

Taking a Leap of Faith: A Look Back at 20 Years
By Sharistan Ardhaljian

It was September 1984 when five understandably proud members of a board of directors, eight brave students with their matching homemade yellow lunch boxes, and two teachers, one of whom is still with the school today, stood with the late Archbishop Mesrob Ashjian, Rev. Torkom Hagopian of St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church, and a host of community members in front of the Armenian Cultural and Educational Center (ACEC) on Nichols Avenue in Watertown, and took the first steps into what had only been a dream for years: an Armenian nursery school which promised to become a first-rate Armenian elementary school.

St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School has more than fulfilled that promise.

Maral Derderian, who teaches Nursery II today, took those first steps 20 years ago with those eight students. Derderian said everyone, including then-head teacher Paula Greene and herself, participated in getting the school ready, from buying the right size furniture and supplies to painting the classrooms. Derderian credits Greene as being an "excellent head teacher who taught [her] a lot."

"It was a lot of work," said Derderian, "especially in the beginning. I started as a teacher's aid and the Armenian language teacher." The days were long. At that time, the school offered a late-stay program until 5:00 pm. Most students participated in that program. And there were only two teachers, so each took turns supervising the late stay program. And once a month, the school held parent meetings keeping parents well informed as to what the students were learning and how the school was operating.

St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church had a vision and a dream and entrusted an enormously honorable job to an equally determined board of directors.

Yervant Krafian, Missak Barsoumian, Arpy Davis, Araxy Khanjian, and the late Jirayr Gharibian were appointed to the first board of directors to give an entire generation of Armenian-Americans the opportunity to obtain the best Armenian education possible. It was something that two generations of Armenian-Americans hadn't been able to do. This group was determined.

Rev. Hagopian of St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church shepherded this board and subsequent boards that would follow in its footsteps.

The school had an admirer, of sorts, Hagopian admits, even before it opened. When Gabriel Ayvazian, a survivor of the Genocide, heard of the church's desire to open a school, he made a substantial donation to the church to be used exclusively for the opening of a day school. Unfortunately, Ayvazian didn't live long enough to see the school open. He, too, would have been proud that amazing fall day.

The school's board of directors expanded over the years to include many active members of the community including Astor Guzelian, who served as chairman of the school board for almost ten years, the late Kevork Donabedian, Kohar Tololyan, Ruben Surenian, Mardig Petrosian, Zareh Gregorian, Garbis Zerdelian, Gregory Avedikian, Dr. Mirhan Artinian, Nubar Afeyan, Vazken Basmajian, Maro Minassian, Heather Krafian, Rosemary Khachadourian, Rosine Patterson, Dr. Shahe Fereshetian, Fimi Khachadourian, Dr. Vicken Babikian, Alice Barsoomian, Armine Chorbajian, Zovig Kanarian, Ani Sahakian, Hagop Nercessian, Sonya Nercessian, and Naila Jirmanus.

Today's board of directors includes a diverse group of active members of the Boston area Armenian-American community. Rev. Antranig Baljian, principal Houry Boyamian, St. Stephen's Board of Trustees liaison Ruben Surenian, and co-chairmen John Aftandilian and Dr. Vatche Serederian work with Tavit Ohanian, Raffi Festekjian, Nigoghos Atinizian, Karnig Ostayan, Vahe Gharaman, Jean Jacques Hajjar, Sarkis Ourfalian, former speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives George Keverian, and Heather Krafian.

The school also boasts a prestigious Honorary Board including Archbishop Oshagan Choloyan, the Rev. Hagopian, Noubar Afeyan, John Baronian, Anthony Barsamian, Jack Der Avedissian, Bill Ishkanian, Yervant Krafian, Astor Guzelian, and the late John O'Connor.

When asked why St. Stephen's opened its doors in 1984, Guzelian says "the demand in the community for an Armenian day school was enormous. And, it wasn't easy," he insists. But Rev. Hagopian and the board of directors were determined to do whatever it took to ensure the school's success.

Guzelian believes that putting the school in firm financial shoes, albeit a very difficult task, is part of what makes the school so successful today. Of course, he adds, "St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School has been very lucky in that we have attracted extremely talented teachers."

In June 1991, Sevan Kazandjian, Raffi Papazian, Dikran Sarkissian, and Aida Melkeshian became St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School's first graduates. These four students walked in the door not knowing exactly what to expect. Neither did their parents, who should be commended for their faith and for entrusting the education of their children to St. Stephen's. Those parents took a chance and it was that chance that made Sevan, Raffi, Dikran, and Aida the first of many successful graduates.

In June 2004, St. Stephen's graduated its 14th class with 14 students. And the 2004 class wasn't just the 14th graduating class. That wouldn't have been enough for this school that continues to strive for more. In 2004, the school organized the first annual graduating class trip to Armenia, enriching its curriculum, by ensuring that every graduate of St. Stephen's has an opportunity to visit their homeland.

When he received news that the St. Stephen's fifth grade students spent May 28 at the monument to the battle of Sardarabad in Armenia, Archbishop Oshagan Choloyan said, "What I would have done to spend Armenian Independence Day in Armenia when I was 12."

In 1985, the school approached Lilly Barsoumian and asked her to help the existing eight students prepare for their first year-end programs. Barsoumian has been bringing musical excitement to the school ever since. Today, she not only continues to help students and teachers prepare for their Christmas concerts and year-end programs, she also offers private piano lessons to elementary students.

Throughout the years, the school has had the luxury of a highly active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). Most schools only dream of a PTO with as much energy and commitment as the one at St. Stephen's. This PTO not only raises much needed funds (it raised \$30,000 at a wine tasting benefit), but organizes enrichment programs like a Christmas family night, and serves hot lunch once a week.

In 1988, the school did something that its first board chairman Yervant Krafian believes is one of the school's most valuable accomplishments: the school hired Houry Boyamian as the school's principal.

Boyamian, the daughter of Karnig Panian who was not only one of the first graduates of the Neshan Palanjian Jemaran in Lebanon but later became its principal, came to this position with her own accomplishments. She was a skilled pharmacist and had previously taught Armenian language at St. Stephen's. With her new job in hand, Boyamian sought to bring excellence to the school and began and finished a masters degree in education at the University of Massachusetts.

But Boyamian wasn't actually the school's first principal. In 1986, the school hired Takouhy Papazian from Montreal who was to serve as the school's first principal. Papazian served the school for a very short time, commuting from Montreal. But, that weekly commute just didn't work. And later, Zovic Hagopian Kanarian answered the call and served as acting principal.

Boyamian, however, has served the school for over 16 years bringing a strong sense of identity coupled with a dedication to the best education possible.

In 1997, St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School responded to yet another demand in the community and added a pre-nursery section to its curriculum. What is pre-nursery, many might ask? Pre-nursery is a class designed specifically for students who are not three years old by the school's deadline for nursery school, which is September 1, but who turn three-years old before the end of the calendar year.

And in 1998, St. Stephen's opened a brand new nursery building which now houses six classrooms. Realizing that the demand for an Armenian education exceeded the space available at the ACEC, the school board approached St. Stephen's Church which decided that the building at 46 Elton Avenue, which had previously served the church with rental income, would house the new nursery building. The new building opened to an awestruck community, providing a beautiful playground and five classrooms to accommodate the growing demand for an Armenian education.

During the summer of 2004, the school expanded the nursery building once again to include a sixth classroom due to still growing demand. Today, close to 200 students and 30 faculty members are housed in two buildings in the block between Artsakh Street and Nichols Avenue.

In 2003, following intense preparation, curriculum assessment, and evaluation, St. Stephen's school became the first and only Armenian day school in New England fully accredited by the Association of Independent Schools in New England.

In 1984, the tuition at St. Stephen's nursery school was \$1,200. Today families pay substantially more than that. But when the school board made the difficult yet anticipated decision to raise tuition, they did so knowing that parents could certainly choose to send their children to public school. They also knew that if the school was going to offer students the best education possible, it had no other choice but to increase the tuition.

Krafian says this was a calculated risk without which the school would not be where it is today. "We were able to hire more teachers, the best teachers possible. We have better space. The school grew because it finally could." And, the school couldn't have done that without increasing the tuition. When asked what he thinks of the school today, after 20 years, Krafian says, "It is great and I know it will continue to grow."

Almost every parent asked excitedly exclaimed, "Hail to Mrs. Artemis [Megerdichian] and Mrs. Anahid [Joubanian], who not only teach our children to read and write but also to love our language and take pride in being Armenian-American."

Agreeably, the teaching, administrative, and maintenance staff at St. Stephen's is made up of an amazingly dedicated group of individuals, who together make St. Stephen's extraordinary.

Of course, every family has its own reasons for sending their children to St. Stephen's. But it is obvious that families are grateful to the first board members and the subsequent ones that followed as well as the St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church not only for their commitment to preserving the Armenian language, but for taking that leap of faith in 1984.

Congratulations, St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School, and good luck in the next 20 years.

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