

Community

Ground is broken for new Fresno school

by Sarah Soghomonian

FRESNO, Calif. — After 30 years of being the guest in someone else's house, the Armenian Community School of Fresno has its own home. Parents, students and local supporters got their first look at the new location of the school during a groundbreaking ceremony held July 1.

The day's celebration represents a complete turnaround from the Armenian Community School's (ACS) situation four months ago. The school's future was uncertain. Their landlord, the Catholic Diocese of Fresno, had decided not to renew the lease of the St. Therese Cathedral campus the school occupied.

Relief came in the form of a generous donation from Southern California philanthropist Charlie Keyan. His donation of \$685,000 allowed the financially stricken school to purchase property. The new location in Clovis, which borders Fresno on the north and east, was previously used as a church facility.

"It is a dream come true," said Dzovig Kutumian, the daughter of the school's founder Rev. Kourken Yarialian. "It's something we've wanted for years and now we have a permanent home for our kids."



Children help break the ground for the new Armenian Community School.

Kutumian, who has two children enrolled in ACS hopes ownership of the school's facility will benefit ACS financially through increased enrollment and newfound community support. "To be honest I don't know why we haven't had our own school considering we have so many Armenians here," she said.

The groundbreaking ceremony held on the 2.3-acre property, brought out more than 200 supporters. Clergy members from five local Armenian churches blessed the soil and prayed for the school's continued success.

It was also announced that the school would be renamed to honor Charlie Keyan. The new name will be the "Charlie Keyan Armenian School."

Board members hope the change in location signals a new birth for ACS. "There's been a gradual decrease in enrollment for the past six years," said Randy Baloian, past ACS board president and current treasurer. "Essentially, the new location gives us the opportunity to reverse this downward trend."

The school's previous location was near Fresno's downtown, which

isn't in close proximity to the areas in which most students live. "We anticipate that the enrollment of our nursery and pre-kindergarten class will really benefit from the Clovis location," Baloian said. "Most parents need some form of daycare and we think the new site will be closer and more convenient for families living in the north part of town."

Now that ACS has property, construction of new buildings is the next goal. Classes, which resume in September, will temporarily be held in portable classrooms. "We estimate the school will need approximately \$1.5-2 million to begin construction," Baloian said. "Charlie has given us a new direction, but there's still a long way to go until we've reached our destination."

This means fundraising efforts will be stronger than ever, Baloian said. The school is looking for monetary donations along with donations of building materials, school supplies and equipment.

"The best form of support is for families to send their children to the school," Baloian said. "The Fresno Armenian school offers a quality alternative to overcrowded public classrooms."

ACS educates children from nursery to sixth grade. Classroom sizes are small because the school only averages about 90 students.

Berj Apkarian attended the groundbreaking ceremony with his family. He says he chose to send his three children to ACS because of its reputation for academic excellence. ACS regularly performs highly on standardized tests, such as SAT 9. "Scholastically the school is very good," Apkarian said. "Socially it allows my children to learn about their heritage and culture in a safe-environment."

Many alumni attended the groundbreaking ceremony. They reminisced about the time they spent at ACS. "I cherish my six years at this school," said Viky Yarialian-Mitrovich, who now lives in San Diego, Calif. "My heart is going to always be with this school."

Yarialian-Mitrovich began attending ACS the year it opened, in its first home, at Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church. "It was very personal and family oriented," she said. "We learned a lot about what it means to be Armenian."

While ACS is the only Armenian school in the Central Valley, Yarialian-Mitrovich says there isn't an Armenian school in San Diego.

"It's a jewel. I encourage all he Armenian parents to send their children here," Yarialian-Mitrovich said. "I'm jealous. I wish I could send my son here." ❧

Could you forgive your son's murderer?

by Brandon Lowrey

PASADENA, Calif. — Leticia Aguirre never got to throw her son his 18th birthday party.

On May 5, 2000, Raul Aguirre, 17, didn't come home from school. Leticia Aguirre grew worried as she began making dinner. The school called, saying he had been hurt.

Raul was stabbed once in the back and twice in the heart by teenage Armenian gang members as he tried to break up a fight involving one of his friends. He died just a few hours after his family rushed to the hospital.

Raul was not involved with gangs.

During his sentencing, one of the young killers begged Leticia's forgiveness. And for just a moment, she put herself in his shoes — he was scared, and practically a child. The 19-year-old, who was 15 at the time of the murder, was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Justice was served, and it was time to forgive him, she told listeners Saturday at the Forum on Forgiveness.

The forum operated on a simple principle: In order to break the cycle of violence, one must learn compassion, sympathy, and forgiveness.

Father Vazken Movsesian, a priest at Saint Peter Armenian Church and Youth Ministries Center, founded the group as a way of dealing with the Armenian Genocide.

Armenians, Movsesian said, have been caught up in seeking recognition for their genocide.

"In a sense, we don't need the recognition. We already know it happened," he said. Meanwhile, the atrocities in Darfur are ongoing. "It's the only genocide we can actually do something about."

His group looks beyond political or ethnic lines to provide relief to fellow human beings.

"We're trying to help anyone who suffers," said Father Movsesian, "and the reason is because we at one time suffered, too."

Perhaps 150 people attended the forum on Saturday. The signifi-



A giant circle of forgiveness. Photos: Don Miller.

icance of the date — 7-7-7 — came from the words of Jesus, the group said: "Lord, how many times must I forgive someone who has hurt me? Not seven times, but seven times seventy-seven times."

Among the speakers featured was Ben Kayumba, field activities coordinator for Solace Ministries, which tends to orphans and widows in the devastated African nation of Rwanda. He had lost 152 members of his family, including both of his parents, during the 100-day genocide. But he said that forgiveness has allowed him to cope with his pain.

The forum was hosted by In His Shoes, a group founded by young people, who in light of the Armenian Genocide, say that those who have suffered evil have a responsibility to take action against injustice to others.

Artist Gregory Beylerian photographed each of the forum's participants in a stance symbolic of forgiveness, which he will use to patch together a piece of art in honor of the event's theme.

Armenian rock star Gor Mkhitarian played his signature blend of modern and Armenian folk music for the crowd at the forum.

On Friday, the group showed the film *Sand and Sorrow* to an audience of more than 200. The documentary,

produced by Paul Freedman — who attended the event — and narrated by George Clooney, explores the atrocities currently unfolding in Darfur. An estimated 2.5 million people have been displaced there, and more than 400,000 have died so far.

And the filmmakers also examine the international community's failure to act.

In addition to examining historical atrocities, the group has focused on trying to draw attention to contemporary tragedies, like those taking place daily in Darfur.

The Pasadena-based In His Shoes is dedicated to anyone who suffers for any reason, including all of those affected by genocide, war, or other strife. It recently joined an antiwar protest in Los Angeles, lamenting the fact that nearly 4 million Iraqis have fled their homes since the war's start.

He said that instead of sending "peacekeeping" troops with guns and bombs, those who seek peace should instead try to place themselves in the shoes of those who are suffering.

"We tried it in Iraq and it didn't work," he said. "You can't just send in troops anywhere you have problems." ❧

connect:
www.inhishoes.org



From left: Benjamin Kayuma and his wife Stephanie Uwumuremyi, artist Gregory Beylerian, speaker Leticia Aguirre, Fr. Vazken Movsesian, event organizer Suzie Shatarevian, and event coordinator Anita Issagholyan.



Participants ceremonially release petals to the wind as cares, worries, and hurt are forgiven.