

Students Fast to Raise Awareness of Darfur

By: Erica White

Issue date: 4/27/11 Section: News

Follow the sounds of beating drums, maracas, and laughter. Sticks of Nag champa incense are burning in the middle of a large circle of participants. Everyone has a weapon of choice; all are feeling experimental and giddy. The giddiness could be from lack of food for the last 10 hours, but it's most likely due to the thrill of trying something new and finding the beat.

This is not a hippie commune nestled in the hills above San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. No, this is Glendale.

Last Friday, members and non-members of In His Shoes Ministries gathered in the GCC Student Center Conference Room to fast for Darfur. The 30-hour fast began noon on Friday and ended Saturday at 6 p.m. at the Armenian Church Youth Ministries Center. Participants were asked to raise a minimum of \$150 and bring an open heart, along with a toothbrush and sleeping bag.

Darfur is a region of western Sudan in the African continent. It is not a country, but it is equivalent to the size of France. Darfur once harbored six million African tribes and nomadic Arab herders before the outbreak of hostilities in 2003.

Since then nearly 400 villages have been destroyed and millions of people have been displaced. Over 400,000 have been killed by violence or malnutrition. Today in the refugee camps, water shortages are common. The refugees live in constant fear of attack since the camps sit along the Sudan and Chad borders. The violence has spilled into Chad and if refugees wander too far they are at risk of

being killed if they are male, and raped if they are female.

In His Shoes was created as a response to the Armenian Genocide, and members believe that through fasting they can raise not only money for Darfur's refugees but also raise awareness about the atrocities that are ongoing in the region.

The group partakes in the fast annually. This is their tenth year of participation and, with their partners World Vision, they have raised over half a million dollars in donations over the 10-year span.

This year the group chose to switch partners and teamed up with Stop Genocide Now, which is a non-profit grassroots and activist lead organization. They made the switch because the organization focuses primarily on Darfur. "We still have partnerships with World Vision and in the future we'll probably do something with them again," Suzie Shatarevyan said.



CAN'T BEAT THIS: Suzie Shatarevyan keeps it steady during the drum circle at the Fast for Darfur event.

Media Credit: [Erica White](#)

During the year, In His Shoes participates in a number of charitable events including making blankets for babies, and going to skid row every month to pass out food and clothing. Besides this, in January they go to Santa Barbara for fellowship with their Martin Luther King retreat.

Shatarevyan is a bubbly, energetic and receptive 32-year-old. She was born in Armenia and has lived in the U.S. for 23 years.

Shatarevyan found out about In His Shoes when the president, Fr. Vazken Movsesian, came to USC and participated in a symposium. "After I heard him speak I went home and looked up the website. And after I looked it up I thought 'that's what I want to be a part of,'" Shatarevyan said. Shatarevyan works as an electronic resources librarian and helps with the groups podcast. She also helped organized the fast.

Shatarevyan said that Armenians are a resurrected people, and that they need to provide hope for people still suffering. "We are trying to give the people hope. They too will survive and they are not forgotten and we still think about them," she said. With events planned to fill the hours, Shatarevyan said she often forgets about her hunger. This is her sixth year of participation in the annual fast.

In His Shoes consist mostly of Armenians from the Glendale community. April 24 commemorates the 96th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. This year, the anniversary date falls on Easter which is practically significant to the primarily Armenian Orthodox group.

Father Movsesian said the commemoration of the genocide was not about forgiveness.

"First of all, nobody did anything to you. They did it to your parents, your grandparents, your great-grand parents. It's up to their generation," Movsesian said.

To be clear, Movsesian does not condemn the commemoration he just feels there are better ways to heal. "We just don't feel commemoration is the path to finding that justice we're seeking," said Movsesian. "What we're saying is if you are seeking justice there are better [ways] than going out there and burning a Turkish flag. Let's go do some real action."

Susan Movsesian, speaking to a group member who told a story of idolizing people who beat up others, congratulated him for attending. "There are people in our community who would find what we are doing to be very, very extreme and maybe not the right thing to do.

The group aims to spread the message not only to the Armenian community but to the world around of walking in another person's shoes. "When we walk in someone else's shoes we start to ask the questions that need to be asked. We start to understand the other person and who they are. By understanding who they are we start to have respect for them. By respecting them we start to love them," Father Movsesian said.

GCC student Savana Aghamal, 24, found a creative and lucrative way to get donations. "During club rush week when the tents were up I sat under one and offered free massages for a donation," Aghamal said. Last year Aghamal said she didn't get any donations cause she didn't know how and she was shy. "This year I was determined to get some [donations]. Once

I got people relaxed I'd tell them about the event. The more relaxed people got the more they listened and were willing to donate," Aghamal said, giggling. "It was funny cause people kept asking me, is this your club?"

This year Aghamal not only had donations to bring in, but she brought her future brother-in-law Teddy Mirzaian, 29, too. Mirzaian went to a march last year but didn't dig the vibe. Mirzaian grew up in Glendale. He said he grew up with this, referring to the Armenian Genocide.

"Every culture has a history that's been passed on," Mirzaian said. "I'm not trying to talk negative about it [the march]. I think it's important to do the march because it's some kind of voice. But when I went to the MLK [Martin Luther King] retreat, that's when it struck me, why look to the past?" Mirzaian said. Mirzaian had an epiphany. He realized that he didn't need the recognition of politicians or other people. He knew the truth. So does his family, and so will his children. "We're all brothers and sisters. I don't know those people but I can understand the pain they are going through. I wish somebody understood the pain my people went through 100 years ago and helped them out rather than turned their backs," Mirzaian said.

Yelena Zakaryan works in the GCC chemistry department. She is tired from the long day, but grateful for the opportunity to fast.

"Seeing the eyes of the children and seeing them filled with hope and love. Seeing that means so much more and is more filling than food.

For more information on Darfur or to donate go to <http://stopgenocidenow.org> or <http://inhisshoes.org/>.

© Copyright 2011 El Vaquero