



Man on a Mission

Raphaël Der Agopian organizes service-based communities for generations to come

RAPHAËL DER AGOPIAN epitomizes the impact of youth leadership development on already principled, passionate thinkers. Born and raised in Paris, to Armenian parents from Lebanon, he came of age in a robust Armenian Diaspora community. It was his own drive, however, that would lead him to not only conceive of both UGAB Jeunes (an AGBU youth program) and *Arménie Terre de Vie* (a service mission to Armenia), but also become

the youngest Paris chapter chairman in AGBU history.

“It was through summer camp that I had the opportunity to discover AGBU’s history, spirit and values,” Der Agopian explains. When he was 14, he began attending *Colonie de Vacances* (an AGBU summer camp in France) and soon after started working on staff, first as a cook’s assistant and then as a counselor. In the kitchen, he learned to work collaboratively but

efficiently and, as a counselor, he realized how catalytic his own leadership could be if he focused on empowering his campers. Passionate about Armenia and Diaspora communities abroad, Der Agopian participated in AGBU Discover Armenia and the New York Summer Internship Program. Through these programs, he realized how a community is formed and how it can be organized to stay intact.

In 2007, as Der Agopian entered law

Der Agopian on a visit to the AGBU Nubar Library and Research Center in Paris, France.

school, he noticed a gap in sustainable programming available to him and his peers: it seemed they were too old to continue with camp and too young to join the Young Professionals at the time. “I was eager to use this energy and friendship from camp to start an organization to get youth interested in participating in the Armenian community,” Der Agopian explains. And so, he created UGAB Jeunes. The group specifically focuses on engaging 18-30 year olds through their events and fundraising initiatives, providing them with opportunities to create networks in the Armenian community. Where they would otherwise drop out of the community, many would now have reason to engage. Since its inception, the group has attracted hundreds of attendees to their meetings, parties and performances.

With the success of UGAB Jeunes, Der Agopian saw an opportunity to further mobilize the people joining this network. He set his sights on creating a platform that would encourage direct action through service work in Armenia. “I wanted to create something not only for Armenia, and for the Armenians there, but also for people from France, from the Diaspora, who were lacking that connection to their identity,” he asserts. “Creating a direct bridge between their origins and Armenia was vital. So I established *Arménie Terre de Vie*.” The organization, whose name translates to

“Armenia, Land of Life,” generates campaigns every two years that focus on particular social justice issues in Armenia. The three pillars emphasized in the projects are community health, education and environmental protection. Each campaign has two lead participants that establish the project plans in the chosen regions and recruit the other thirty participants. Together, they embark on a month of hands-on service, out in the field. From Berdzor to Malatya, *Arménie Terre de Vie* has launched four successful campaigns since its inception in 2011, all predicated on highly focused projects.

“IF YOU SAY THAT YOU ARE ARMENIAN, IF YOU TRULY LOVE AND IF YOU TRULY BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE ARMENIAN, THEN YOU ARE!”

Every single participant, at all levels, volunteers their time, insight and labor—including Der Agopian himself. And everything is collaborative and accessible. “I’m the founder of the program but I didn’t want to focus it only on myself, because it’s not *my* program,” he insists. “It’s for every Armenian and so I wanted each generation to take ownership and choose its own mission.”

Empowering others is a trademark of Der Agopian’s leadership style and ultimately what propelled him to become the Paris chapter chairman in 2015. As the youngest person to take the office in AGBU history, Der Agopian focused on converging the different chapters of AGBU Europe by mobilizing the next generation of Armenian

leadership. He was involved in leading the Alex Manoogian Saturday School, coordinated events for parents, and tended to the general wellbeing of French Armenians, all while revitalizing the Diaspora’s interest in and attention to Armenia.

Der Agopian’s passion for the global Armenian community is palpable as he discusses the recent revival of political participation in Armenia and across the Diaspora, but the Armenian identity is not so simply defined for him. “The first thing I would say is that there is no rule,” Der Agopian asserts. “If you say that you

are Armenian, if you truly love and if you truly believe that you are Armenian, then you are.” And it’s this spirit of inclusivity, of meeting people where they are, that makes him that much more of an effective leader. Both UGAB Jeunes and *Arménie Terre de Vie* attract community members that are not just Armenian by ancestry, but by shared passion and interest. His three-year tenure as chapter chair was characterized by this commitment to collaboration and mutual empowerment.

Although he has a full professional life as a lawyer at Atos, Der Agopian admits that the projects his Armenian heritage has provided have been most exciting to him. In fact, even his degree in law, anomalous in his family of doctors, was motivated by his disdain for impunity and injustice surrounding the crimes of the Armenian Genocide. Although he deals primarily in contracts and dispute resolution now, he has found a way to foster equity through all the community organizing and intentional, transparent service work he does. “For me, being Armenian is something that is burning in my heart,” he says. “I have always been attached to our history and I believe that we deserve truth and we deserve justice. And I know it is through our actions that we will achieve just that.” ☺

AGBU *Arménie Terre de Vie* volunteers help renovate a school in the village of Sarigyugh, Summer 2017

