

## **Frequently Asked Questions** (by people in Armenia and back home)

### **Where are you from?**

I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (north of Chicago). After two years studying at night and on weekends at the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Milwaukee while holding down at least two jobs, I transferred to the University of Denver. I didn't know if I wanted to be a journalist, an attorney or a pastor. I studied mass communications, but took classes in the other areas as well as women's studies, sociology, geology. I started my professional journalism career at the Baraboo, Wisconsin, *News-Republic* daily newspaper. In 1985, I joined the award-winning communications staff at Foremost Farms USA Cooperative, one of the largest dairy cooperatives in the United States. After 10 years, I started my own freelance communications business, which I still operate today from Armenia. I'm the oldest of three children. My father passed away in 1995, but my mother continues to live in Milwaukee. My brother is a structural engineer and owns his own business, while his wife is a social worker. Their two grown sons attend the UW-Oshkosh and the UW-Madison. My sister has worked in the social worker area, though her degree is in art education. Her husband works in printing. My sister's grown son attends Milwaukee Area Technical College.

### **How did you find Armenia, or how did it find you?**

Actually, it's my mother's fault. In the early 2000s, she wanted to go on an adult UM VIM trip after years of chaperoning teenagers on their own mission trips around the United States. We went to Koinonia Farm near Americus, Georgia (the state, not the republic), to a program I explain as the pre-cursor to Habitat for Humanity. However, she longed to travel abroad, so we started our international UMVIM experiences in Jamaica in January 2003. While fixing toilets and putting on new roofs are her forte, I'm pretty good at hauling wheelbarrows of rock, painting and fetching bottled water or frozen fruit juice for team members. I began to search for a mission experience where I could use my communications skills and found in a regional church newsletter such a request. By the time I replied to that particular volunteer job, it was filled. They asked if I would help UMCOR Armenia mark its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of service. I thought, "Well, I can do communications and I played the contra-alto clarinet in 'Armenian Dances' in both the Bay View High School band and the community Lake Band, so I guess I'm qualified." After working online for several months, the Armenians encouraged me to come nearly half-way around the world for a few months. We negotiated down to six weeks and it was a big mistake. When the six weeks ended, I knew there was something about the people I met, their stories of struggles and triumph, their needs and even this ancient place that goes as far back as Noah's Ark that touched the core of my soul. In September 2005, I returned for six months and have virtually remained, except for a three-month trip back to Wisconsin in spring 2006.

### **How long will you serve in Armenia?**

I will serve in Armenia until God puts something or some place else in my heart. I truly feel called by God to be here and to do what I can to help people living in Armenia. My help may be in the form of communications or teaching. Often it's "putting God's love in action" to help people remember that life isn't easy, but that God is always with us to carry our burdens, if we ask Him. It may be an embracing hug to someone who lost a loved one or doesn't know God is there. Maybe I share small words of faith to Christians who struggle to break free of atheism or pagan wives' tales and rituals. Perhaps I collect cast-offs from departing Americans and others to

re-distribute to needy orphans or the elderly in remote villages. Surely, there are daily, random acts of small kindnesses towards strangers, in front of others, to demonstrate that God's love is for everyone.

There are days when I really have to ask God if the frustrations, worries or sheer exhaustion I carry are what He intends. Then He sends me moments filled with so much joy that I know this is where He wants me to be right now.

I remain until He says it's time to go.

### **How can you afford to do this?**

There is some confusion. I have always thought "volunteer" means "unpaid helper" or "unpaid assistant," as my handy MS Word thesaurus also shows. People are often taken aback when they learn neither UMCOR nor the church provide a stipend. Moreover, I've offended other "volunteers" who receive a very small stipend to do their truly good works in Armenia. Yet there is a difference, though I mean neither offense nor disrespect to people who have left everything behind to come to this emerging Third World country to help make a positive difference.

I am able to serve because of the generosity of family and friends who donate money through their own churches to me. Alternatively, if they have no church, I write them a receipt from The United Methodist Church for their tax advisor. I have wonderful friends who have given me their frequent flyer miles so I can return home for a visit. Still others have given me their unused or unnecessary-to-take-home items when they leave so I can have something new, something American or something to give to those in dire need. Often, people have lovingly brought me a "can't find" or "cheaper in America" item, or carried letters home for family and friends.

I have complete faith and trust in God to provide for me, though the experience of serving others who have so little has shown me how little I truly need.

Yet, as my pastor and girlfriend says, I cannot be too blind to my needs. She reminds me to take some steps towards ensuring funds so I can remain in service. Therefore, I continue Karg Communications, writing articles about my experiences or those of other volunteers I meet, and updating websites. Editing and teaching/tutoring jobs at Armenian wages earn me money towards rent, utilities (my two biggest expenses), food and my UMCOR insurance. In addition, I'm now living with two young Armenians so we can cut expenses, while enjoying life as a quasi-family – aunt, niece and nephew – in a culture that treasures these ties above all worldly possessions.

People moved to give in some way should write to me at [pjkarg@baraboo.com](mailto:pjkarg@baraboo.com) to discuss further. Or, click on Wish List from my site's menu options.