The Delegation for Friendship Among Women
THE REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA AND ARMENIA

This trip was at least a year in the making. The fifteen Delegates who completed the trip returned home far richer than when they left. No matter how many books we read or films we saw, no matter how many emails any one of us exchanged with people in Georgia and Armenia before we left, we all returned home amazed and inspired.

Each of the traveling Delegates was assigned a counterpart before she left on the trip. The obligation was to establish contact and, hopefully, a relationship with a woman from either Georgia or Armenia. In addition, each of the Delegates who went was assigned a day during which she would act as recorder. What follows is a "summary" of those daily notes. It is from those notes and from being among the Delegates on this trip that I can assure you each traveler came home changed. Each set of notes reflects an enormous respect and sense of awe of the women we met who were engaged in working on behalf of their fellow countrywomen and shaping the future of their countries in the process.

We spent eight full days in Georgia, four full days in Armenia, and a day traveling between the two countries. Our journey began in Tblisi, the capital of The Republic of Georgia. The first event of our trip was, fittingly, a fabulous lunch. The wealth of the dishes served was reflective of every single meal given us during our entire stay. The vegetables tasted like they had been sitting in a sunny garden just minutes before. Fresh herbs were not added by the pinch but by the handful. Walnuts were used in every conceivable way in many dishes throughout the meal. Pomegranates were used spectacularly. I will not go on at length about the meals offered us in the rest of this summary. I will simply say they were all amazingly generous and delicious. I will also say here that all of the Delegates met many women with whom they made more than casual connections. The work and ideals represented by the women we met inspired us all. Contact information was exchanged along with many wishes to stay in touch and continue to jointly pursue goals to further that work.

DAY 1

After lunch on our first day, we walked through the city of Tblisi. It is a very beautiful city with sections dating from the fourth century and other sections where high-rise developments are in process. The river Katavi River, the longest river south of the Caucasus (1,000 miles long), bisects the city. We walked across the beautiful glass Peace Bridge.

We walked a short distance to the entrance for the cable cars which would take us to the top of the surrounding hills. From the top, we had spectacular views of the city and had our closest view of Mother Georgia. She stands over the city with a sword in one hand, for those who come to Georgia to fight, and a bowl of food in the other hand for those who come in peace.

As we walked the hill overlooking the city, we could see the red roofs of the old city, now in some disrepair, had views of the botanical gardens, saw the fourth century Narikala Fortress, and descended to the city's famous sulphur baths. Some of the Delegates returned to the baths after dinner to partake of their health and beautifying properties.

[Mary Byl, Recorder]

DAY 2

Our next morning began with a visit to The Ani Children Foundation. This non-profit, established in 2016, is now headed by Nata Geguchadze, the mother of the original founder, Ani, who was killed in an auto crash. We were guided by hospital staff through the facility which provides palliative care to terminally ill children, including those in comas or vegetative states. They currently attend to approximately forty patients. Government funds cover the costs of medical care but equipment and other supplies are funded through private donations. This was a heartbreaking visit for us all. We gathered outside for a photo with the amazing staff, including Maia Chkhaidze, Medical Director of the Tsisishvili Children's Center (front row on the right).

We then left for the American Embassy where we met with the Charge d'Affaires, Elizabeth Rule and two of her staff, Erin Mai Jarrett, Assistant Press and Information Attache, and Daniella Tran, Cultural Programs Coordinator.

Elizabeth gave us an honest assessment of conditions and challenges in Georgia today. This included discussion of the threat that Russia represents to Georgia. She noted that the United States (US), largely via US AID (Agency for International Development) is helping make Georgia attractive to the breakaway territories by fostering farming, industrial development, and entrepreneurial initiatives. Erin and Daniella continued the discussion of the difficult task of recovery from the post-Soviet economic collapse. They also addressed the societal and cultural roles of Georgian women, both traditional and contemporary. They were very generous with their time and provided us with important information as a context for all our visits in Georgia.

We ended our afternoon with a fascinating visit to The Georgian State Museum of Folk and Applied Arts. The small museum housed exhibitions spanning the 11th to the 20th centuries and included amazing Georgian woven rugs, musical instruments, local costumes, jewelry and embroidery from all over the country. The museum's mission also includes in the preservation of traditional arts.

That evening ended with a reception in the lobby of our Marriott Hotel to which were invited representatives of all the organizations with which we would be meeting and the Delegates' counterparts. It was a fascinating evening, almost overwhelming in the opportunities for connections. It also gave the Delegates and opportunity to introduce outstanding Georgian women to each other.

[Brenda Dominici Johnson, Recorder]

DAY 3

Our next day began with a visit to The Guivy Zaldastanishvili American Academy. Founded in 2001 with US State Department funds, the school is a private four-year, co-ed high school. The current enrollment is 290, predominantly-Georgian, students. The school's mission is to prepare students in grades 9-12 for colleges and universities in the international arena. Classes are conducted on a seminar basis with 12-15 students per class. This is an elite school, with competitive admissions policies, high tuition rates and lofty goals and standards set on bringing Georgia into the 21st century. It is housed in a beautiful state-of-the art facility with advanced technology and sophisticated laboratories. We met obviously-devoted teachers and visited 2-3 classrooms in which discussion was lively and free-flowing.

We left the school and went to The Janashia Museum of Archaeology, the Georgian National Museum. The Janashia Museum is a component of the Georgia National Museum system and the country's premier archaeological repository. It houses an astounding collection of preChristian gold, bronze and iron artifacts, decorative arts, domestic and farming material and jewelry, dating as far back as the 10th century BCE (Before the Common Era). The great hall display of 1.8 million-year-old Homo Erectus skulls, the discovery of which is rewriting the history of European humanity, is like none other in the world.

Ms. Nino Jakheli, Curator of the Stone Age Collection and Scientific Secretary of the Georgian National Museum, and several of her associates provided a comprehensive tour of the stone and bronze age collections, including a 7th century BCE funeral cart, huge clay wine and water vessels, tools and numerous household items. The large collection of skulls, excavated at Dmanisi in Western Georgia, is truly remarkable. On the second floor the Museum of Soviet Occupation depicts a full story of repression and resistance. On the lower level are displayed a treasure trove of gold objects and jewelry found in what were1500-1000 BCE Trialeti burial mounds. We were enthralled by the age, depth, and breadth of materials indigenous to this ancient culture and land, as well as how they were so magnificently displayed.

Over lunch on a sunlit veranda, we met with members of the Women of Tomorrow Association. Discussions were lively with all of the dynamic women in attendance, who are breaking ground in their fields of textiles, art, television, advertising, travel and hospitality, media, public relations, international relations and communications. Women in Georgia have basic rights, but are not equal in the business environment, the art world and many other areas of endeavor. It is okay to be a wife and mother, even a teacher or a nurse, but it is not acceptable for women to "make money" (aka: "be independent"). Women For Tomorrow wants to change that, largely through economic development and supporting small women-owned businesses.

Lastly, on this very full day, we attended a roundtable discussion at The Tblisi Headquaters of the Exchange Program Alumnae Association of Georgia (EPAG). EPAG is the U.S. Embassy umbrella organization for alumnae of Fulbright Graduate education programs in the US. These were all amazingly impressive young women. For example, one who studied chemistry in Missouri under the FLEX program (high school) is now doing research on pollution, particularly

plastics, and is trying to get the first recycling legislation through Parliament. Another young woman works at the Ministry of Economics trying to improve the representation of women in Parliament. There is currently a mandatory quota of 18 out of 150.

After brief introductory remarks by Anjela Pakhlajian and others, we broke up into small groups to discuss topics, including : Environment, Education, Arts, Healthcare, and Gender Bias. Discussions were led by the young graduates with varying degrees of expertise. The idea of the round table was to switch groups after thirty minutes; however, most of us were so engrossed in discussion we did not want to move. Of particular significance was a young woman who runs her own NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) for women with disabilities. She is a radio commentator for disabled people, who spoke with great passion and articulation about the discrimination she suffered in all aspects of her life due to her own disability of blindness.

[Diane Dunning, Recorder]

DAY 4

Our next day in Tblisi began in a meeting with The Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN). We were hosted by the Executive Director, Nana Janashia, and several of her staff who gave us a very comprehensive introduction to environmental concerns in Georgia and CENN's efforts, particularly as it involves women. Nana described the difficulties Georgia faced after the breakup of the Soviet Union when there was no electricity and no safe water in Georgia. Georgians stood in lines for bread and most lived on beans and potatoes. CENN had to use electricity from the Post Office to initially get things started. In the 1990's, corruption was a big problem. Donors did not trust giving money to the government or large Georgian organizations, NGO or not. In the early days of CENN, the U.S. and other organizations gave money to trusted individuals to help get CENN off the ground.

CENN works with rural women to help them learn how to farm in a sustainable manner. For example, in rural areas, cows frequently roam free through the towns and fields. Originally this

free method of cow management provided enough meat and dairy to feed a family. CENN developed a program to teach these farmers to increase their production in sustainable ways so that they could also sell their meat and dairy products. They are also learning how to make cheese that would meet the standards necessary to sell in Europe. CENN also focuses on environmental education for school children.

Georgia's most important natural resources are its forests and water. These resources have faced numerous problems such as earthquakes, mudflows, human pressures (deforestation) and old roads that need to be replaced. Much of the energy consumed in rural areas is from burning wood, much of it obtained illegally. Once again, in the 1990's there was a lot of corruption associated with the management of the water and forests. CENN has worked hard to expose and eliminate this corruption and the situation has improved. CENN is working with the European Union (E.U.) and the Coca Cola Foundation to address water sanitation which remains a problem. CENN is working with schools to provide toilets and water supplies. They especially focus on vulnerable communities such as those of eco-migrants, social migrants, women and children. They are also working with the E.U. to help rural communities develop Environmental Community Organizations. There are currently no toilet or hygiene standards in many schools which leads to poor health among the children. Many school children have to go to a neighbor's house to drink the water or use the toilet.

CENN is also concerned about mining companies from Russia and China which may not be concerned about the environmental health of Georgia. Without rural development independent of the mines, many residents have no choice but to work in the mines. One of the greatest threats mining poses is the pollution of ground water. Over 50,000 people now live in areas of ground water pollution.

CENN has discovered that its best partners are the Rural Women's Councils. Women want more education and more responsibilities for the resources with which they have direct contact. It is the women who are typically responsible for obtaining water and disposing of waste. However, culturally women are not encouraged to be involved with issues outside their domestic responsibilities. Men say they are not opposed to women's involvement in many cases as long as it does not interfere with their domestic duties. Even with these restraints, these women's councils have been successful in establishing irrigation, registering pastures, and educating the children to continue these efforts in the next generation. CENN also works to help socially vulnerable populations such as the LBGQ (Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Gay, and Queer) communities, working to educate the population and provide jobs. Many students find their professions through CENN. Youth empowerment is a major focus. In the Muslim culture, many women must marry by the age 14 and 15, and CENN is working to empower these women as well. As is evident, this was a hugely informative meeting.

We ended the morning with a visit to Gallery 27, owned and operated by Nino Kvavilashvili, one of the many artists we were very fortunate to meet throughout our trip. Nino is committed to supporting local Georgian artists who work in a variety of media and developing the local arts community. Before opening Gallery 27Nino was a member of one of the most famous art studios in Georgia, La Maison Bleu, established by five women graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts. Nino is a founder and board member of Women For Tomorrow.

During the afternoon our group was divided in two. One group met with The Social Services Agency of Georgia. The other group visited Avlabari Hospital.

The Social Services Agency (SSA) of Georgia

The group met with Mari Tsereteli, Head of the Division of Guardianship and Care, whose first profession was pediatritian and cardiologist. The SSA falls under the Ministry of Labor Health and Social Affairs and works with children's rights, foster care, small group homes, and the elderly and institutionalized. Services imclude shelters, rehabilitative services, day care, and small group homes for the elderly.

The social work profession is only 18 years old. There are currently 239 social workers employed in Georgia, all certified by the E.U. By 2021, it is expected that more than 400 social workers will be certified. Since the social work profession is so new, there are still many challenges. Previously, all social work agencies were centralized ; however, they are now being moved into the municipalities.

There used to be 47 orphanages with a capacity of 112 children in each. Georgia is beginning to close orphanages and place children in alternative care facilities; of these, 60-75% are placed with families at the outset. Others are placed in foster care facilities or small group homes. There remain only two functioning orphanages with 29-50 children. It is especially difficult to find foster care for children with disabilities. At this time, there are 3.5 million residents of Georgia and 8100 children waiting for adoption.

Domestic Abuse Legislation was recently passed in Georgia; however, enforcement is limited and there is much need for education of the police. The responsibility for adult abuse and human trafficking fall under the Minister of Health. Thus the work for too few social workers is overwhelming. Churches offer some services. Volunteerism is not part of the Georgian tradition.

Avlabari Hospital

This hospital is a six-bed in-patient hopice facility, founded and overseen by Mother Miriam. The hopital is within the grounds of a beautiful Eastern (Georgian) Orthodox monastery, located in the Aviabari neighborhood of old Tblisi. The nuns run a nursing school as well and plan to provide support and training for caretakers with in-home hospice patients. Death is a very difficult issue to discuss in Georgia, and Mother Miriam and her very small staff are devoted to helping families and caretakers accept dying with dignity. All of us who met with Mother Miriam, and her small staff were deeply moved by her devotion and clarity of mission.

That evening, we dined in the beautiful garden of The Writers' House of Georgia. The Writers' House was built and owned by philanthropist David Sarajishvili in 1903-5 and was an important center of cultural life. The home was recently re-opened for the purpose of supporting and developing cultural and literary activites.

[Kim Harms, Recorder]

DAY 5

This was a day of travel to Kazvegi in the high Caucasus Mountains. Our journey took us through pastoral villages along the Military Highway, the main road north to one of two natural passes through the mountains. We passed the Zhinvali reservoir and navigated countless hairpin turns as we climbed to the highest point through the Jvari pass. During our journey, we stopped at the Jvari church atop a hill overlooking the town of Mtskheta and the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers.

The church stands where Saint Nino, the most revered saint in Georgia, set her cross upon a pagan site. Saint Nino was an ever-present figure throughout our trip. She is responsible for Georgia's adoption of Christianity as the national religion.

We visited the 11th century Sveti Tskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta, the largest cathedral in Georgia, which is built on the site of the first church in Georgia and is where Christ's robe is reputedly buried. Lunch was at the Iago winery where we were hosted by Marina, one of the country's few women winemakers. As well as a tour, we were treated to a bread-making lesson. The bread was cooked on the inside of a charcoal-fired clay oven and a number of us tried a hand (with varying success) at slapping the dough into the insides of the oven.

As we moved on, we stopped at the soviet-constructed Russian-Georgian Peace Memorial overlooking the valley with its mosaics depicting the cultural highlights of both countries. At the last stage of our journey, as we descended into the Darali Gorge and the town of Kazbegi, where we visited a felt studio and learned about the labor-intensive process of turning the raw materials of wool, silk, and herbal dyes into beautiful wall hangings and other household and personal items.

All of our rooms during our stay in Kazbegi, faced Mount Kazbegi, the third tallest mountain in the Caucasus at 16,500 feet. It was an exquisite site at any time of day.

[Holly Jobe, Recorder]

<u>DAY 6</u>

We awoke to the hotel window vista of the mountains. The sun rose like a spotlight on Mt Kazbegi with the light inching down to the peak where the Gergeti Holy Trinity Church sits. A caravan of SUVs (sports utility vehicles) bumped us up the deeply rutted, dusty, narrow road on the steep edges of the mountain where we hiked up steep rocky paths to the terrace of the 6th century stone church. From the terrace we could see the rivers and town in the valley. The church was perched in a high place to protect church treasures from the frequent invaders of Georgia. Out of respect for the Georgian Orthodox religion, we donned head scarves and "skirts" to visit the Georgian and Russian icons hung on the walls around the central altar.

After visiting the church, we drove to the Russian border which was only 15 kilometers away. Trucks parked along the road waiting to clear Russian Federation customs in the high mountains pass. Guarding the gate to Georgia stood the 6 year old St Michael and St Gabriel Church, a symbol of guarding the gate to heaven.

From there, we went to lunch where we tried our first the traditional Georgian dumpling, Khinkali. Husband and wife, Vakho Kilikashvili and Maia Khutsishvili, hosted us in their new business of guest house and restaurant. At lunch, we split into two groups. One group chose to ride SUVs up narrow roads to Juta where the group climbed to the guest house, Fifth Season, sitting at the foot of the moraine. These Delegates relaxed in hammocks in the sun before their descent past horses grazing beside the rocky trail.

The other group visited an amazing 80 year-old sculptor at his Snovili Studio in the village of Sno. It was an absolutely magical place filled with beautiful works in progress, the designs drawn from Georgian folk tales and Christian motifs. He works in stone and metal as well as wood. As the master craftsman, he now has a number of apprentices working with him, including his son; however, it was very clear that he is still the master. His works are commissioned by churches and municipalities in Georgia and beyond. He has recently been commissioned to restore one of the many castle cities which have guarded the Georgian border for centuries.

[Katharine Mauer, Recorder]

DAY 7

We left this morning to return to Tblisi. We stopped in Gori, the site of the museum dedicated to Josef Stalin. We visited Stalin's private train car and the home in which he was born, both of

which were on site. Stalin was afraid of flying and always traveled by train in which he was the only one allowed to use the toilet or have a chair with arms. He did have two additional sleeping rooms for secretary or family, but all the facilities on board were very sparse.

His birthplace proved to be a rented room over his father's cobbler shop. This stop was very difficult for the members of our group and was short. It is important always to be aware of history but difficult to view any honor paid to Stalin. Cathi Smith related that Mary Pomeroy, one of the Delegation's founding members, had lunch several years ago with Stalin's daughter, Svetlana, after she defected to the U.S.

Our second stop was to visit a sandstone cave city, Uplistsikhe (meaning the Lord's Castle). It lies near the town of Cory and requires 91 steps to ascend to the site and 80 to descend. It was built during the 4th century BCE. The residents of Uplistsikhe honored pagan gods until the 14th century when a small church was erected. There is evidence of a three-tiered society. Servants, those who served the priests, and the nobility all lived here but in very separate sections. There is still evidence of the wine preparation area, burial area, jail, high priest's throne, sacrificial animal altars, and living quarters. The views across the valley as well as the site itself were spectacular.

We arrived in Tblisi that evening and stayed overnight.

[Darlene Miller, Recorder]

DAY 8

Today we departed for Signagi, known as “The City of Love” for it many marriage chapels and its great beauty. Signagi is in the heart of Georgia’s wine country. Saint Nino was said to have made a cross of grape vines and bound it together with her hair, symbolizing the sun’s rays. And indeed, we had a perfect day to visit Pheasant’s Tears winery. We strolled through the vineyard and toured the buildings housing the quervi buried to their necks in the ground where the natural Georgian wines were fermenting. The winemaker, John, described the unique process producing the wines, and we sat on the terrace overlooking the vines as we tasted the many varietals.

That evening, we were treated to a true Georgian “supra”, a feast to end all feasts, with toasts in abundance. The polyphonic singing group, Zedashe, sat and ate with us and broke into song and dance throughout the meal. Zedashe was formed to preserve and perform traditional Georgian chants and songs. Georgian vocal music has been passed down by ear for hundreds of years, possible since the 5th century BCE. The founder of Zedashe and our host at the Pheasant’s Tears restaurant was Ketevan Mindorashvili (front, right in photo), who played the panduri (beautiful traditional lute) and sang. Zedashe has toured all over the world and will be touring in the U.S. in 2019.

[Carolyn Moats, Recorder]

DAY 9

Our day began with a visit to the Bodbe Monastery where Saint Nino (“The Great Enlightened”) is buried. The Bodbe Monastery is the largest in Georgia housing approximately thirty nuns. The original building on the grounds was built in the 8th century. Georgian kings have been crowned on this site which looks out over a beautiful valley.

We then continued our journey back to Tblisi, stopping to visit Nukriani Community Organization en route. We were hosted by the Director, Maya Bidzinashvili. Maya sold her dowry to establish Nukriani in 2006 to create employment opportunities for women in the area by involving them in her workshops which teach them traditional handicrafts upon which they can build a small business of their own. A number of the women she works with were there to greet us and treat us

to a lesson in making “churchkhela”, a traditional Georgian delicacy of walnuts dipped in boiled-down fruit “molasses”.

We arrived in Tblisi in the early afternoon with time to pack for Armenia and that evening celebrated with the women we had met at our Farewell Dinner at which we presented our Mary Pomeroy Awards for Georgia. It was extremely difficult to decide among the very worthy organizations with which we met. It was decided to present two awards which went to the Nukriani Community Organization and _____.

[Darcy Olstad, Recorder]

DAY 10

We leave for Armenia. Crossing the border was an interesting several-step process, including saying goodbye to our Georgian guide and driver. Our guide and dear friend throughout our stay in Georgia was Sopho, whose patience, knowledge base, and good humor was a delight. Our dear driver was Giorgi.

After passing through Georgian and Armenian passport controls with a walk and bus ride in between, we boarded our bus for Armenia and met Lipo, our driver, and Anna, our guide. The scenery changed radically very soon after entering Armenia. The surrounding hills were covered with forest in autumn hues. While driving, we started learning about the Armenian economy, environment, and culture from Anna. Armenia’s only open borders by road are the northern border with Georgia and the southern border with Iran. The western border with Turkey and the eastern border with Azerbaijan are both closed. In 2008, Hilary Clinton was encouraging the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border; however, Turkey wanted Armenia to deny the genocide and give up their disputed territories. Armenia strongly declined on both counts so the border remains closed.

Our first stop in Armenia on our way to the capital, Yerevan, was the Haghbat Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage Site from the 10th century. Armenia was the first official Christian country. We saw our first example of a khachkar at the Haghbat Monastery.

A khachkar is the intricately carved stone cross for which Armenia is known, and the one at Haghbat Monastery is from the 13th century and is believed to having healing abilities. The color that was used to originally decorate the cross is now more expensive than gold. There were gravestones all over the monastery grounds, especially by the church entrances and in the narthex. There is the belief that the sins of the people who died would be forgiven by people walking on their gravestones. The Armenian Church is simpler in decoration than the Greek or Georgian churches. It is believed that this will allow for fewer distractions from prayer. It also provides less for invaders to steal.

After lunch and Armenian coffee (never ask for Turkish coffee in Armenia), we traveled to Lake Sevan. Lake Sevan is the second largest alpine lake, second only to Lake Titicaca in Peru. The water from the lake was used for massive irrigation and hydroelectric projects during the Soviet period until it became evident that the water level was decreasing too radically. On a positive note, the drop in water level allowed for the discovery of evidence of a highly developed Bronze Age culture.

We arrived in Yerevan in the late afternoon, checking into our hotel which sat majestically on Republic Square.

[Caroline Olstad, Recorder]

<u>DAY 11</u>

Our first full day in Yerevan, Armenia, was a very full day. We started with a short walking tour of Republic Square.

We had seen the square the previous evening lighted up with music echoing, but the full majestic view in bright sunlight was dazzling. We were then scheduled for an Embassy visit with Erika King, the Cultural Affairs Advisor, but John Bolton was visiting the Embassy, so Erika was kind enough to arrange for us to meet her at the "American Corner" in a public library where we learned about the Embassy's mentoring program for women.

We then visited the History Museum of Armenia, another of the majestic buildings on Republic Square, where we were guided through a treasure trove of very old relics. After lunch, we visited the Anania Shrakasty Lyceum, a private secondary school where CAS (Creativity, Activity and Service) was the mission. This special school is a member of CIS (the Council of International Schools), which emphasizes critical thinking skills and offers an International Baccalaureate program. Student Council members provided a guided tour of their school and articulated the goals and mission of their experience enthusiastically.

Our next stop was Saint Mary's Health Clinic, which serves a vulnerable population of poor and disenfranchised women. Several organizations cooperate under one roof to offer many different services including reproductive services, plastic surgery, massage, psychological services, dermatological, and gynecological services.

Our last activity of the day was a delightful "speed networking activity" arranged by Erika King of the U.S. Embassy. Erica had assembled many professional women representing a variety of humanitarian and business enterprises. The discussions were riveting, and once again, the Delegates found it hard to move from one person to the next as planned. It was a thoroughly positive experience.

[Sharon Richardson, Recorder]

<u>DAY 12</u>

Our first visit of the day was to meet with representatives of The Armenian Young Women's Association (AYWA) which "is a non-profit, non-governmental organization comprised of young women united in their determination to improve the status of women in Armenia, regardless of political affiliation, educational/cultural background, ethnic origin or religious outlook. AYWA's missions to lead social change and to achieve equality of opportunity and reward for all Armenian women, is an integral element in transforming into a just and productive society for all." Their mission is to "increase the role of women in Armenian society" through economic

entrepreneurship and leadership development, social enterprise and micro grants focused on vulnerable groups, and business start-up assistance. AYWA's outreach also includes health advocac and community organization assistance for women between the ages of 13 and 40. They founded the Women's Entrepreneur Network and will host the International Women's Congress in Armenia in April 2019.

From AYWA, we went to meet with representatives of the Human Rights Common Platform. In a country scourged by conflict, genocide, and severe social and political restrictions, The Human Rights Common Platform, founded by Tatev Tatulyan in 2014, is a social, non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Yerevan that focuses on supporting, raising awareness and advocating for human rights, peace and equality for all Armenians through community activities, arts events, film and education programs, and by collaborating with other international organizations.

Their stated goal is to "create a platform to encourage democratic participation, to develop civic consciousness, human rights values and to reach social justice for all." They focus on LBTQIA rights, women's rights, art and activism. This group of young volunteers impressed us all and was one of the recipients of our Mary Pomeroy Award.

We then went on to meet with the Public Journalism Club (PJC), a non-governmental organization, co-founded by Seda Muradyan in 2011, "to promote freedom of expression, diversity and pluralism, build a media literate society, facilitate the development of a stronger civil society and support processes aimed at the democratization of the region and establishment of a dialogue, mutual understanding and peace". Their vision is for a "democratic Armenia which enjoys peace, welfare and an active, well-educated and competitive civil society cooperating with mass media to become a real watchdog while state structures have transparent activities and accountability". Seda hosted a round table discussion for members of the Delegation and her fellow PJC members.

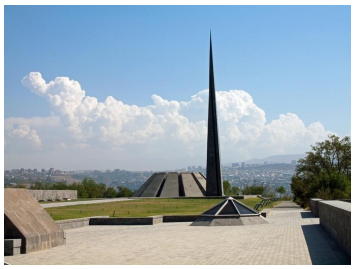
[Cherie Riesenberg, Recorder]

DAY 13

After a tour of Yerevan, we left the city center and traveled to Zvartnots Cathedral, a UNESCO site which includes the ruins of the 7th century cathedral which in its day was the largest round church in the world. We were treated to breath-taking views of snow-covered Mount Ararat to the south across the border in Turkey and Mount Aragats to the northwest.

We continued on to Echmiadzin, founded as Vargarsapat in the year 117 as the capial of Armenia. Echmiadzin is now home to the spiritual center of Armenia and the seat of the Patriarch. It too is a UNESCO World Heritage site and includes the first Christian church built in the world (4th century). The center which includes the current cathedral (7th century) is vast, larger than the Vatican in Rome and has an exceedingly wealthy treasury.

As we returned to Yerevan, we stopped to visit The Armenian Genocide Memorial. We ascended the path to the museum and memorial, passing a grove of trees each of which was donated by a supporting-nation of the world.



The Memorial is haunting in its stark elegance. While genocide has long been a gross failing of humanity, the Armenian Genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Turks was the event for which the term “genocide” was coined. According to scholarly estimates, over 1.5 million Armenians perished between 1914 and 1918.Thousands more were deported to Syria and faced starvation in the desert. Others fled and their descendants now make up the Armenian Diaspora which is composed of more people than inhabit current Armenia. Armenians march to the Memorial on the eve of every April 23rd, in memory of those massacred. April 24th is Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day.

This evening we attended our Farewell Dinner in Armenia and awarded our Mary Pomeroy Awards. Again, our decision was a difficult one, and we decided to present two. The first award was presented to to Maro Matosian and The Women's Support Center. The Women's Support Center is a highly protected domestic violence shelter in Yerevan. Maro could only allow three of the Delegates to visit in order not to attract unwanted attention. The women in the shelter are given support, training and basic tools with which to earn money to support themselves and their children. The second Mary Pomeroy Award in Armenia was given to The Human Rights Common Platform.

[Mary Rohman, Recorder]

DAY 14

This, our last day before departing for home, began with a visit to the Vernisage Art Market and the local vegetable market where the Delegates were able to buy gifts for friends at home. We then traveled out of town to visit The Diaconia Charitable Fund, located on 15 hectares of land with 75 homes. We were the first group from the U.S. to visit and we were treated royally. Our host and founder of the organization, Baru Jambazian, explained that the Diaconia Charitable Fund was established to work with survivors of the 1989 earthquake as well as other families impacted by war, poverty, and misfortune. The Fund has built homes, provided health care, food aid and mental health access, founded workshops to teach skills, and provided support for disabled children and talented young artisits and musicans. We were treated to a wonderful lunch, during which we were entertained by a number of the children, and we visited a family who lived in the settlement. We were all moved and impressed by the Fund's efforts. As we had already presented our Mary Pomeroy Awards, we took up a spontaneous collection and were able to present a gift to Baru to help continue the work of the Fund.

Our last visit of the trip was to the home of Mrs. Hripsimeh in Ashtarak, located on the southern slope of Mount Aragats. Mrs. Hripsimeh lives in a 170 year-old home, the oldest in Ashtarak. At

one time, Mrs. Hripsimeh hosted a cooking show on Armenian television, and she provided us with a cooking class in her garden, teaching us how to make summer dolmas, lentil soup, and a delicious sweet. We were then guided into her wine cellar for a gorgeous meal which included the dishes we had watched being prepared.

[Cathi Smith, Recorder]

DAY 15

We departed Armenia and the Caucus Region. It was a full and moving journey for us all and has become an integral part of ourselves. I can say that the depth of all we learned and witnessed grows more deeply within me every day, and I feel so fortunate to have shared it with my fellow Delegates.

Sincerely, Susan McCraw Helms