

Teaching Armenians, Georgians at ATC

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Contributing Writer*

Living and teaching in another country can give a person a whole new perspective. I know it has done so for me as I begin my second year teaching public speaking at the Agribusiness Teaching Center (ATC), a department of the Armenian Agricultural Academy in Yerevan.

Two years ago this month, I first visited Armenia to help the United Methodist Committee on Relief non-governmental organization (UMCOR NGO) mark its 10th anniversary here. During that time, I also learned about ATC and received an invitation to teach there, if I ever returned to this South Caucasus Mountain country.

A few days after returning to Armenia in September 2005, I received an email from Dr. Daniel Dunn. A Wisconsin native and University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate, he heads up ATC and wanted to know if I'd teach public speaking to incoming students. A bit peeved at getting the invitation after returning – rather than before I left America so I could pack the right supplies – I agreed. I also taught business management ethics to fourth-year students.

I've always had a great appreciation for education in America. My grandmother was a teacher, as were some of my aunts and an uncle. I sat on the Milwaukee school board as the high school representative and I've always covered education as a reporter for various newspapers.

Yet, stepping into a classroom – and in a foreign country – opened my eyes even further. I'm not sure I could teach in traditional American schools, but here I think I've had a far-reaching impact on the lives of young Armenians and young Georgians. They have impacted my life, as well. In fact, the experience is one of the reasons I felt I must return to serve here.

ATC is administered by the International Center for Agribusiness Research and Education (ICARE) through a cooperative agreement between the U.S. Department of Agriculture Foreign Agricultural Service and Texas A&M University. ICARE also includes the Career Placement and Counseling Center, ATC Research Group and ATC Outreach. The department and ICARE value modern agribusiness and marketing education and research in Armenia and Georgia. Students enrolled in either the Armenian or the Georgian agricultural universities complete a written test and an oral interview before being selected to attend ATC during their third and fourth years of college. Families will literally mortgage their homes and sell off possessions to come up with the \$300 to \$500 annual tuition needed to send a son or a daughter to university. Those who know about ATC will do whatever they can to come up with the money so a child can attend.



ATC's Fifth-Year students, also known as Super Seniors or, as they like to call themselves, Super Angels, during one of their agricultural and business tours to southern Armenia. Here they toured a gold mine to find out how it operates, regulations it must follow and its impact on the area.



ATC Juniors during their day-long tours of wineries, vegetable canning operations and Khor Virap, the Armenian Apostolic Church that sits at the foot of Mt. Ararat.

Unlike America where less than 2 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture, Armenia alone has 45 percent of its labor force employed in agriculture. In addition to a need to organize subsistence farmers with small tracts of land, most producers have limited knowledge of modern cropping and animal husbandry practices due to a lack of suitable training. In some cases, people lack experience since they never imagined, prior to Armenia's independence in 1991, that they would someday need to know about agriculture just to grow enough food to support their families. Also, when the collective farms were privatized into small family plots, some previous farm workers had not been exposed to

the entire production system and lacked a comprehensive knowledge of how its pieces fit together. The situation is similar in Georgia.

The agricultural sectors in both countries need more investment and updated technology. While ATC cannot pour that money into the sectors, it can invest in educating tomorrow's agricultural leaders to understand the dynamics of moving from a closed Communist system to a globalized capitalist economy. It's done western-style. Students are encouraged to share their independent ideas and opinions regardless of whether they conform to society's norms – a radical approach here. Yet with nearly 100 percent literacy in Armenia, for example, education is paramount and ATC graduates have gone on to earn master's degrees and Ph.D.s in some of America's best schools. They've also landed good jobs in emerging agribusinesses, in a country like Armenia where unemployment runs between 30 and 40 percent.

Into this scenario I step to help students research and organize their thoughts and effectively deliver speeches in a third language (they know their respective national languages as well as Russian and now English!) Simplistically, I tell them their goal is to "stand and deliver." They practice by giving occasional, one-minute speeches on any topic I might select or role-playing in scenarios I create from watching daily life here. They also have to give three formal, outlined presentations that may include PowerPoint visuals.

Beyond the classroom, however, I try to instill in these students a sense of pride in themselves, to find joy in even the smallest things in life, and to bring forward their abilities to fulfill the promises their parents see in them. People over age 35 or so say they fought for independence on behalf of their children – these now 18- to 21-year-olds in my class. The hopes and dreams of an entire nation ride on the shoulders of these young people, and they take seriously those responsibilities. There are few all-night parties or



With some of the Fourth Year students in mid-July 2006 after returning to Armenia.

missed assignments. They take it all in and become excited when they figure out how to take what they've learned and apply it to their everyday lives.

And, as a volunteer working in Armenia but with no known Armenia heritage, I am also teaching the students about serving others – to strangers. It's an uncommon practice here. Rather, people spend so much time helping their own extended families that they never consider the idea of volunteering to help total strangers. So the students gave speeches about organizations such as UMCOR, Habitat for Humanity and Heifer Project International. It fired them up to plan their own visit to a local orphanage and others are becoming volunteers with these types of organizations. It has given them more experience, which will someday help them in their careers as well as help them build their nations.

So it has been pure joy to accept a teaching position at the ATC. Sometimes, it can be a little hectic juggling it with my UMCOR duties. Yet the rewards I get are immeasurable when the lights flick on and that shy student stands with confidence to deliver a well-reasoned opinion.

(This is the third story in a series by Pamela J. Karg, an award-winning journalist and photographer who has called Sauk County home for some 25 years, but now is answering a new call to serve as a volunteer at UMCOR-Armenia. She is a member of the Denzer and North Freedom United Methodist churches. Her stories will appear here periodically. You can also go to her website at www.dwave.net/~pjkarg/ to read more or to email her.)