

Gyumri in pictures*

Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city, is located in the north of the country.

My most powerful and shocking memory of my first visit to Gyumri in 1999 is of the sight of half-collapsed buildings and thousands of people still living in temporary accommodation – over a decade after an earthquake flattened entire parts of the city in 1988.



In 2004, I returned to Gyumri. I was impressed by the new homes built with funding from the Lincy Foundation, the Urban Institute and a number of other agencies. Though many people still remain homeless, any improvement is welcome in this city.

However I was even more impressed by some of the students I worked with.

Gharib (pictured on the left with his faithful puppy) is President of the Gyumri Students' Council. He oversees the student councils of 10 universities and colleges in Gyumri. Hundreds of students are involved in various volunteer activities including visiting orphanages, cleaning and reopening churches, and organising Genocide commemorative activities.

One of the ideas that these students have come up with is to organise a series of forums about Armenian-Turkish relations with students in the city of Kars, which is located across the border in Turkey.

In 2002, the Center for Leadership Development (CLD) in Yerevan held a Summer Leadership Program in Gyumri. Gharib is a graduate of that Program.

In August 2004, I met with Gharib and the then President of the Students' Council, **Karen**. We agreed to continue the Leadership Program.



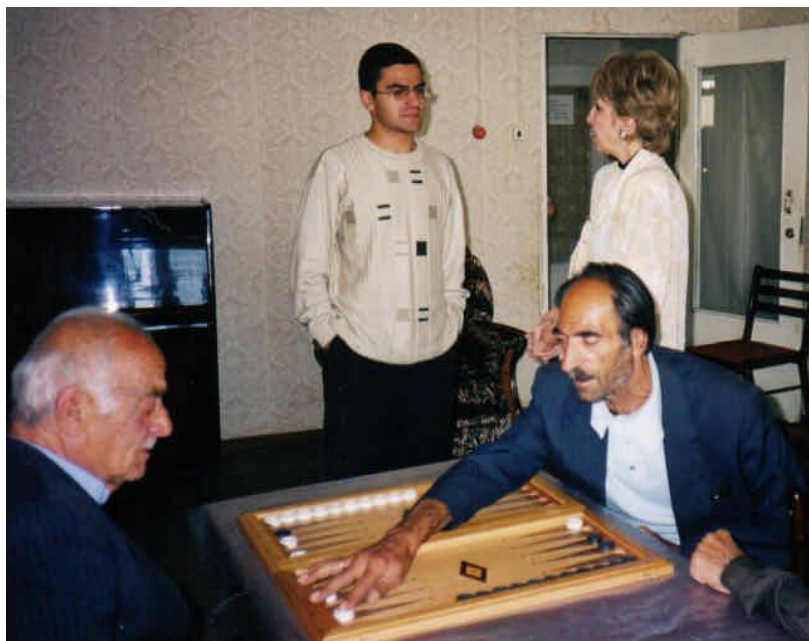
At the first meeting, 22 members of the city's student organisations turned up. I listened to their stories about their efforts to improve the situation in their city. I shared some ideas with them of how they can bring about long-lasting change.

For the next 4 months, a trained team of **CLD Yerevan students and graduates (see pictures above and on left)** made their way to Gyumri twice a week to run seminars on personal values and leadership.

I took Gharib to one of Mission Armenia's soup kitchens in Gyumri. He was very impressed with **Mission's Armenia work** among the elderly.

In his conversation with the director of the soup kitchen (**see picture on right**), Gharib promised to send volunteers to help with serving meals and home visits.

We then visited an after school care centre run by the **Shirak Foundation**, a non-profit organisation that works among street children, children from abusive homes and children who have been the victims of child prostitution and gangs.



Here I am (see left) with Gharib, Karen and their friend Eddy. Behind us is the Statue of Hope.

In the midst of so much poverty and despair, the people of Gyumri have kept their courage and sense of humour. They have learnt to laugh again, to tell stories, and to work together to build a better future.

Gharib and Karen are exceptional men. Guided by their faith in God and love for their city, they have performed miracles.

On the trip back to Yerevan, **Karen and the 2 Haikuhies (pictured below)** kept the whole bus amused with their stories and laughter. The spirit of youth cannot be quenched.



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