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### **May I Introduce Azerbaijan? The Karabakh Foundation's Individual Approach to Cultural Diplomacy**

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In the competition for the hearts and minds of Americans, the Karabakh Foundation recognizes the power of personality. Few Americans can describe Azerbaijan. And yet anywhere in the United States where *mugham* is played or a magnificent Azerbaijani carpet is unveiled, Americans stand ready to welcome the "newcomer." Enter the Karabakh Foundation.

The Karabakh Foundation launched in 2010 as a 501(c)(3) U.S. cultural charity foundation. The foundation's mission is to "increase awareness and understanding in the United States of the cultural heritage and traditions of the country of Azerbaijan, the Caucasus area, and the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan."

The foundation's outreach approach embraces the range of factors that influence anyone's decision to embark on a friendship with a newcomer. *Mugham* and carpets serve as outstanding calling cards, no doubt. But it is experiences and not products of culture that bond peoples. The "exotic" fascinates, and the familiar endears.

In just a year, the Karabakh Foundation has captured a loyal following that defies classification by age, gender, or other background. The foundation has accomplished this not simply by hosting world-class concerts for hundreds and thousands of individuals (such as Natig Rhythm Ensemble and the Rast Group), presenting dance performances at one of Washington's premiere cultural festivals, mounting professional exhibits of art by Azerbaijani artists, presenting the record-breaking Azerbaijani Radio Hour, or by publishing a thoughtful publication series entitled *Karabakh: Looking Back, Looking Forward*, among other outreach programs. Rather, the Karabakh Foundation has engaged Americans in a relationship that each participant designs according to tastes and interests.

Rather than demand full attention, particularly in this age of information overload, the foundation's outreach allows for varying degrees of commitment. Staff designs each program to reach specific audiences without trying to appeal to everyone. For those who

sustain a deep interest in the topic, the foundation is ready to suggest follow-up, from reading materials on [www.KarabakhFoundation.org](http://www.KarabakhFoundation.org) to becoming a foundation's "cultural ambassador" by participating in substantive program initiatives. The intended outcome of all activities remains Azerbaijan's presence in U.S. consciousness.

The Azerbaijani Radio Hour is somewhat emblematic of the foundation's "cafeteria-style" approach to sharing Azerbaijani culture. Each week's one-hour show focuses on musical accomplishments, cultural themes, and/or personalities that translate Azerbaijani culture for U.S. audiences. Estimates suggest that some 1,000 individuals listen to or download the show each week—many more listen to the show on the Web. The friendly, somewhat informal, presentation style highlights the foundation's conversational approach to outreach.

The 2011-12 iteration of the Azerbaijani Radio Hour will feature more short segments and more unexpected themes and pairings. Entertainment and education, as always, will complement one another in the show. Plans include special features on U.S.-Azerbaijan friendships over the years, a conversation about the foundation's initiative in digital mapping of Azerbaijani historic sites, some musical performances gearing up for next year's Eurovision, and more.

The foundation's focus on easily accessible programs has not meant sacrificing the interests of serious dilettantes or of scholars. The organization's *Azerbaijani Rug* Initiative embodies the foundation's "layered" approach to programming. Rug programming began with a talk in the showroom of longtime Washington, D.C., carpet dealer David Zahirpour. Several participants expressed amazement at the extensive role of Azerbaijan in the design and production of "Oriental carpets." The foundation followed up with the celebrations at the Textile Museum, including a modest display about Azerbaijan's role in the world of oriental carpets. The foundation now is publicizing an invitation for individuals to become part of the *Azerbaijani Rug* Initiative, which is planned to be a virtual and in-person forum.

A diverse corps of volunteers plays a vital role in the foundation's cultural diplomacy. Via the individual passions and expertise of each volunteer—who have come from Azerbaijan, from other countries, from across the United States—the foundation again engages the human dynamic. These cultural ambassadors are helping to build, among other things, an online exhibition entitled *Azerbaijan Artifacts* that will allow others to explore their own interests. This exhibition focuses on material artifacts showcasing Azerbaijani culture. From musical instruments to coins to postage stamps, the story emerges of a country with much to tell.

The foundation's cultural diplomacy will be enriched as the foundation continues to build its Board of Advisors. Content experts have made outstanding contributions to many of the foundation's activities to date. Culinary historian Amy Riolo led the development of the foundation's soon-to-be-published Karabakh cookbook. The book is a compendium of food and culture that is guaranteed to expand world consciousness of Azerbaijan's ancient and modern legacy.

The foundation is fortunate to have several "big personalities" to draw on in engaging Americans. The enthusiasm of Azerbaijan's youth, manifested recently in the post-Eurovision exuberance of Azeri students in the United States, permeates many foundation activities. The foundation recently sponsored outdoor performances of Azerbaijani music and dance at the Celebration of Textiles at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. The videotape of this event reveals a mostly young Azeri demographic eager to share the beauty and sophistication of their culture. The foundation has launched a *Young Professional* division that emphasizes "bring an American friend" to the group's casual get-togethers and other programs.

Just as foundation staff and volunteers seek to engage stakeholders in a dynamic relationship, we each derive inspiration from personalities who inhabit our world. Several of us Americans have become enamored of Azerbaijani musical icon Uzeyir Hajibayov. Breathtaking musical compositions aside, Hajibayov seems to us a first-class practitioner of cultural diplomacy. He did not stop at preserving and furthering Azerbaijani musical tradition; he recognized the need to keep culture flowing for his contemporaries. Had Hajibayov worried simply about posterity, who would have experienced the culture firsthand in order to pass it along to future generations?

As the foundation takes stock of our impact on Americans, we have in mind a historic-personality construct. That is, we envision an Azerbaijani born in 1917, who would have experienced the Russian Empire, the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic, the Soviet Union, and the Republic of Azerbaijan. This person also would carry a sense of Azerbaijan's ancient legacy, and, ideally, the country's modern persona. How convenient would that be—to introduce such a person to fellow Americans. In the meantime, the Karabakh Foundation has endless material with which to celebrate Azerbaijan here in the United States.

<http://ada.edu.az/biweekly/issues/vol4no12/20110630021933889.html>