

# Service Pioneers



Pediatric ophthalmologist Alina Zakaryan administers eye drops to an infant at the Yerevan State University hospital complex in Armenia.

# In Armenia, the concept of service clubs is so novel that Lions personally fund club projects. The newfound impulse to serve has saved premature babies from needless blindness.

by Katya Cengel

Maria's tiny face is wrinkled and sunken like a prune. When she was born two months ago in Armenia, 12 weeks premature, she weighed two pounds. She is almost double that now, but still frail, managing only a weak cry when pediatric ophthalmologist Alina Zakaryan examines her eyes using a retinal camera.

Maria has the first stage retinopathy of prematurity, an eye condition that can lead to blindness if left untreated. A few years ago Zakaryan probably wouldn't have seen an infant like Maria until she was a toddler and it was too late for the most successful types of intervention. Now she follows premature babies like Maria from birth, monitoring their cases and recommending them for laser treatment or injections when needed, thereby saving them from a possible life of darkness, slowed development and missed opportunities.

"I see the difference in the retina after treatment and I feel like I am the hand of God," says Zakaryan.

In the United States the risks of retinopathy of prematurity have been known for decades. In Armenia—a country the size of Maryland sandwiched between Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia—widespread knowledge has come only recently. Much of the awareness came thanks to the Armenia EyeCare Project, which brought experts to Armenia to lecture on the topic in 2010. In the past, preemies like Maria were often subjected to high levels of oxygen saturation at birth, increasing the risk of damage to the retina and the possible need for surgery. Now oxygen levels are more closely monitored, says Hrant Kalengeryan, a Yerevan neonatologist.

"In the first six months [after the training] we did five times more laser surgeries than we had in the last six months," says Kalengeryan. "That means a lot of retinopathy of prematurity. And now it has decreased by five times."

Retinopathy of prematurity is the newest focus of the Armenia EyeCare Project, a California-based nonprofit founded by Armenian-American ophthalmologist Roger Ohanesian. The project's original mission was to provide eye care for those wounded in the Nagorno-Karabakh War that Armenians fought with Azerbaijan from 1988 to 1994.

After the war Ohanesian redirected the project toward conducting specialized trainings for Armenian ophthalmologists and providing eye screenings and eye surgery for isolated and vulnerable members of the population. He added retinopathy of prematurity to the mix after learning that better neonatal care was increasing the survival chances for Armenian preemies, but lack of proper eye screenings meant many were ending up blind. In 2010 he helped bring Dr. Thomas Lee, director of the Vision Center at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, to Yerevan to teach ophthalmologists how to look for and treat retinopathy of prematurity.

"Approximately one in 10 premature patients develops severe retinopathy of prematurity," says Lee. "Half of these babies will go blind without the appropriate treatment."

The project also provided retinal cameras for screenings so the doctors in Yerevan can continue to consult with Lee and other U.S. experts thanks to the images the cameras record. Lee has returned to Armenia twice since his initial trip. Ohanesian has been here more than 40 times. But in Armenia it isn't the ophthalmologists who are in charge, but Nune Yeghiazaryan, the Armenia EyeCare Project's country director.

"I found no one who has been able to understand the program as much as Nune," said Ohanesian.

In addition to overseeing the EyeCare Project's work on the ground in Armenia, Yeghiazaryan is also president of the Yerevan Erebuni Lions Club, chartered in 2009. The capital, Yerevan is Armenia's largest city with 1.1 million people. The Yerevan Erebuni Lions Club is not the first Lions club in Armenia; it is not even the first one in Yerevan. But it may be one of the first to gain the trust of a larger populace unfamiliar with the idea of giving without receiving. That has a lot to do with its members, beginning with Yeghiazaryan.

Like in many post-Soviet societies, Armenians are unfamiliar with service organizations like Lions, says Yeghiazaryan. The group lost several members after it became clear to them that membership in the club would not in any



Nune Yeghiazaryan, president of the Yerevan Erebuni Lions Club, oversees the EyeCare project in Armenia.

way help them secure equipment for the hospitals where they worked, says Varvara Kalashyan, the club's treasurer and operations manager of the Eye-Care Project. Even the younger generation of Leos struggle to convey the message to their peers. Arus Khachatryan, a 20-year-old linguistics student with long curly hair and a soft voice, is president of Armenia's first Leo club. When she tries to recruit friends she is met with skepticism.

"They want to know 'what's the profit?'" she says. "Not only for them, but for us in general, because it's hard to understand that we work without profit."

Mambre Ghazaryan has been trying to spread the message of Lions Clubs since the first Armenian Lions club, Yerevan Ararat, was founded in 2001. As director of an international tourism firm, he is familiar with service organizations and quickly understood the role Lions clubs could play in the development of his country's social welfare system. He helped establish some of the seven clubs that now exist.

But with membership in decline at the original Yerevan club, Ghazaryan decided to try something different when he formed the Yerevan Erebuni Lions Club. ("Erebuni" is a former name for Yerevan.) Instead of attracting new members with the Lions' message, he impressed them with the caliber of those who had already joined. He handpicked each of the group's 22 original members, sending as many as 10 letters to one potential recruit. In this way he convinced a war hero, an opera singer, a history professor, a magician and a ship's captain to join.

"I didn't want to join Lions for three years, and he kept begging me to come," says Mkolich Mkolchyan, a hero of the Nagorno-Karabakh War.

It was only after Ghazaryan told him about the other people in the group that Mkolchyan and his wife, Lilit Matinyan, decided to join.

"The people in the club are very good, very respected," said Mkolchyan.

The various talents and backgrounds of members attract different segments of the population, adds his wife. As a history professor, Matinyan is able to reach out to students, while her husband is trusted among veterans. "So each member has his or her own circle," says Matinyan.

While not all of the club's 15 remaining members are familiar with service organizations, all of them have been involved in humanitarian work.

A doctor and nurse with the Armenian EyeCare Project consult with patients at Prkutyun ("Salvation") Center, a facility for people with disabilities in Yerevan.



Garen Balayan, a 56-year-old ship captain, has taught disabled children sports since the devastating 1988 Northern Armenian earthquake that left at least 25,000 dead and as many 31,000 injured. As a surgeon, Souren Iloyan is also familiar with helping others. He joined the club because he wanted to continue to do so, and because he liked and respected the other members.

"It doesn't matter what the club is, I like to do good things for people," says Matinyan.

Even though every project is funded out of their pockets, the Lions have been able to do quite a lot of good in their club's short history. They have distributed donated French books to a Francophile community, held concerts to raise money for a charity that teaches disabled children sports and held eye screenings in various communities. They plan to partner with the Armenian EyeCare Project in the future and already make use of the project's office space and expertise in vision screenings. With Yeghiazaryan and Kalashyan playing pivotal roles in both organizations, it seems only a matter of time before the partnership expands.

Spreading the word wider may take longer. It isn't that Armenians are selfish, Lions explain. It's just that they have suffered so much and still lack so many things that they are more used to receiving help than giving it. Memories of the "cold and dark years" of the early 1990s when there were severe electricity and food shortages are still fresh in the minds of most adults. During those years homes were heated by wood fires and "showers" were taken in segments; one day you washed your hair, the next your feet.

"We didn't take a shower—we took a mug," says Kalashyan.

The shortages lasted not weeks or months, but years. It was during these difficult years that Yeghiazaryan began working with non-governmental organizations. A commanding woman of 56, with short dark hair and a direct manner, Yeghiazaryan has an impressive pedigree. Her brother is a former minister of economics and her husband is a former chief of staff to the Armenian president. Although she studied at Harvard and her two grown daughters now live abroad, Yeghiazaryan never thought of working anywhere but Armenia.



A patient's vision is checked by a nurse with the Armenian EyeCare Project.

A nurse with the Armenian EyeCare Project examines a patient at Prkutyun Center.

“I think people who are able to study abroad owe something to this country,” she says.

Armenia has lost so much she would hate to see it lose anything more. Even the lovely food Matinyan prepares, including for the club's yearly dinner, has bitterness to it, especially the meat salad Van.

“Just like you long for spring, this salad is named Van after a city that no longer belongs to Armenia, but we long for and remember it through the food,” says Matinyan.

Van is located across the border in Turkey, lost to Armenia in 1915. The borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan have both been closed since the Nagorno-Karabakh War during which Matinyan's husband was wounded. The couple had to sell their house to pay for his medical treatment and struggle to support their two teenage children, but never shrink from hosting fellow Lions.

“Do you know what the kindness of a person is?” asks Matinyan. “It doesn't matter how much he needs help, he will help others.” She sees this quality in her fellow Lions, and in their leader, Yeghiazaryan. “We know what kind of good deeds she does,” says Matinyan.

Yeghiazaryan doesn't always have time to visit the hospitals. But ever since Lee's 2010 visit, Zakaryan has been screening babies in the neonatal intensive care unit every week. The mothers wait in the hall, dressed in fashionable fur coats and heels, their tiny infants wrapped in layer upon layer of pastel blankets. Zakaryan escorts them to the camera one by one, spending as little as five minutes on each infant. In most cases she advises the worried parents to follow up in two weeks.

Before Lee's 2010 visit she had never screened infants for retinopathy of prematurity. Instead she saw what happened when it wasn't treated: children who were already blind. She sent one girl to Russia seven times for surgery. The family had to sell their house to pay for the girl's treatment. Zakaryan didn't say whether the girl recovered any of her eyesight. Instead she looked at the preemie laid out on the examining table in front of her, one eye held open with a prong so she could examine it with the camera.

“You can't imagine what a blessing I feel when I see improvement thanks to our efforts,” she says.





The Armenia EyeCare mobile unit visits the village of Yeghvard.



A patient gets checked in the mobile eye unit.



A patient waits in the mobile unit after eye surgery.



Doctors operate in the mobile unit.