TIGRAN NAZARYAN:
"AGBU CHANGED MY LIFE, I WANT TO CHANGE ARMENIA"

Almost 25 years ago, Tigran Nazaryan was awarded an AGBU scholarship that allowed him to travel from his hometown of Gyumri to the University of California, Berkeley, where he enrolled in a PhD program. Following his studies, he returned to Armenia, eager to build a career while strengthening local institutions. He's been at the forefront of the country's IT industry ever since.

Today, Nazaryan is the Director of Operations of VMWare Eastern Europe, located in Yerevan. Under his leadership, this global tech giant's operation in Armenia is spearheading the new wave of cloud-based infrastructure management. It's also rapidly expanding, creating new jobs for professionals in the country. Nazaryan attributes much of his success to the support he received from AGBU, and his story is an inspiration to entrepreneurs, engineers and students around the globe.

In 1990, Nazaryan was among the countless Gyumri residents struggling to help the city recover and rebuild following the

Tigran Nazaryan

devastating Spitak earthquake. When his mother heard an advertisement for a study abroad program, she urged him to apply. Though he was initially hesitant, it wasn't long before Nazaryan was heading to Yerevan for an interview. He met with American University of Armenia (AUA) founders Armen Der-Kiureghian and Stepan Karamardian, who were in the early stages of establishing the institution. As Nazaryan recalls, the meeting was the first time he had really interacted with Americans, and in his then rather basic English. It didn't stop him from becoming one of 18 students selected to study in the United States, pledging to teach at AUA after receiving his degree.

Soon, Nazaryan was settling into his new life as a student in California. He had never before left the Soviet Union but quickly acclimated, immersing himself in his studies while keeping Armenia close to his heart. During the week, he worked toward his degree in Industrial Engineering. On Sundays, he biked the 6 miles to the St. Vartan Armenian Church in neighboring Oakland.

On campus, Nazaryan was immediately drawn to computers, which were a rarity in the Soviet Union at the time. When he took notice of a photo of Valentina Tereshkova, the first female Soviet astronaut, posted next to the computer of a professor, they struck up a conversation. Then, they struck a deal: she would give him computer lessons if he taught her Russian. The foundation of his IT career was set.

When Armenia declared its independence, Nazaryan knew it was time to return home, taking with him the knowledge and skills he developed as an AGBU scholarship student. As promised, he joined the AUA staff, contributing to everything from administration to accounting. Following his work at AUA, Nazaryan joined the United Nations as an Information Officer and IT Management expert. He then initiated, and subsequently managed, Armenian Freenet, the first public access internet facility in the former Soviet Union and a major UN development initiative. By 1998, Freenet, with its tens of thousands of users and dozens of vibrant online communities, became a major contributing factor triggering the development of IT industry and education in Armenia. Nazaryan was by then one of the country's foremost IT experts. In 2005, he joined a small Diaspora-Armenia start-up business and built its Armenia team of math and physics PhDs working on advanced technologies of math analysis and big data behavior forecasting algorithms. In 2010, VMWare, the virtualization technology leader, acquired the company and its technology to use as a management platform. They brought Nazaryan on board in the process.

Tigran (5th from left) with the VMWare Staff

"I've never wished to see Armenia become an attractive outsourcing location for international companies. Rather, my ultimate, long-term goal is for Armenia to become a Center of Excellence, a Center of Knowledge. Companies should flock to Armenia for these reasons, not because of cheap labor. In fact, they will practically be forced to come here if they want to get the best quality," Tigran says.

At VMWare, Nazaryan remains committed to investing in Armenia, knowing he has the resources to make a difference because of the investment that AGBU made in his education. He's proving that VMWare can be a model to attract other international businesses to Armenia. At his helm, VMWare is also growing, planning to add over 100 employees to its current staff of 75 by the end of the year. VMWare was recently declared one of the top 3 Most Innovative Companies by Forbes magazine. In 2013, the company officially pledged to invest 100 mln USD in Armenia.

With AGBU alumnus Tigran Nazaryan overseeing its operations, the firm will have plenty more to accomplish in Armenia.