

YEREVAN, ARMENIA

# Presidential Move

## Mathematics professor Bruce Boghosian heads the American University of Armenia beginning this fall

BY HELENE RAGOVIN

In September, Bruce Boghosian traded views of the Boston skyline for a view of Mount Ararat. The majestic snow-capped mountain, said to be the landing place for Noah's Ark, towers over the city of Yerevan, the capital of Armenia.

Boghosian, professor and chair of mathematics in the School of Arts and Sciences and adjunct professor of computer science, began a leave of absence from Tufts to become president of the American University of Armenia (AUA). At the completion of his term there, he intends to return to Tufts, where he has taught since 2000.

From AUA's compact city campus, Boghosian will lead the only university in the region that offers American-style graduate education. With six schools specializing in fields from engineering to business to public health, AUA's goal is to educate the next generation of leaders for an ancient land that faces many 21st-century challenges.

"As a research scientist, I have lived abroad for periods of time in many different places, and I've always enjoyed travel," says Boghosian. "But being able to help Armenia was the most important thing that attracted me to the position."

Boghosian was born and raised in Worcester, Mass., the grandchild of immigrants who came to America following the Armenian genocide of the early 20th century. He grew up active in the Armenian-American community, eating his grandmother's stuffed grape leaves and speaking a smattering of Armenian. Yet it was not until 2008, when he was elected to the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, that he began to travel to Yerevan and forge a connection with the scholars there.

In 2009, officials from AUA approached Boghosian about assuming the presidency. He ultimately accepted, he says, because he believes the school is serious about creating graduates who will make a difference in Armenia.

"In February, I went out to dinner with four graduates of AUA," he recounts. "One of them is now deputy justice minister [of Armenia]; another is a professor of linguistics in Yerevan; another works for Oxfam; the fourth is working for a major telecom company. They were, all of them, just bright young people, passionate about what they are doing in their careers. And all of them indicated they would not be the person they are now were it not for the education they received at AUA."

"So, that went a long way toward convincing me that AUA is doing something right, if it produces that kind of person," he says.

### Bringing a New Perspective

The American University of Armenia, which is affiliated with the University of California and accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, was born along with the modern-day republic of Armenia. After an earthquake devastated much of what was then Soviet-controlled Armenia in 1988, a group of Armenian and American academics, brought together by post-earthquake work, broached the idea of establishing a graduate school in Yerevan based on the model of other American

universities abroad.

AUA taught its first classes on September 21, 1991, the same day Armenia declared its independence from the Soviet Union. In an interesting twist, the original AUA building had been constructed as a meeting place for the Soviet politburo.

Like many other former Soviet republics, Armenia is still wrestling with the economic and social transition from communism; it has been hard hit by the worldwide recession. It has also long depended on support from the Armenian diaspora, mainly people of Armenian heritage living in the U.S., Russia, Canada, Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere. Environmental concerns, including water resources, and rural development remain among the country's most pressing issues. Boghosian notes that two of AUA's cross-disciplinary centers focus on these areas.

"Students in any of the six majors have to take at least one environmental course while at AUA, which is good, because environmental issues are important in Armenia," he says. The roof of AUA's newest building, for example, sports a huge array of solar panels. "Alternative energy is a hot topic there; water conservation is a hot topic," he says.

"Since Armenia started running its nuclear reactor in the mid '90s, it has been a net energy exporter. But the reactor is aging, and they can't use it forever. So energy conservation, solar and hydroelectric power are big areas of research," he says.

### The Secret Handshake

Boghosian anticipates he will be in the U.S. often during his time as AUA's leader.

"Basically, it's a very international position," he says. "I will be based in Yerevan while I'm there, but I will be back in the U.S. very frequently. AUA has offices in Oakland, Calif., and most of its fundraising is done in the U.S."

Still, he is prepared for some degree of culture shock as he and his wife, Laura, settle into their new quarters in Yerevan, a nearly 3,000-year-old city with gleaming modern hotels; an imposing opera house; a fountain-filled city square and numerous monuments, museums and cafes.

"Because of Armenian activities in America, I feel going in as though I know quite a bit about Armenia, but,

of course, this is going to teach me much, much more," he says. "It's one thing to visit a place—one thing to know about a place—and quite another thing to live there and work there. I'm under no delusions. I know this is very, very much going to be a learning process."

At the moment, Boghosian is focusing much of his learning on his Armenian language tapes. Armenian con-



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sists of two primary dialects, eastern and western. Boghosian's family, like most of the Armenian immigrants who came to the U.S. in the early 20th century, spoke the western dialect; in contemporary Armenia, the eastern dialect predominates.

While president, Boghosian hopes to continue his research. "I'm sure the rate at which I publish will be diminished, but I don't want it to go to zero. I want some amount of research to continue," he says. "I hope this opens new opportunities to collaborate with groups over there and, by that collaboration, help them make connections with counterparts in the West."

Boghosian says the administration and board of trustees at AUA have been active in mentoring him as he begins his new position; he also says he's grateful to Tufts President Lawrence S. Bacow, who has been especially supportive. Has Bacow offered any special presidential tips? "Well, there's no secret handshake that I know of," laughs Boghosian.

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