

Warm Hearth ~ Aravot Article

“I remember my mom saying, ‘Susso, your grandmother and grandfather will not allow me to keep you.’ I am from Russia. My mom is Russian. My dad is a police officer. I don’t know if he is Armenian or Russian. After the earthquake my mom appeared. She wrote and said that she would soon come. And after that I never had any more information about her. I don’t know where she is,” says a former orphanage resident, 35 year old Susanna Vlavtsova, stifling her grief.

Susanna, who suffers from mental illness, has been through special schools in Nubarashen and Kapan. After becoming an adult she was going to be placed either in a psychiatric clinic or a senior home, but this time fate smiled at her and she now lives at the Warm Hearth group home.

In Armenia, children who are without any parental care and who are placed in orphanages are faced with a housing problem once they reach adulthood. This becomes much more complicated and difficult especially for those young adults who have disabilities, are more vulnerable and need constant care. In response to this difficulty and thanks to former Peace Corps volunteer Natalie Bryant-Rizzieri’s efforts, in 2006 Armenia’s first group home, Warm Hearth, came into being in Yerevan. Even though Warm Hearth is the best solution to this problem, to this day, it has not received help from the government.

“One of the Peace Corps volunteers, knowing our young adults and being aware of the problem, did everything in order to raise funds and implement the same group home model that exists in the USA and other developed countries. With the help of financial gifts from individuals, she was able to collect a sufficient amount to buy this house, and henceforth began our work. Many changes were made, the model was adjusted and made more fitting for our environment, and it displays its fruitfulness,” says Yelena Kirakosyan, the director of the project.

Located in Silikia, Yerevan, the 3-story house has been an abiding haven for only 14 “graduates” of Kapan’s and Paraqar’s special schools.

“Of course, working with 150 individuals is not the same as working with only 15, but here we work individually with each resident; our approach is personal. Even though it’s a group home, we take into consideration each individual’s capabilities, abilities, preferences, and personalities,” says Kirakosyan, adding that this kind of home is also cost-effective. According to Kirakosyan, the government spends more than Warm Hearth on each institutionalized individual, but the results from Warm Hearth are incomparable. “Government representatives have been guests here often and they too see the difference.”

For 5 years Warm Hearth has applied for government funds and has been rejected, allegedly due to a lack of funds. It relies on regular donations for its budget. The Peace Corps volunteer who started the project is not able to expand and open other homes because of the financial burden. She cannot carry that burden by herself.

After graduating from the state institutions, orphans with disabilities are placed in Vardenis Psychiatric Institution, but Kirakosyan says that this is not the best place for them, since there are no opportunities for growth and development.

“We are always seeing growth in their abilities and are amazed at how much they are capable of, how far they can go, what else they can do. They have tremendous potential for growth,” says the expert.

However, people with such struggles are faced with not only indifference from the government but, often, are also victims of their community’s intolerance.

According to experts, children born with physical and mental disabilities are abandoned at orphanages because of shame. Kirakosyan says that once families of children with disabilities

were so secretive that even their relatives did not know.

“In the past few years people’s attitude towards people with disabilities has changed. We’ve been received warmly wherever we’ve been. When we go to coffee shops sometimes they give us discounts; sometimes they don’t charge us at all. People gather around us and are often generous. Our residents are truly wonderful, but our neighbors don’t accept us,” remarks the director sadly.

Kirakosyan says that they are not very lucky in regards to their neighbors. Since the beginning the neighborhood was against having neighbors with disabilities, but with the available funds this was the only area where they could afford to buy a home. “All of the neighbors wanted Warm Hearth to close down, unfortunately. They don’t want to live next door to people like our residents. This is a serious problem for us. We have significantly limited our residents’ interaction with them, since we don’t want to create problems for anyone,” says Kirakosyan, adding sadly, that, when last year one of their residents, who is very lively, was loud in the balcony, the neighbors called the police. Meanwhile, Kirakosyan is confident that none of the residents is dangerous. She, herself, entrusts to the residents’ care her own minor daughters, who, from time to time, love to visit them.

Each of the 27-36 year-old residents knows his or her daily routine. “We wake up, eat, then each one of us is on duty somewhere-- in the rooms, or the kitchen. Then we work. I weave a rug. In the afternoon we rest and then we get together again to watch TV, sing, dance, and talk,” says one of the initial residents, 32 year-old Davit Michaelyan who hurries to show his rug, and proudly adds that he works very fast. “I love rug weaving very much; I love the patterns.”

Two years ago the residents of Warm Hearth graduated from Yerevan’s humanitarian college, becoming experts at rug weaving and embroidery. This was made possible by “Bridge of Hope” for the purpose of providing training and work. But the program has ended, because there has not been any available employment for the residents.

“We were able to create a room with carpet looms and now our residents are able to participate in art exhibitions and show their handicrafts and sell them. With the proceeds we buy things we need and some of it we give to the residents as encouragement. They see it as their work,” says Kirakosyan.

In the workroom, on the second floor of the house, work is in full swing. The residents are competing with one another, their fingers, intertwined with strands of yarn, deftly moving over the looms, increasing the colorful patterns.

Dianna Meliqjanyan, who has been teaching the residents carpet weaving since 2010, says that even though the work is very complex and the residents struggled in the beginning, after learning a little, they work even more thoroughly and systematically than those who don’t have such disabilities.

33 year-old Agappy Zaroukyan, who’s been a resident at Warm Hearth since 2008, came from one of the special schools at Paraqar. She says that there they worked in greenhouses and would get very tired, whereas here she is able to do carpet weaving, which she loves.

The house also has a basement, which after being renovated has become a place of recreation for the residents, but now could be a good place to start up a small business.

“We’re thinking about bread production, since we ourselves are consumers, and there is always need in the market. We’re thinking that it should be ecologically clean and helpful, but we have a problem with financing,” says Kirakosyan. The residents receive only 15,000 dram from the state, but according to Kirakosyan, they also receive a monthly allowance from Warm Hearth.

In a few days it'll be Agappy's birthday and she says that the past few months she's saved her monthly allowance in order to buy a birthday present for herself. "This year I've decided to buy a beautiful dress, last year I bought a doll but I won't buy another one, I don't like it anymore, I already have one anyway," says Agappy, smiling.

Meanwhile, 35 year-old Susanna continues to gently dote on her dolls, which continue to increase in number every year. The doll with golden hair and the pink bear are Susanna's very best friends. Among the residents, Susanna reads the most.

"I really love Nar-Dos's 'The Slain Pigeon,' I've also read Charents, Toumanyán. I love doing embroidery, reciting, singing, writing," says Susanna and gently shows us her embroidered handicrafts, then adds that she dreams about becoming a singer.

"I'm not praising myself, but I sense that I have a good voice. I want to sing for people. I also want to be a tailor, so that I can make clothes for people. But I haven't forgiven my mom, I would love so much to be with her..." says Susanna and hiding the sadness in her longing eyes, she turns her face to Ararat, sparkling through the window. "But it's good among Armenians, I'm not complaining. See how well I can write in Armenian."

From a neatly organized drawer she pulls out a notebook of songs written in Armenian and turning the pages, she gently sings, "My name is Armenia, I'm free and independent..."

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