

Shahabian's Trip to Armenia Helps Young Artists From Gyumri

SACRAMENTO - In the summer of 2005, 25-year-old Birthright Armenia participant and Sacramento native Tamara Shahabian embarked upon a four-month journey to Armenia to change her destiny.

Little did she know that when she left Armenia, she would begin yet another journey - to help a group of young emerging artists from Gyumri discover their own destinies. These emerging artists are between the ages of 4 and 20 who attend the Gyumri Aesthetic Center, a school/orphanage promoting cultural education and development. With classes in drawing, painting and carpet-weaving, and a dedicated gallery displaying artwork created by children living at the Center, the school serves as a beacon of hope for a region that still suffers from the devastations of the 1988 earthquake.

It was during a planned excursion to Gyumri with Birthright Armenia as a volunteer with the Armenian Volunteer Corps, that Tamara and her father, John Shahabian, first discovered the school's gallery of artwork. As owners of Coffee Works, a café in Sacramento that displays and sells artwork by local members of the community, Tamara and her father realized they had stumbled upon something incredibly valuable. Determined to help these young artists, they decided to plan an art show at Coffee Works featuring artwork created by the children of the center. All proceeds from the show would then be sent back to the school.

With the help of Birthright Armenia, the father/daughter team was able to transport almost 50 pieces of art all the way to Sacramento. Tamara then worked with Coffee Works art director Melinda



Tamara Shahabian shows off one of the Armenian artworks displayed in Sacramento

Johnson to touch-up, preserve, and frame each piece. The artwork, which consists of large paintings, paper-plate pieces, religious icons, and medium-sized and miniature carpetweavings were displayed on March 19 and March 20, at both St. James Armenian Apostolic Church of Sacramento and Coffee Works.

"My main goal for the show is to illustrate to the students and orphans at the Gyumri Aesthetic Center that they are capable of using their talents and creativity to generate opportunities for themselves," Tamara said.

What Tamara and her father have accomplished can only be seen as a goal in further connecting the Diaspora with the Homeland and aiding in its development far into the future. What they have also provided to the children of Gyumri is a message of hope. "I want the children's contributions

to this art show to inspire them to discover their own strengths and learn how they can turn their strengths into career prospects," she says. "I think that in some ways, Gyumri is a desperate place, but it is so important that the children there, and all over Armenia, remain hopeful and learn at a young age that they can control their own destinies."

Birthright Armenia's mission is to strengthen ties between the Homeland and Diaspora youth by affording them an opportunity to be a part of Armenia's daily life and to contribute to Armenia's development through work, study and volunteer experiences, while developing life-long personal ties and a renewed sense of Armenian identity. For those interested in learning more about Birthright Armenia, please visit www.birthrightarmenia.org or email info@birthrightarmenia.org.