



The Irish Pub – *written March 26, 2006 in Armenia, edited April 13, 2006 in America*

I know, your first question is, “An Irish pub in Armenia?” followed by “A Volunteer in Mission (VIM) in a pub?” Both are valid questions.

The answer to the first is, “Why not?” I’ve been to the famous Irish pub in
Edgar, Nicolas and me a few months ago.

Washington, D.C. with my friend,

Cheri Johnson. There are Irish pubs, as well as German, Chinese, Mexican, Thai and even Texan taverns and restaurants everywhere. Even in Armenia.

In fact, the former UMCOR Head of Mission Warren Harrity met his wife, Suthira, in Afghanistan where they were working – him for an NGO and her in a Thai restaurant. The restaurant owner was even written up in *The Wall Street Journal* because she follows world crisis and sets up restaurants in their wake. Soldiers, peacekeepers, insurgents, negotiators, journalists – they all have to eat.

So, why not an Irish pub in Armenia?

People are both surprised and amused by the idea. Its décor is fairly good Irish, based on what Mum, my aunt, cousin and I saw in Ireland just a year ago. It’s definitely not the typical ostentatious décor one finds in most Armenian restaurants, so that makes it a fairly good Irish replica. It’s classy and even soothing, like a comfortable pair of old shoes. It’s more Irish than Yerevan’s Miami club is Florida or its Niagara Club is New York/Canada. So it’s good.



‘The Gang’ from ATC on St. Patrick’s Day

I guess one of the amusing parts is thinking—and knowing—the creator of The Irish Pub never set foot in Ireland. Yet through donations from one ex-pat after another, The Pub has assembled both Irish memorabilia as well as Irish music.



It’s also amusing to find businesses of different nationalities in places. Mum and I went to a Chinese restaurant in New Brunswick. Aunt Dorothy Gilkes, Cousin Karen Thulli, Mum and I went to a Chinese restaurant in Ireland. I’ve also eaten at a Thai, Chinese, Indian and Mexican restaurant while in Yerevan.

Those crazy Germans (seated) and Oksana behind the bar.

When you think about it, though, it probably shouldn't seem odd. Or, we should think of America as being just as odd. We're a mixture of everything and we definitely find all of it on any typical small-town street. How often Mum and I have visited a Serbian or natural or Mexican or French restaurant in Milwaukee. We think nothing of it, yet it tickles people to do the same in a foreign country like Armenia.

Now, the answer to your second question is: "Yeah, we go to The Pub." Being human, being from Wisconsin where there's a pub on every corner, knowing even Jesus served wine on his final night with his Disciples, I admit I go to The Pub.



Edward posing for Nicolas and Argam



Manager Aram (center) with Frank from the gold mining company, along with a geologist from South Africa

On a VIM team, we sign a covenant of no smoking, drinking or swearing while serving domestically or abroad. It makes sense as we represent ourselves, our communities and our church to the rest of the world. We've had team members buy rum in Jamaica to drink back home. We've eaten in restaurants and taverns/bars/pubs that also serve alcohol. People brought whiskey back after a team traveled through Kentucky.

As an Individual VIM, you do what is culturally appropriate and what is sensible for yourself. You set limits so as not to offend others nor embarrass yourself, community, church or even your nation. Marcia and I, and then me alone, are always mindful of why we are here and what is appropriate for people serving in our unique positions. We are also ever mindful of the call we received from God to serve and what He expects of us.

We started visiting The Pub almost immediately after Mick Foster, UMCOR farm program manager, suggested a stop. I'd never been to any Armenian bar during my previous service, so I welcomed the adventure. And what an adventure it has been!

We have been blessed in our visits by meeting many new people in Armenia for many reasons. Our most precious blessings have been in meeting and befriending 73-year-old Michael Cooney who has now returned to New England after two years working on a water utility project; theology student, former bar manager and now translator for an Australian gold-mining company Argam Mughdusyan; multi-language bartender Oksana; and French cooking teacher Nicolas. Each is a good friend who you can count on to tell you the truth, help you out for no reason other than you need it, and laugh with you when you might otherwise feel like crying.

Along the way, I've also met THE Germans who drink heavily every night and go to work each day in the aluminum factory; Armenian-Ukrainian bartender Edward; Edgar the little guy and translator;



UMCOR's Mick and Vahan eating corned beef.

US Embassy no-problem's-too-big employee Randy Naylor; current manager Aram; a bunch of Australians with various jobs and one New Zealander geologist; some of the 90+ Peace Corps workers in Armenia, a few of them while they were on their way to watch the Super Bowl in the middle of the night on big TVs at the Marriott; Torgen the Dutch guy arrested when he flew through Dubai only because of his nationality and its connection to the anti-Muslim cartoons published a few months ago; Gourgen the crazy journalist I used as the basis for my column and a

sermon "To Be or To Have"; a former Armenian Red Cross worker now studying metals as well as learning Japanese; an Armenian who speaks great American English but with a heavy Texas drawl after working with the construction workers who built the US Embassy; and even some visiting Irishmen who work for an NGO (non-governmental organization). My ATC students have even stopped in, though they sat at a table, which is typical of Armenians whereas ex-pats generally feel most comfortable sitting at the bar.

There are many, many more people and all are acquaintances with whom you can share a little bit of everyday life. It's such an international experience...almost like a mini-vacation. And that's an important part of stopping, too. There are days when it's difficult to be a 46-year-old independent American woman in a different culture. At The Pub, you can just be who you are and not get the stares that are commonplace everywhere else.

Everyone knows why I'm in Armenia and they respect me and my call. Often, I drink a few cups of coffee, a pot of Armenian tea or a few bottles of Jermuk carbonated water. Sometimes, I decide to have a glass of Kotyak beer or Areni wine.

In the process, many people have turned to me for a soothing word, an opinion or an explanation as they share their worries, fears, joys or questions about life or their own faith. I often told former manager Argam that being a theology student was probably good training for being a good bartender. Both have to deal with our very human frailties and both possess the power to say the right words that can point a person in a better direction.

So that's The Pub. If you come to visit, we'll stop for a pot of tea, a Jermuk or even a little snifter of 20-year-old Armenian cognac. Please, though, remember to bring a package or two of corned beef. I think it's better than gold and then we can have a "true" Irish experience in Armenia!

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...and now resting for a few weeks in Baraboo, Wisconsin*