



“AGBU has not only maintained but strengthened who we are as Armenians all over the world today. Keeping the legacy of our ancestors alive is a driving force to stay connected to the AGBU and to support its mission in perpetuity.”

Maria Stepanian

Greenwich, United States 

Born and raised in a robust Armenian community, with family ties to AGBU, Maria Stepanian is always looking for ways to give back. She has recently joined the Camp Nubar Committee as Parent Liaison, hoping to contribute to the spirit of unity that camp instills in Armenian youth. A New York Summer Internship Program (NYSIP) alumna turned NYSIP Program Coordinator, Maria continues to use her expertise as an educator to connect with fellow Armenians through her faith, service and community outreach.

How did you first become involved with AGBU and how did that experience shape your perspective and goals? I grew up in the Saint Thomas Armenian Church in Tenafly, New Jersey and at the time AGBU had a chapter in Saddle Brook, New Jersey. Not only did they offer events throughout the year, but also they had a weekly Sunday hangout, *Agoump*. It was meant for parents and kids, so sometimes there was music, sometimes performances, but there was always great food and good company. My parents' commitment to the community introduced me to AGBU, but my first independent experience was participating in NYSIP.

The year I did the New York Summer Internship Program was one of the best summers of my life because the professional experience was immense. The mentor I was paired with at the Rusk Institute for Rehabilitative Medicine treated me as a peer, valued my

input and respected my thoughts on the work we did together. It was one of the first times a professional adult found value in me as a student. The relationships that I built living with Armenian youth from all over the world and figuring out who I was empowered me to believe in my goals.

The year after participating in NYSIP, you became its Program Coordinator. How did that impact your career and your Armenian identity? I was always in my identity, but I didn't know it until I did NYSIP and it all came together for me. Why am I here? And what can I do next? I wanted to give back to what I received the summer before. You feel like a better, stronger and more educated Armenian when you do anything for your heritage and for your community. AGBU raised the bar for me, teaching me to work harder and develop skills in the workplace as I explored my academic and professional goals in education and research. As a teacher, I believe the type of indirect education that AGBU encourages is vital.

What inspires you? I believe in the power of education and the transformative connection between teacher and student. A few years ago, the AGBU Alternative Education team reached out to me to help work on an app for Armenian traditions. You can manipulate education in so many ways with technology, tapping into different demographics. The potential for that type of outreach inspires me.

What lies ahead in your work with the Armenian community? I'm very involved with my church, Saint Gregory Armenian Church in White Plains, New York. It's a second home to me and to my family. I was the head of the PTA of the Armenian school for 10 years and I've been on the parish council for eight years. There isn't an event at church that I haven't worked on, participated in, volunteered with. As a family, we show up, we help, we set up, we clean up, and we give. And I would do the same for AGBU.

I've recently become involved with the Camp Nubar Committee as a Parent Liaison. My kids have been attending for more than 10 years and it's their second home. There's nothing that warms our hearts more than seeing how much they grow with each year of attending camp. Camp Nubar empowers them as Armenians but also empowers them as people: they learn about the great outdoors, they learn negotiating skills, and most of all, they figure out who they are at camp and how to be comfortable in their own skin.

The relationships they have, the skills they've learned, the people they've become because of camp is a gift to us as parents. So, in my capacity as a Committee Member, I am continuing the tradition by trying to make Camp Nubar an even better place than it already is.

I hope to always stay connected to my church and to AGBU. If either community or both need something, my answer always is, "What can I do? How can I help? Tell me." Whatever it is, I'll rise to the occasion because I believe in the cause.