

ARMENIA

a model for change



Until it became independent in 1991, Armenia was one of the 15 republics that made up the Soviet Union. The country is rich in culture deeply rooted in its ancestry—what it lacks in population, the people surpass in determination.

Armen Der Kiureghian, PhD, has been dividing his time between UC Berkeley and the American University of Armenia (AUA). Merely a few years after Armenia's devastating 1988 earthquake, he helped establish AUA, which is an affiliate of the University of California—though the two campuses are more than 7,000 miles away from one another.

With the sweet aroma of pastries, colorfully delicious fruits and traditional Armenian coffee, Chet Cooper and Lia Martirosyan of *ABILITY Magazine* shared a lovely brunch with President of AUA, Dr. Armen Der Kiureghian—at Lia's Southern California home.

Lia Martirosyan: American University of Armenia had a unique beginning.

Der Kiureghian: Yes, it was the 1988 earthquake in Armenia. I'm a structural engineer who looks at the effect of earthquakes on big buildings, bridges, and so on. Right after the earthquake, the US National Academy of Science formed a team during the thawing of relations between the US and the Soviet Union. Soviet President Gorbachev was actually in Washington when the earthquake happened. There was an outpouring of sympathy and willingness to help.

The academy formed a team to go to Armenia and look at the effects of the earthquake, and any lessons that could be learned. I was on the 22-member team of scientists, seismologists and engineers who went over. During a second visit a couple of months later, two things happened: First, I was disappointed at how the non-Armenian Soviet specialists were dealing with the earthquake. They weren't trying to identify problems and find solutions. And then, during a gathering, the idea of setting up an American university came up. I thought it would be a good thing. A colleague and I, who were on the original team that went to Armenia, got things started.

Martirosyan: It was as simple as that?

Der Kiureghian: We proposed this university, and it caught on. It's one of those things where the planets line up once in a million years. AUA was established in collaboration with the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), which put up the money; the Armenian Minister of Higher Education, which provided the building; and the University of California. We're very closely affiliated with the University of California. (The UC public university system has 10 campuses throughout the state.) AUA started in '91 with only graduate programs, because the country needed to prepare specialists

very quickly. We have eight master's programs: industrial engineering; systems management; computer sciences; public health; law; political science; international affairs; and teaching English as a foreign language. Two years ago we started an undergraduate program. We're adding each year.

We're accredited by a commission recognized by the US Department of Education; the same one that accredits Cal Berkeley, Stanford, UCLA and other universities on the west coast. Last year our accreditation was up for renewal. Usually they give it for seven or eight years. We got it for nine. I'm very happy about that.

Martirosyan: Congratulations!

Der Kiureghian: We're also excited because we signed an agreement of collaboration with UCLA to exchange faculty and students, and conduct joint projects. We're offering some AUA-UCLA courses in this summer's intensive program. There are also two faculty members from UCLA who'll teach at AUA. One is a UCLA lecturer, who has a PhD in Armenian studies. Her father, from age 45, was disabled. As a young woman, she would carry him to the balcony of their home in Armenia, so he could see outside for a while. The concept of a wheelchair didn't exist then. And Gregory Areshian, who's also from Armenia originally, is an adjunct associate professor at UCLA in Archaeology. He's the one who discovered the 6,000-year-old shoe in an Armenian cave.

Cooper: Just the one shoe? There's always one shoe missing.

(laughter)

Der Kiureghian: But there's more to it. I went to the cave with him last October, and he discovered—

Cooper: —a sock?

Der Kiureghian: *(laughs)* It's a bit gory, but there was half of a young woman's body that was 6,000 years old. At the time, sacrificing half of a body apparently had some significance in mythology.

Cooper: He discovered that?

Der Kiureghian: Yes, he's a very accomplished archeologist. So if you put "6,000-year-old shoe" in a search engine, you'll find lots of articles. It was a big discovery. UCLA got a lot of mileage from that. And not only that, but in the same cave, people made wine. There are wine barrels, so it's the oldest winery. They found some grains that were 6,000 years old—residue on the wine barrels in Areni, where the wine region is. They plan to clone them.

Cooper: You should promote that in your tourism ads.





Representatives from the Ministry of Emergency Situations of RA demonstrate roof evacuation and how to extinguish a fire during a disaster preparedness drill at AUA

Wasn't there something about the Ark as well?

Der Kiureghian: Noah's Ark? Of course, Mount Ararat, every morning you get up, it's there.

Cooper: You've been up there, too?

Martirosyan: You can't access Ararat from Armenia these days.

Der Kiureghian: The mountain is so huge; it's as if it's the background for the city.

Martirosyan: That's true. It does look that way. You know, I wanted to know more about how you got appointed president.

Der Kiureghian: I was dean of engineering for 16 years at Berkeley. I would go back and forth between UC Berkeley and AUA, and also work by email and fax. I've been a member of the board of trustees from the beginning. So when the past president declared late last year that he was going to resign this summer, the board asked me to go for a year while they decided on the next president, so I took a leave of absence from Berkeley and went there in July. And then in January the board asked me to continue as permanent president. I've agreed. So that's why I'm retiring from Berkeley, where I've been for the past 24 years. As of July, I'll be an emeritus Berkeley professor and president of AUA.

Cooper: Tell me about AUA's campus.

Der Kiureghian: We started with one building, which ironically was once used by the Communist Party. They

gave it to us in 1991. It was huge and at first we were like, "Wow, how are we going to fill this?" But pretty soon we ran out of capacity. Since the building is from the Soviet-era, we've significantly modified it. We built two connecting buildings behind it, and received a lot of support from American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (ASHA). That's a USAID agency that contributes not only to universities in other countries—including American University of Beirut, American University of Paris, American University of Cairo and 15 others—but also to American hospitals abroad.

At AUA, we've used some of the support we've gotten from ASHA and other donors to make the old Communist propaganda hall accessible. During the Soviet era, you had to climb up a few stairs to get into the building. But all we had to do was add a ramp. We created special parking. There are now ramps to the library. Before you couldn't go if you were in a wheelchair.

Cooper: How many of Armenia's universities are accessible?

Der Kiureghian: The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), an NGO in Armenia, did a survey of the country's 29 universities, and found that only AUA was accessible to students in wheelchairs. Our aim is to go beyond educating students, to provide an alternative model in Armenia for universities operating in Soviet-era buildings.

OSCE funds projects in former Soviet republics, which were notorious for not considering those with disabilities. Although in the capital, Yerevan, there's a school for deaf people from Soviet times. The OSCE report recommends





Volunteers from Unison NGO came out to showcase the university's accessibility & services during the drill

that the Minister of Higher Education provide the resources so universities can become more accessible; the government is getting more pressure to put resources behind the upgrades.

Cooper: What about evacuation for people in wheelchairs, or any disability—in case of an emergency.

Der Kiureghian: There was just a drill to simulate how people are going to evacuate from university buildings in an emergency. Someone from an NGO that deals with people with disabilities was contacted by our people and asked if they would like to participate. I think four wheelchair users were to see whether they could get out.

Martirosyan: That's great.

Cooper: The Federal Emergency Management Agency is doing the same thing: Trying to better evaluate disaster preparedness for people with disabilities in general, because they could have a mobility issue, and/or they could be blind or deaf.

Der Kiureghian: One problem we have right now with the main building is there are many doors. You have to open one door and enter, and then there's another small area that you have to enter. So maneuvering can be difficult. But we are going to change this. We have an ASHA grant to add sliding doors.

Martirosyan: That's good. Hopefully you're looking at the elevators, too... are you aware of The Ed Roberts Campus in Berkeley? Roberts spend a time of his life in an iron lung; he pressed Berkeley to become more accessible. Outside of the elevator, a couple of big

buttons are on the bottom, so if you're using a wheelchair, you can wheel up and push it with the chair. Their stairway is a huge ramp; it's a slow incline to the second floor. Creative thought has gone into the design of the center.

Der Kiureghian: We've had some students who've been disabled, navigated through, and finished. We had a legally blind student who graduated from our Teaching of English as a Foreign Language program. She is now teaching and doing translation for a government agency. We have very strict non-discriminatory laws, just like here, in admissions, in employment, in all aspects. On religious, sexual orientation, disability, mental condition, gender.

Martirosyan: I'm so glad to hear that.

Cooper: In terms of AUA's innovations, are you using newer, web-based technology?

Der Kiureghian: Yes, we provide a model for change not only in terms of our students, but also in terms of our process. We're developing an in-house university management system. It eliminates the possibility for corruption with admissions, registration, grades, and transcripts. Sometimes we collaborate with other universities in these matters. For example, recently some administration from other schools came to our university to hear about our admissions process.

Martirosyan: You have a no-smoking campus policy.

Der Kiureghian: Young people smoke way too much. So when we started AUA in 1981, we declared the school non-smoking from day one. Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, a chain smoker, came to our grand opening and was shocked.

(laughter)

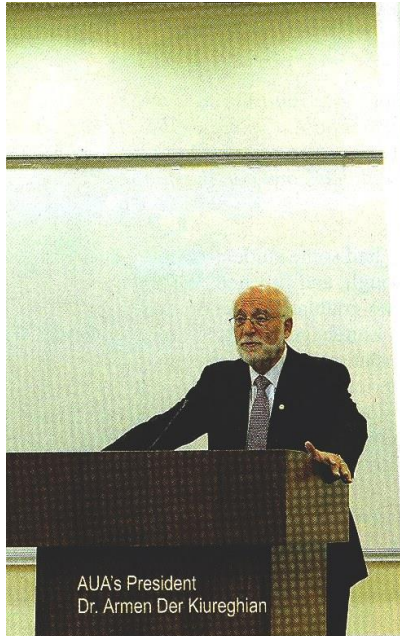
He would use his first cigarette to light his second. So when he walked into the new building and saw the sign, he said, "You mean I can't smoke?" And my colleague said, "You can't. It's our law." So for the one hour that he was in the building, he didn't smoke. I think that's the longest period in his life—while he was not sleeping anyway—that he didn't smoke. We haven't thrown anyone out for smoking, but students who get caught are given a warning.

Cooper: If you need a bouncer, Lia can come out and toss them.

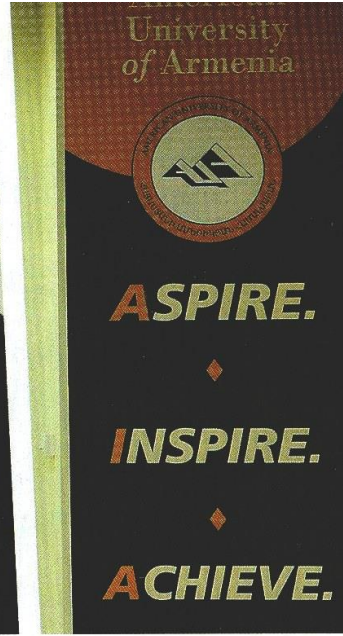
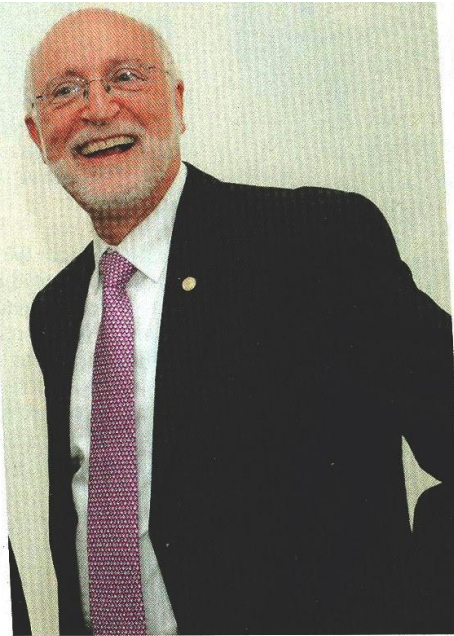
Martirosyan: I can take care of it!

Der Kiureghian: *(laughs)* Usually when we catch them once, they stop. But we were the first non-smoking building in the country. Now it has spread to some hospitals and public places.





AUA's President
Dr. Armen Der Kiureghian



Cooper: Talk show host Jon Oliver brought attention to this issue by showing how tobacco companies are suing some countries to stop them from changing their cigarette packaging. For example, in Australia, they put disturbing images of people who have cancer on the packages to show what smoking eventually does to you. And then the tobacco company sued Australia. But Australia won, and the tobacco company had to pay its legal fees, which were in the millions.

Even though they lost, tobacco companies still tell other countries: "Look what we did to Australia," and some of the smaller countries get intimidated. So one of the things you could possibly push within Armenia is to address cigarette packaging. There are some stats that say there's something like a 40-percent drop in smoking when the packaging reflects a negative image of smoking.

Der Kiureghian: Yes, and on a personal level, I go to a restaurant or jazz club, and come out as if I've smoked a couple of cigarettes myself. Right now restaurants and other public places don't even have non-smoking sections. Smokers essentially govern the situation. I think giving people the right information to motivate them is important, but also it's important to put pressure on lawmakers to make public buildings provide relief to non-smokers. That's not happening.

Cooper: There's enough information out there on how the US and other countries have pushed with pure numbers by showing the economic benefits not only to the economy, because of decreased health costs, but also to the health of the individual.

Der Kiureghian: Yes. Going back to what we were saying about people with disabilities in Armenia, things have improved in many ways. There are some compa-

nies that are progressive in their thinking, including the cell-phone company, Vivasel, do you know them?

Martirosyan: Yes. Similar to Verizon.

Der Kiureghian: They have many employees who use wheelchairs, and their office is designed in a way that employees can maneuver. Similar things are happening all over Armenia.

Martirosyan: That's great. The last time I was there, about two years ago, I did not see one person out and about in a wheelchair, using crutches, a walker, or anything of that nature.

Der Kiureghian: You're right. You don't see people in chairs in the streets very much.

Martirosyan: Steps and cobblestones.

Der Kiureghian: This particular office that I'm talking about had been retrofitted to make it accessible. I saw maybe five or six employees in that office.

There's also an ensemble of artists, musicians and singers with disabilities that sing at AUA every year at graduation. I've also seen them perform in the garden of Parliament.

Cooper: Do you know of any Armenian artists who sing opera and happen to have a disability?

Der Kiureghian: I don't.

Cooper: You actually do.

Martirosyan: (laughs)



Der Kiureghian: Oh, really! Lia sings opera?

Martirosyan: Classical music, arias from operas.

Der Kiureghian: Really! *(laughs)* Now I do know someone! Fantastic. Soprano?

Martirosyan: Lyric soprano.

Der Kiureghian: Do you sing in Armenian?

Martirosyan: Yes, English, Italian, Armenian, French, German. My maestro is from Yerevan Komitas State Conservatory. Komitas is in my repertoire.

Der Kiureghian: You look like an opera singer!

Martirosyan: Thank you. I like that.

Cooper: I think they're supposed to be bigger in girth.

Der Kiureghian: Some are big, some are not.

Cooper: Both of us happen to be speaking at an event coming up in China, and Lia's looking to sing in Mandarin.

Martirosyan: Yes.

Der Kiureghian: Where in China are you going?

Martirosyan: Guangzhou.

Cooper: It's a large event dealing with health and rehabilitation; about 25,000 people will attend.

Der Kiureghian: Only 25,000? For China that's a small event!

(laughter)

Martirosyan: Tip of the iceberg.

Cooper: When we were in Washington, DC, at the M-Enabling summit, it was announced that more people are accessing the web on their mobile phones than on desktops, so the fact that some of these platforms, software and apps are not accessible, is a problem.

Der Kiureghian: At the university we have research centers. One of them is supported with a grant from Samsung. We have a professor in computer science who's a very well recognized encryption expert. He and a bunch of students working on projects in that area. In fact, they may turn out to be mobile applications.

Cooper: What's Armenia's major economy?

Der Kiureghian: Armenia doesn't have many resources. It doesn't have oil. It's landlocked, so it doesn't have access

to the sea. The joke is that when God was distributing land to countries, Armenians were having fun some place, and by the time they got there, it was too late—

(laughter)

—so he gave them a land full of rocks. In fact, agriculture is difficult, because of the soil, thousands of years ago it was volcanic, and there's lots of rocks you have to clear. The biggest resource is the people. It's almost 100 percent literate, very talented people.

Cooper: You're the only country where everyone learns to play chess.

Der Kiureghian: Less than three million people, and twice we had the number one team in chess. There have been several world champions of Armenian origin. That's why I'm saying the people are very intelligent; they're very talented artistically. So many artists, so many good musicians. Fantastic jazz, classical, chorus, all very high quality. There's mining, gold, molybdenum, copper, which is a curse as well as a blessing, because the way the mining is done, it's not environmentally safe. We have—the university is involved in this—recently set up a center for responsible mining. We did a crowdfunding and received funds. We purchased equipment to measure heavy metals in soil and in water.

Technology is perhaps the most successful sector in the economy. Many American companies have branches in Armenia that develop software. The biggest of them is Synopsis, which has almost 1,000 engineers. But there are also companies that have started in Armenia that have become very successful, including several who are our graduates. The most successful of these is PicsArt. It's one of the hottest apps for Android and iPhone for editing pictures. It's like—

Cooper: —Photoshop.

Der Kiureghian: —a mobile version of Photoshop, more artistic. It gives you a lot of artistic freedom. It has been downloaded more than 200 million times. Now it's big. One of the co-founders is a good friend of mine. He's now here setting up an office in the Bay Area. So Armenia is becoming recognized as an IT area.

Cooper: Part of your curriculum is computer science?

Der Kiureghian: We award both undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science. Tourism is another sector. The country has hotels, but all in Yerevan. It needs to have more pensions and places with accessibility considerations. It could be an ideal place for tourism, because it's almost like an open-air museum. There are so many monasteries, and they're marvelous. It's not as if they had been built, it's like in nature they grew up. From that stand point it's very unique. So tourism could be a major sector.



Dr. Der Kiureghian & Lia Martirosyan talking AUA

Martirosyan: I'm so glad for all of this.

Der Kiureghian: We have this undergraduate program, and we're very keen on admitting students from abroad because a problem we have is lack of diversity. Of course we're trying very hard to increase it. For example, of our local students, 45 percent receive financial aid. Although tuition is very inexpensive compared to here. For locals, in-state tuition is about \$2,500 to \$3,000 a year.

Cooper: What does "local" mean?

Der Kiureghian: Citizens of Armenia. For international students, it's double that, \$5,000 or \$6,000 as compared to here in the States where it's about \$50,000. But even though tuition is low for citizens, we give almost 45 percent of them financial aid, so that we have an economically diverse group.

Cooper: The language spoken in your university?

Der Kiureghian: English.

Cooper: We know somebody right now, she's desperately looking for a good MBA program. Is it \$5,000 for an MBA?

Der Kiureghian: That's the undergraduate program. For the graduate program, it's the same for locals, but for international students it's three times that. And an MBA would be about \$9,000 for an international student. But for good students, we may provide a small scholarship.

Cooper: Is housing cheaper there?

Der Kiureghian: Much. The cost for one person in a single room would be \$200 to \$250 a month.

Martirosyan: Is the dormitory accessible?

Der Kiureghian: I don't know. We didn't build it. But I can find out. That would be an important thing.

Martirosyan: Especially if you're seeking international diversity. What about as you grow, with more undergraduate students?

Der Kiureghian: With up to 2,000, our current facilities would be okay, but at some point we'll reach capacity. Going forward, we have to build new buildings. And there are houses we might be able to buy and a building about 600 meters from the university that can be made into a dormitory. But for all of these projects, we need donors willing to give several million dollars. Every new building will cost \$5 million minimum.

