

March 16, 2007

A TRIP TO GYUMRI, ARMENIA

Day 7 Diary from John Tocci

OK, it's Friday. I'm writing as we bounce our way back from Gyumri to Yerevan, the capitol of Armenia. It is a two hour ride, everything seems to be about a 2 hour ride from where we are in Yerevan. Gyumri was the site of a massive earthquake in 1988. Today much of it remains un-repaired and in ruins. The ride takes us along twisting roads which, I suppose, were in reasonable condition back in 1988, prior to the earthquake and the break up of the CCCP (USSR). It's quite challenging to traverse now, despite work done by present government. It has begun snowing heavily so visibility is low and traction lower. There have been three snow plows for the entire "highway", all parked. Since the road winds through the mountains, heavy drifting makes the trip even more exciting with drivers also drifting from one side of the road to the other at will.



Driving conditions on the way to Gyumri

We were joined on our trip by Mark Kelly, the World Vision Armenia National Director, and Kristina Mikhailidi, the former Child Protection program manager, currently managing sectoral work in World Vision Armenia. It's fabulous to have such knowledgeable people as our guides to the culture and problems of this area. Mark is from Australia. He's here with his wife and two young children. Passion for this work is a prerequisite, especially when it involves sacrifice from your young wife and 3 and 5 year old children. It's one thing to beat yourself up, depriving yourself of the hundreds of creature comforts we take totally for granted. It's quite another to be a young dad and bring your family along on this journey.



Mark Kelly, the World Vision Armenia National Director

We have passed miles of sparsely populated land with abandoned cars, collapsed stone housing, and stacks of reclaimed precast plank hoping for a use again someday. Occasionally we pass a towering Soviet statue or propoganda piece intended to inspire worker solidarity and productivity, of which there was, and is, very little. I'm just beginning to understand the root problem in this part of the world, a total gutting of the value of personal initiative and entrepreneurship coupled with a near-total dependence on the mother-state decision making authority. This took 70 years to inculcate with intense propoganda. It will take more than the 15 years that have elapsed since the collapse of the economic experiment known as Marxist Communism to correct.



Ubiquitous remnants of Soviet propaganda

As a result, people don't trust any program that requires working together or pooling resources. It smells too much like the Kolkhoz, the Soviet collective farm system of the 1930's which stripped people of private farmland. Three generations of people were brought up with posters, statues and speeches extolling the

virtues of productivity but lived through decades of guaranteed, flat wages that came month after month, year after year, unaffected by personal initiative or merit. Naturally, human nature being what it is, people performed at the lowest acceptable level. The state supplied rent, heat, electricity, fuel, schooling, healthcare and infrastructure all for free or very little. Moreover, people were not told how their profession, trade or work fit into the big picture, an example being a huge, abandoned watch factory in Armenia. Watch parts, manufactured in several other Soviet states were shipped for assembly here. The producers of “cogs” or “wheels” generally weren’t informed what they were fabricating, where it was going and for what purpose. It didn’t matter whether there was a market for the watches when finally assembled. The focus was jobs. Often a factory was planted out in the middle of nowhere with nothing for miles around followed by construction of concrete high rise factory housing for transplanted workers. When the collapse occurred, the factories died and the housing began to degenerate.



Construction, halted for decades; Housing near Yerevan

When the country began privatizing after 1992 (remember everything was state-owned) people either bought or were given the apartments they were living in. If they were in desirable locations (geesh, define “desirable” will ya?) they could be bought by others and families displaced. Even if families were given ownership the parents often could not find work to support the housing. Women were more likely to find work because they weren’t too proud to do anything, anything to support their children. Un-employment and underemployment exceeded 40%. Today it stands at 10% according to government figures. More accurate estimates place it substantially higher. Speaking of government; there is deep mistrust of the government. Corruption is institutionalized. The mafia and illegal gain abound. The disparity between rich and poor is huge.

We asked knowledgeable local representatives, “what percentage of the people are living very comfortable, rich lifestyles, what percentage are getting by with daily needs and what percentage are chronically hungry, discouraged, under employed and barely existing?” Answer: the first category, 100. We asked 100,000? No, 100 persons. The second category accounts for 30-40%. We can do the math on the desperately poor.

We're learning how deep this problem is and how invisible it has become. Three whole generations of the population were "trained-out" of personal initiative by socialist pay policies which are surprisingly similar to the US trade union philosophy. They became disconnected from the noble aspects of work, to work for a purpose, a cause and a profit. Add a healthy dose of corruption and bureaucratic ineptitude and the sum of the equation is pervasive despair.

OK, back to our visit. As mentioned previously, Gyumri is the site of the 1988 Armenian earthquake that killed 25,000 people. Seeing the former high rise concrete housing and the poor level of workmanship, I'm not surprised by the numbers. Construction teams from all over the Soviet Union and the world began reconstruction about a year later but then USSR collapsed and the work stopped abruptly. Cranes stand rusting in place and, while much of the debris was removed by relief organizations, several thousand damaged or partially constructed buildings haunt the landscape. Until fencing was installed kids played in the concrete and rebar rubble, a source of regular injury.



Abandoned construction

The ride back, like each one at the end of each day is quiet. My eyelids feel heavy from thinking too much and my face hurts from too much emotion all day and trying not to show it. Life is good at home.

Visits in Gyumri - Lila Tocci

We visited the World Vision office and met the two children we sponsor and their families. Satenik, a ten year old girl, was accompanied by her mom. Buizand came with his older sister, mother and grandfather.

We gave gifts to each family, mostly the practical sort: school supplies, hats, gloves and a few small toys. We chatted the uncomfortable chit chat of the giver and the receiver. The boy's mother was exceptionally articulate. The boy's grandfather deeply moved. As we rose to take photos, the grandfather, a handsome, dignified man with piercing blue eyes, walked toward John, removed his engraved silver wedding band and grabbed John's hand, gesturing, this is now yours. John, questioning the appropriateness of receiving such a dear gift, looked to the World Vision staff for guidance. With their reassurance, he placed the ring on his finger and the two men embraced to seal the covenant. Sponsorship became a solemn vow. The need for grandfathers to stick together to protect the children is something that is important here.



Sateynik, a ten year old girl, sponsored by the Tocci Family; Buizand, a child sponsored by the Tocci family



Buizand's Grandfather, giving his wedding ring – sponsorship becomes a solemn vow

We saw a school in a poverty stricken district that World Vision had connected a gas line for. This may not sound impressive, but many live in unheated homes in a climate like our northeast US. Much of the heating is done by wood stove but trees and wood are a scarce commodity. The warmth of the school incentivizes older students to attend. Working with other international relief organization support, World Vision provides hot meals for the first three grades. Delightful artwork covers the walls. Extracurricular classes like dance give students the opportunity to learn steps and routines for performing. Parent groups sew

costumes for school productions and crochet handcrafts for sale. In the kindergarten, twenty trundle beds hold napping children, some still awake and following the strange American retinue with their eyes.



A sign in one of the schools that World Vision has helped; Kitchen in the school; The kindergarten classroom with triple trundle beds for nap time

We head off to an inclusive kindergarten where we are greeted warmly by an old woman in peasant dress, who nearly loses her thin shawl to the biting blowing wind. Inside only one classroom operates. There is no gas and electricity is too costly to heat more. We blow up balloons and hear about the economic realities.



Kindergarten

Next we visit a family living in a shipping container. This has been temporary housing since the 1988 quake in which they lost two children. Another son, Arthur, was born with cerebral palsy. Ashamed and alone, without jobs and on disability, the parents kept the boy home. No small feat when home meant one room with no running water and only a community latrine at the end of the street. Intervention from World Vision staff provided tutoring and surgeries. Today, Arthur walks, albeit with great difficulty, attends school and participates in extracurricular activities. Best of all, he is happy, grateful and willing to try what is new and hard because he's seen given a chance to try.



Temporary housing in a shipping container; the inside of the shipping container home; Arthur, born with cerebral palsy, now walking thanks to surgery funded by World Vision