

Real Medicine Foundation Changing Lives in Armenia

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BY KARINE CHAKARIAN



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The images are arresting; A great-grandmother cradling her toddler grandson, the rolling of bread dough, the sheer force of the baker's movements felt through the photographer's lens, a cross resting on a grave.

On June 12, 2009, the humanitarian organization Real Medicine Foundation, will present A Journey to Armenia, a photography exhibit fundraiser featuring the work of Sara Anjargolian, Vahe D'Ala and Sevag Vrej. The artists' images will be on display for one night only. Proceeds will benefit major renovations of a primary care clinic in Shinuhayr, one of the most poverty stricken areas in the Syunik region in Armenia.

Founded in May 2005, Real Medicine Foundation (RMF) began as pediatrician Dr. Martina Fuch's mission to help the tsunami victims of Southeast Asia, and has grown to become an emergency relief organization with clinics and projects in fourteen countries around the world. Its mission is all encompassing, focusing on the individual as a whole by providing long term medical, social, economic and support.

Below The Poverty Line

Nairy Ghazourian was first introduced to Dr. Fuchs in April of 2008. Moved by the amount that had been accomplished in the brief time that the organization had been established, she approached her with the idea of establishing a primary care clinic in a rural village in Armenia. "She [Dr. Fuchs] had built the Foundation based on passion and a keen drive to improve the lives of mankind throughout the world," Ghazourian, who is now RMF's Country Director for Armenia, states. "If you can inspire people to believe in a cause and feel the same passion toward it as you do, then you are able to create an army of great ambassadors, and the work will get done and the project will succeed no matter how great the challenges or obstacles life throws at you."

The challenges with the clinic in Shinuhayr are monumental. The decision to focus on the rural town near the border of Karabakh, where 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, was congruent with Real Medicine Foundation's mission.

As a direct result of their extreme poverty, Shinuhayr's clinic and the residents it serves do not have access to pivotal resources such as drugs, medical supplies and even the most rudimentary of medical equipment. According to Ghazourian, an assessment of the country was the catalyst for the decision to focus on Shinuhayr.

Expert observation found that patients of the village who are in need of specialized care are forced to make a five to seven hour drive to Yerevan, Armenia's capital, because of the clinics current state of disrepair and lack in resources. Besides the time commitment required for the trip, the trek is virtually impossible for a number of reasons, including expense, and potentially dangerous road conditions due to harsh winters.

The renovated clinic will serve the town's population of 3,000, as well as act as a referral site for the additional 5,000 residents from its neighboring seven villages. Immediate plans for the 14,000 square foot clinic are to rebuild the roof, which show signs of hazardous mold. In addition to roof reparations, other vital expenditures will be applied towards repairing the damaged foundation, floors, and installing water, gas and sanitation systems, as well as the provision of basic medical supplies and pharmaceuticals, training of health care staff, implementation of community health education outreach programs and the addition of an ambulance that would transport critically ill patients.

Images Of An Ancient Civilization

Lord Byron once wrote, "It was in Armenia that the flood first abated and the dove alighted." To the volunteer fundraising committee of A Journey to Armenia it seemed fitting that captured moments preserved in time of life in Armenia would provide a glimpse into this world described by Lord Byron. And it is this ancient land and its people that is captured poignantly through the lens of photographers Anjargolian, D'Ala and Vrej.

The photographer's eclectic backgrounds, and unique but complementary visual style, depict stories of the crossroads between old and new; an elderly woman tends her sheep near an ancient graveyard, a grandfather walks in the hills with his young grandson, mist and fog shrouding them, a sea of colorful sun dried laundry blow like flags against a clear blue sky.

Photographer Sara Anjargolian's inspiration for contributing to the exhibit stemmed from her exposure to the state of Armenia's health care system while living there for several years during the early part of the decade. *Woman with Rooster*, her image of an elderly woman sitting alone on a bench in a church courtyard, a rooster in her arms, perhaps most starkly captures the dire circumstances of the people who live within the region. The photo was shot in the town of Meghri in the Syunik region, the exact area that the primary clinic will serve. Anjargolian states that the rooster was the woman's sacrificial offering to God for the sick granddaughter that awaited her at home. "When I consider what's going on in the image... I can't help but consider whether this woman would be sitting there had she and her grandchild

had access to a primary health-care clinic in their region," says Anjargolian.

Champagne, Celebrity and Cause

On the evening of June 12, the doors of A&I Photography Gallery will open to a champagne reception and hors d'oeuvres catered by Mi Piace, Sandella's Café and Felafel Arax. Guests will mingle with the photographers, dignitaries and celebrities like actor Ken Davitian (Borat, Get Smart). "For \$500 you get a picture worth a thousand words," Davitian says with a smile. "And I'll take a picture with the picture. Now you'll have two pictures that are worth 1000 words, each for 500, which makes the original picture only \$250."

Davitian trades on his trademark humor to honor a cause that is close to his heart. The exigent need for healthcare in these poverty stricken areas is a matter he is all too familiar with. His father was raised in a rural village in Armenia where poverty ran rampant.

It is the alleviation of this poverty which Real Medicine Foundation is working towards accomplishing. "Our goal with this project is not just to build a primary care clinic but to empower the people of Shinuhayr and its surrounding villages," states Ghazourian. "To equip them with all the tools necessary so that they can continue to provide for themselves and sustain what we help them build."

Real Medicine Foundation To Host Benefit Photo Exhibition [2]

A Journey to Armenia
Friday, June 12, 2009
A&I Photography Gallery
933 N. Highland
Hollywood, CA 90038
7-8 PM Champagne Reception \$75.00
8-10 PM General Admittance \$25.00 online \$30.00 at door
www.itsmyseat.com [3] Journey to Armenia
www.realmedicinefoundation.org [4]

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