the first floor died while Marcia and I were here, and we only realized what the huge gathering of people meant when we saw the coffin lid sitting next to the door one evening during the home visitation. I went to see Clarence Lehman, 96, at the town dump before I left, giving him a big hug and realizing it could be the last time I see him. There are no email

Michael, Tamara and I would get into great political debates about life in the South Caucasus. Of course, Tamara had more insights than either of us because she is Georgian. Michael had more than I because he has lived and worked here for several years. I always went away feeling somewhat defeated and frustrated, yet wiser for the encounter. It also gave me great fodder about which to talk during my Business Management Ethics class with 4th year students.

Now the UMCOR office is down to ex-pats Scottish-English Michael Foster, the farm program director, and me. The UMCOR micro-lending program AREGAK office downtown includes French Canadian Serge Beaudry. Of course, there is also Dr. Daniel Dunn at the Agribusiness Teaching Center, located

messages for those of us left behind. A phone call goes unanswered. We feel sad and lonely because they are no longer physically in our lives.

Yet I believe the greatest gift we can give to people we lose in our lives – whether temporarily because of a move or permanently because of a death – is to let the light they put into our lives shine through us onto others. Recall their words of wisdom. Live our lives fully, with joy, peace, love and faith.

It's the same thing we started doing 2,006 years ago when God's only Son said good-bye to us. We could have felt sad and lonely. Instead, we ensure His light shines in us and through us in our daily actions. We read His word to affirm His wisdom for our lives. We grow where He plants us so that we are filled with joy, peace, love and faith in service to Him. All these things, along with prayer, allow us to remain connected to our best friend, God.

Peace!

Pamela J. Karg