

Art shows feature 50 imported pieces by Armenian earthquake survivors

Special to East Sacramento News - Last summer, 24-year-old Birthright Armenia volunteer and Sacramento native Tamara Shahabian embarked upon a four-month journey to Armenia. Little did she know that when she left Armenia, she would begin yet another journey: to help a group of young emerging artists from Gyumri discover their own destinies.

These emerging artists, who are between the ages of 4–20, now attend the Gyumri Aesthetic Center, a school/orphanage that offers cultural education and development. With classes in drawing, painting and carpet weaving, and a dedicated gallery that displays their artworks, the school serves as a beacon of hope for a region that still suffers from the devastations of the 1988 earthquake.

This spring, almost 50 of the Gyumri artists' works will appear in Sacramento at the St. James Armenian Apostolic Church of Sacramento (3240 B Street), as well as at Coffee Works (3418 Folsom Boulevard) beginning Sunday, March 19.

It was during a planned excursion to Gyumri with Birthright Armenia and the Armenian Volunteer Corps that Tamara and her father (and Coffee Works owner) John Shahabian first discovered the school's gallery of artwork.



An art show at Coffee Works will feature artworks by young Armenian artists, many of whom are survivors of a devastating 1988 earthquake.

Photo courtesy Melinda Johnson

Since John's café displays and sells artwork by Sacramento-area artists, the Shahabians realized they had stumbled upon something incredibly valuable. Determined to help these young artists, they decided to plan an art show at the café to feature the children's work. All proceeds from the show will then be sent back to the school.

With the help of Birthright Armenia, the father/daughter team was able to export almost 50 pieces of art to Sacramento. Tamara then worked with Coffee Works art director Melinda Johnson to touch-up, preserve, and frame each piece. The artworks—which consists of large paintings, paper-plate pieces, religious icons, and medium-sized and miniature carpet weavings—will be displayed this spring at both Coffee Works and St. James.

“We are extremely excited about the art show and its potential to return much-needed revenues back to Gyumri,” said Tamara. “My main goal for the show is to illustrate to the students and orphans at the Gyumri Aesthetic Center that they are capable of using their talents and creativity to generate opportunities for themselves.”

Tamara's dedication to the show provides a source of inspiration for other Armenians. As its core mission, Birthright Armenia is not only committed to enriching the experience of volunteers while in Armenia, but they also promote continued connections with Armenia even after they leave its borders.

In fact, Tamara's idea for the art show came as part of a “promise” she made in a Continuing Involvement Proposal that Birthright Armenia requires of all its program participants when they leave Armenia. Tamara's fulfillment of this “promise” is just one example of the lasting impacts her journey through Armenia has made in both her life and the lives of other Armenians.

Tamara said she believes the experience provides a message of hope to Gyumri children. “I want the children's contributions to this art show to inspire them to discover their own strengths and learn how they can turn their strengths into career prospects,” she said. “I think that in some ways, Gyumri is a desperate place, but it is so important that the children there—and all over Armenia—remain hopeful and learn at a young age that they can control their own destinies.”

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