



# ARMENIAN EYECARE PROJECT



Annual Newsletter

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SUMMER 2024

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# LETTER FROM FOUNDER

I've always said the cornerstone of AECP is our priority on medical education and training for Armenia's physicians. Now more than ever we are seeing the fruits of that labor. In this newsletter, you will read about a family who recently traveled to Armenia to receive eye care for their baby, a great example of the elevated medical care available in Armenia that's made possible by our supporters. You will see that an AECP physician is invited to Kyrgyzstan to train medical staff there based on the success of our programs at home. You will discover that leading medical institutions in the world continue to invest in our work in Armenia, the most recent being news of extended funding from the World Diabetes Foundation for our revolutionary diabetes program in the country. And you will read about how these advancements continue to benefit the people of Armenia, including the many refugees who were forcibly displaced from their homes in Artsakh. With your support, we continue to invest in the future of Armenia. We are able to do it because of your own investment in our work. Thank you sincerely for continuing to show up for Armenia and all the beautiful people in it.

*Roger Ohanesian MD*

Roger V. Ohanesian, MD  
Founder and President  
Armenian EyeCare Project



# 2024 MEDICAL MISSION AND CONFERENCE

We are excited to announce that the Armenian EyeCare Project and its volunteer physicians will soon be traveling to Armenia for our 64th Medical Mission! Held September 19-30, 2024, the AECF Mission trip will include our organization's ever-growing annual conference as well as several activities that celebrate our achievements in supporting Armenia's healthcare system for over 30 years.

During the trip, AECF volunteer physicians will hold master classes and discuss complicated cases with their Armenian peers. Activities will include hands-on training and visits to AECF's many facilities throughout the country including our WetLab; Center of Excellence for the Prevention of Childhood Blindness; Mobile Eye Hospital; Regional Eye Centers and newly opened Diagnostic Eye Clinics.

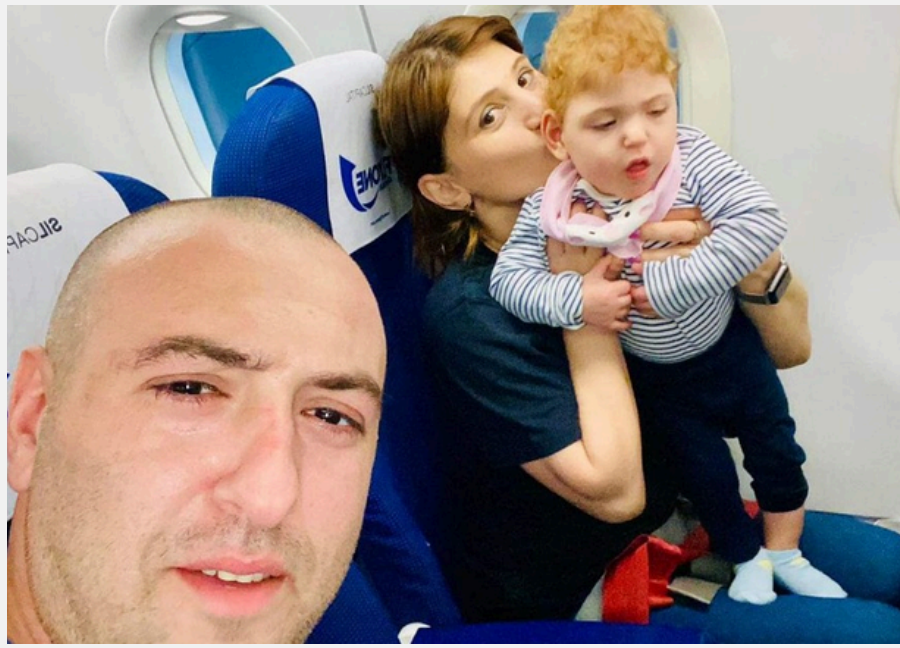
The AECF-CHLA 22nd International Conference, which is organized in cooperation with Armenia's Ministry of Health, Children's Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA) and other professional medical associations, will be held in two parts and include numerous lectures, professional discussions, master classes and workshops for health care providers that include ophthalmologists, neonatologists, general pediatricians and pediatric endocrinologists.

The ophthalmology conference will take place September 27 to 29. During this time, lectures will be delivered on glaucoma, refractive surgery, neuro-ophthalmology, oculoplastics, retinal diseases, pediatric ophthalmology and corneal disorders. The general pediatrics conference will take place September 19 to 20 and there will also be conferences on neonatology and pediatric endocrinology.

We are very much looking forward to our upcoming Medical Mission in Armenia and encourage all those who are interested in participating to join us!



# PAGE 6



## FAMILY FROM GEORGIA TRAVELS TO ARMENIA FOR BABY'S SURGERY

Since 2010 the Armenian EyeCare Project has been implementing a sight-saving program for children in Armenia who are born premature. These newborns need specialized eye care services as they are exposed to the risk of blindness due to retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) and other childhood eye diseases.

In collaboration with USAID, Children's Hospital LA and the government of Armenia, AACP established a Center of Excellence for the Prevention of Childhood Blindness in Yerevan in 2012. At this center, high-quality eye care services are provided to children who have sight-threatening eye diseases. Both children in Armenia and those from neighboring countries benefit from this exceptional center.

One of these beneficiaries is one-year-old Yeva from the country of Georgia who recently received treatment at our Center of Excellence. "Yeva" means life in Russian. This name perfectly suits a small girl with such a strong spirit.



*“Nothing can express fully our gratitude to this program and to our surgeon for saving the sight of our child!”*

Since birth, Yeva has undergone five surgeries and spent the first 11 months of her life in the hospital. Among other health problems, Yeva has familial exudative vitreoretinopathy (FEVR.) This eye condition is a hereditary disorder that affects the retina and can cause progressive vision loss without treatment.

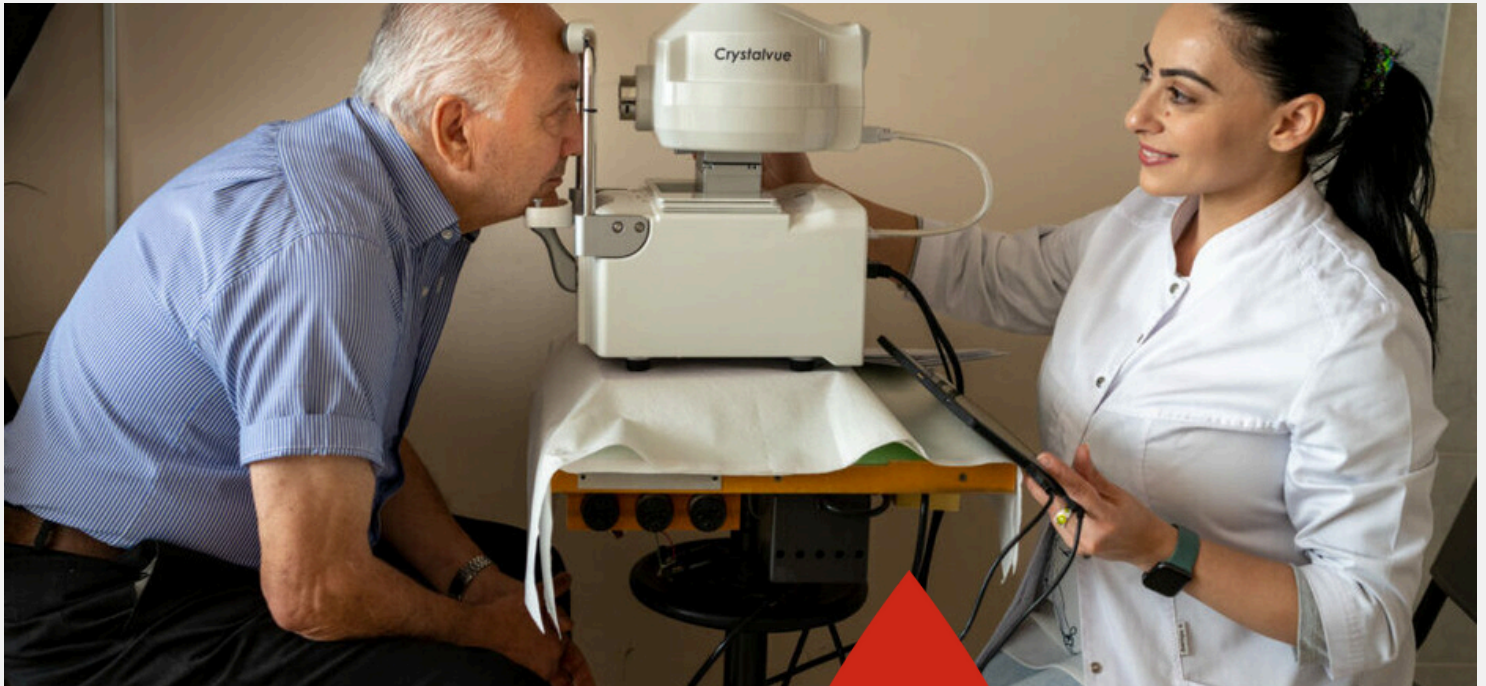
“This much-needed procedure is not carried out in Georgia and our ophthalmologist suggested choosing one of three countries for the prescribed intervention,” explained a family member. “We chose Armenia and it was the best choice we have made!”

Upon arriving in Armenia, Yeva was seen by Dr. Tadevos Hovhannisyan, who is responsible for performing vitreoretinal surgeries and laser treatment for children admitted to the Center of Excellence. Dr. Hovhannisyan has been performing complicated retinal surgeries as part of AECP’s ROP program for more than 10 years and has a series of impressive achievements in this field.

Yeva’s laser treatment lasted five hours but the result was life-changing: Yeva will see! Yeva’s family is beyond grateful for the gift of sight bestowed upon their baby girl and the help from AECP for making this priceless gift a reality.



# WORLD DIABETES FOUNDATION EXTENDS FUNDING FOR AECF



One decade ago, there were no comprehensive programs in Armenia for the prevention and early intervention of diabetes and its many negative consequences despite the large number of diabetics among the country's population. Vision loss or blindness as one of the major complications for diabetes was especially concerning for AECF, given our mission to eliminate preventable blindness in Armenia. This changed when we began our work with the World Diabetes Foundation (WDF) to develop a diabetes program in Armenia that would use a systemic approach to management of the disease and focus on reducing the rate of blindness and vision impairment.

Now the World Diabetes Foundation is extending its support of our Diabetes Program and its accomplishments by funding a \$780,000 grant so our organization may continue its sight-saving work in this sector. The grant will provide the necessary resources to AECF and the Republic of Armenia to carry on and further develop the revolutionary program over the course of the next three years.



News of this grant was announced during a recent visit to Armenia by WDF. From May 13 to 17, 2024 representatives from the foundation visited various provinces throughout Armenia alongside AECF and Armenia's Ministry of Health to get better acquainted with the important components of this project. While in Armavir, they visited AECF's recently developed diagnostic eye clinic - the *Don H. and Vardi Vanitzian Diagnostic Eye Clinic* - which includes the capacity to diagnose potentially blinding eye diseases. WDF representatives witnessed in-depth eye exams and saw how diagnostics are carried out using artificial intelligence (AI) to diagnose diabetic retinopathy as a diabetes complication. As well, representatives observed how diabetes management techniques are practiced with the use of glycosylated hemoglobin tests for patients with diabetes.



*“With a strong foundation in place, we are committed to continuing the program and continuing to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those affected by diabetes.”*



“This program is a continuation of the cooperation started in 2017,” AECF Country Director Nune Yeghiazaryan said. “The program has expanded over the years, increasing the scope of care for patients as well as working toward improving Armenia’s healthcare policy and strengthening local capacities both through training and provision of equipment.”

Thanks to this cooperation, AECF has been able to implement its Diabetes Program in Armenia in innovative ways. This includes diagnosis through AI; the development of data collection and analysis software; and the ability to check glycosylated hemoglobin with mobile devices. Our organization has also been able to help Armenia’s government develop a National Diabetes Strategy for the country as well as lay the foundation for the establishment of diabetes schools throughout Armenia.

Kirza Buch Kristensen, Head of Strategy and Business Development at WDF, had this to say: “This joint initiative is the result of eight years of cooperation in Armenia, the aim of which is to support the implementation of a comprehensive diabetes strategy and transform diabetes care delivery in the country. The previous projects achieved notable success, surpassing targets and contributing to the improvement of diabetes service delivery in Armenia. With a strong foundation in place, we are committed to continuing the program nationally and continuing to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those affected by diabetes.”

In the span of the three-year grant, from 2024 to 2027, eye examinations of more than 40,000 residents in Armenia, including those forcibly displaced from Artsakh, will be performed; laser eye treatments and surgeries will be performed on thousands of patients throughout the country; a diabetic foot screening program will be conducted for the first time in Armenia; 60 regional medical facilities in the country will be strengthened through updated equipment and tools to detect and treat diabetes and diabetes-related eye disease; training for approximately 1,500 medical workers in the country will be organized including guidelines and protocols related to diabetes management and its complications; and several diabetes schools will be established in the provinces of Armenia.

AECF will work closely with Armenia’s Ministry of Health throughout the duration of this program to update the country’s current National Diabetes Strategy and develop a roadmap for the future, ensuring the greatest benefit for the country of Armenia and its residents.

Our organization is grateful that we may continue our sight-saving work in Armenia through this exceptional grant provided by WDF. Better yet, those in Armenia who need pre-diabetes and diabetes care will be able to receive it, as well as play an active role in its management. In terms of a strategy for diabetes, Armenia has come a long way.

# AECP HELPS ARTSAKH REFUGEES



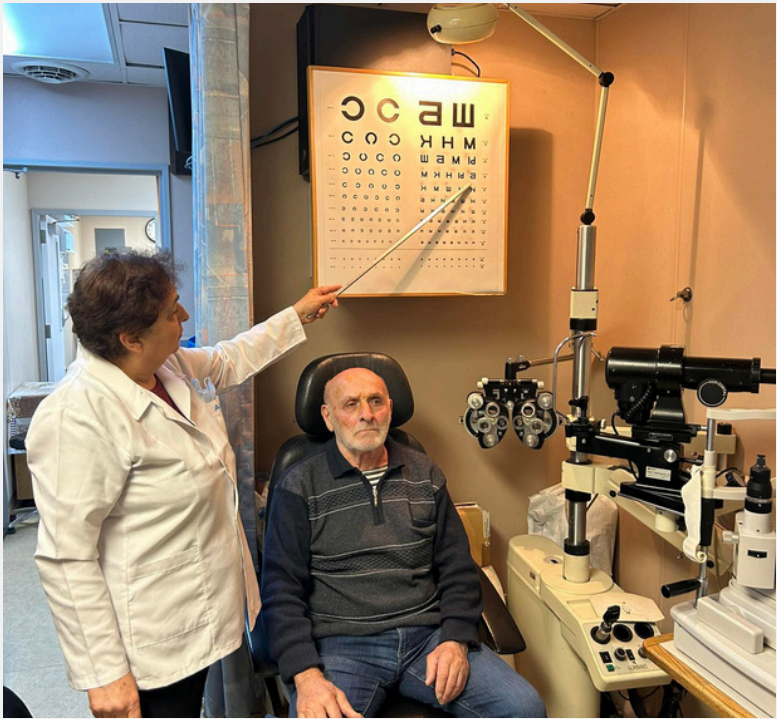
The year 2023 began in total blockade for the Republic of Artsakh, with little to no food, healthcare or other basic rights available for the people living there. By September 2023, all of Artsakh was under fire, with deadly attacks launched against the entire population of ethnic Armenians living there. The heartbreaking result was a mass exodus of residents in the territory and the official dissolution of the Republic of Artsakh. In a matter of days, an estimated 100,500 Artsakh residents left their homes and took a long and difficult journey toward Armenia.

Since this time, Armenians everywhere have made it a priority to help these forcibly displaced refugees from Artsakh. Armenia's government quickly created a humanitarian center to respond to emergency needs; volunteer organizations helped those in need with food, clothing, medicine, healthcare and the like; and individuals and groups donated what they could in support of these displaced Armenians.

From the first days of the Artsakh peoples' displacement, AECP, too, has actively supported our compatriots through services our organization provides. We have provided eye screenings, detailed eye examinations, treatment including laser procedures and eye surgery as well as the provision of prescription eyeglasses, all at no cost. Several prosthetic surgeries have also been performed for wounded soldiers.

Because refugees have dispersed throughout the country since seeking refuge in Armenia, it's been important to have this eye care available in all of our facilities in the country, including AECP's Mobile Eye Hospital, Regional Eye Centers and Diagnostic Eye Clinics located in various regions throughout Armenia.

Additionally, in cooperation with state institutions and social organizations, both AECP screening teams in Armenia as well as volunteer physicians from the U.S. who've visited the country for our Medical Missions have organized eye screenings in temporary shelters for Artsakh refugees and provided additional care such as provision of eyeglasses or surgery.



# THE FACES OF ARTSAKH



Our organization has also made it a point to send general screening teams to Ararat, the province with the highest number of forcibly displaced refugees, and to have the AECF Mobile Eye Hospital stationed there. According to government statistics, 12,000 of the 47,300 who are utilizing state-provided assistance were living in this region at the time of our service there. AECF worked extensively to serve both the local population and Artsakh refugees in Ararat before moving on to the Armavir province to continue our screening and treatment work.

Here are the faces of just a handful of the displaced refugees from Artsakh we have been able to help. There is still much work to do, but like many other groups and organizations, AECF is committed to supporting these individuals who have experienced a great tragedy as best as we can. To learn more about these Artsakh refugees and read their stories, please visit our website: [www.eyecareproject.com](http://www.eyecareproject.com)



## Since the mass displacement of Artsakh residents in September 2023:

- hundreds of refugees have received screenings at our Mobile Eye Hospital and Regional Eye Centers
- over 30 refugees have received eye surgery on our Mobile Eye Hospital, some on both eyes
- more than 150 pairs of eyeglasses have been provided to those in need

# MOTHER AND SON RECEIVE SIGHT-SAVING CORNEA TRANSPLANTS



Hayk is six years old and lives in Yerevan with his family. His mother, Anahit, was born with an eye disease that unfortunately has been passed down in her family from generation to generation.

Anahit remembers that her blurry vision began in childhood. "I couldn't see the school chalkboard," she says. "Because of my poor vision, I couldn't achieve my goals or dreams. I couldn't study or find a job. And when I married, I feared of passing the disease on to my children."

Sadly, one of Anahit's children - Hayk - did inherit the disease. "I recognize people only by voice," Hayk said. "My vision is poor. I need to hold my mom's hand to go anywhere. I wish for better sight so I can go out and play."



*“Our future is no longer in the dark!”*

Recently Anahit and Hayk visited Dr. Anna Hovakimyan at the Malayan Ophthalmological Center in Yerevan. Dr. Hovakimyan is one of the first physicians in Armenia to participate in AACP’s Fellowship Program in the U.S. back in 1999. Today, she heads the Cornea Clinic at Yerevan’s top eye center, a job she has fulfilled now for over 20 years.

The first time Dr. Hovakimyan met Anahit and Hayk she noticed they both had cloudy corneas, which is a form of blindness. In Hayk’s case, if his cloudy cornea wasn’t replaced with a healthy one, he would stay blind forever.

Unfortunately, Armenia lacks cornea tissue. These tissues must be imported into the country and are costly, ranging from \$1,200 to \$1,500 per tissue. During a recent Medical Mission, AACP Volunteer Physician Dr. Anthony Aldave, who works at UCLA’s Jules Stein Eye Institute, visited Armenia and brought with him corneal tissue that could be used for cornea transplant surgeries.

Dr. Hovakimyan first performed a cornea transplant on Anahit. It was successful. A few months later, she performed the same surgery on Hayk. “After the surgery I started to see,” Hayk said. “I could see everything!” Dr. Hovakimyan recalls Hayk’s excitement after his procedure. “He started to smile, saying ‘I can see the colors!’...He gave me a big hug.”

“Now without holding my mother’s hand, I can go to school independently,” Hayk says with a big smile. “I’m very happy that I can see now. Thank you!” His mother, of course, is happy too. “I’m immensely happy and grateful,” Anahit adds. “Our future is no longer in the dark!”

You can be the reason Armenians in need of cornea transplants get the sight-saving care they need. Please consider sponsoring this invaluable initiative in Armenia by providing our organization with the resources to purchase cornea tissues that are desperately needed to save the sight of so many Armenians in the country.



## DR. ASTGHIK GHAZARYAN COMPLETES FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

AECP has been providing fellowship opportunities to promising young ophthalmologists from Armenia at leading eye centers in the U.S. for nearly 20 years. Dr. Astghik Ghazaryan is the most recent ophthalmologist from Armenia to complete a two-year fellowship in her specialty of retina through AECP's longstanding Fellowship Program. Observing at the University of California Irvine (UCI) under the mentorship of AECP Board Member Dr. Barry Kuppermann, Dr. Ghazaryan had the unique opportunity to advance her knowledge in her specialty through a targeted program that involved observing and participating in the day-to-day activities at UCI's Gavin Herbert Eye Institute. Now the talented physician returns to Armenia to put her knowledge and skills to work. We recently had a chance to speak with Dr. Ghazaryan about her fellowship experience. Read on for the Q&A.

Q  
&  
A

*Is there anything you will do differently in your work? If so, what?*

In Armenia, physicians encounter a diverse group of patients with various diseases that impact the retina. If we can ensure these patients also come under the care of retina specialists, we can preserve their vision more effectively and improve their quality of life. This is why we must increase awareness of diseases affecting the retina and strive to disseminate our knowledge more broadly. Given the compact and beautiful landscape of our country, spreading this information is not only feasible but essential.

*What is one of the most memorable moments from your training?*

I spent two wonderful yet challenging years in the U.S. It was tough but ultimately, unforgettable. When I was informed of the opportunity to take a two-year retinal fellowship at UCI, my initial fear was that I might fail. But upon arriving, Dr. Kuppermann advised me to leave my preconceptions and start afresh. At that time, this advice was particularly apt as my understanding of the retinal world was quite limited. A year into the program I realized that thanks to the guidance of five exceptional specialists at UCI, I had become an integral part of that exemplary team.

*Is there anything else you'd like to say?*

AECF's Fellowship Program has consistently elevated the standard of ophthalmology in Armenia, training several doctors and elevating them to high levels of proficiency. This success is supported by people in the U.S. who hold a deep affection for Armenia and are eager to see both its people and the country thrive. I am proud to count myself among the Armenian doctors who have now had the honor of participating in this cherished program.

*What do you feel is your biggest achievement from AECF's Fellowship Program?*

My most significant accomplishment from the program was gaining an in-depth understanding of the retinal field. I discovered innovative approaches to enhance retina clinics in Armenia, learned about cutting-edge techniques used globally and realized that achieving the impossible becomes possible with clear goals and supportive colleagues.

*How do you plan to share the knowledge you gained from your fellowship with your peers in Armenia?*

Teaching is a powerful way to deepen our own understanding so the first thing I aim to do is enhance my skills as a clinician and surgeon while also sharing my knowledge with my colleagues. But my greatest educational aspiration is to establish a Retinal Fellowship Program in Armenia. By using what necessary resources we have, we can create an exemplary program in this captivating field.



## AECP PHYSICIAN TRAVELS TO KYRGYZSTAN TO TRAIN

The Armenian EyeCare Project, in collaboration with our longtime partner Children’s Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA), has been working to combat childhood blindness in Armenia since 2010. This is when physicians in Armenia, along with AECP, noticed a disturbing trend of babies going blind due to retinopathy of prematurity (ROP), a debilitating eye disease that leads to blindness if left untreated.

Soon after, AECP, with help from CHLA, began a targeted program to treat infants with ROP. We developed a cutting-edge facility in partnership with USAID - the Center of Excellence for the Prevention of Childhood Blindness - in Yerevan and started saving the sight of hundreds of babies one surgery at a time. The results have been incredible: No child in Armenia has gone blind from ROP since 2018.

With such a successful program, AECP is often asked to share our expertise and knowledge in the prevention of childhood eye disease with other developing countries. Most recently, Dr. Tadevos Hovhannisyan, a vitreoretinal surgeon and AECP’s chief ROP surgeon in Armenia, traveled to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to train physicians there in the prevention of ROP and other childhood eye disease.





*“Our colleagues in Kyrgyzstan have good theoretical knowledge but lack practice and that is why they reached out to AECF.”*

The request to share our experience in developing a successful ROP program in Armenia and training local specialists in Kyrgyzstan came from Kyrgyz doctors who visited Armenia in 2023 to participate in our AECF-CHLA International Conference and visit our Center of Excellence. In February 2024, Dr. Hovhannisyan arrived in Kyrgyzstan and began his work with ophthalmologists at the country’s National Center for Maternal and Child Welfare. In the span of two days, he examined 40 children. This included pre-term infants of 35 to 37 weeks gestation with a high probability of having ROP as well as older children with eye disease.

Dr. Hovhannisyan also trained specialists in the country on screening and treatment techniques for childhood eye disease and performed laser procedures and anti-VEGF injections. During the hands-on training, physicians had the opportunity to examine newborns’ eyes with the use of a retinal camera that Hovhannisyan brought from Armenia. Trainees also performed laser treatment under Hovhannisyan’s supervision. “We’ve started an interesting collaboration and my hope is it will be quite impactful,” Dr. Hovhannisyan said. “Our colleagues in Kyrgyzstan have good theoretical knowledge but lack practice and that is why they reached out to AECF.”

Of the trip, Dr. Hovhannisyan said it was “short but very intense.” And as a result of the training that took place during the visit, doctors in the country have now begun performing laser surgery. “Many aspects of cooperation were discussed and I am ready to continue providing medical mentorship to these physicians,” he added.

Kyrgyzstan’s Chief of the Department of Pediatric Eye Diseases Dr. Emilbek Misirov expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to work with Dr. Hovhannisyan and gain the education and training needed for doctors there to treat eye disease like ROP. “Previously we could only diagnose ROP... we had no skills to do laser treatment by ourselves,” Dr. Misirov said. “Parents need to spend a lot of money to travel abroad for treatment. The worst thing was that children whose families could not afford the trip had no opportunity to escape further vision deterioration. Now we can implement sight-saving laser treatment in our country!”

In line with our mission AECF strives to eliminate preventable blindness and we are ready to share our experience and knowledge with all who are interested, replicating what once CHLA did by sharing its wealth of knowledge in ROP prevention with Armenia’s specialists.

# IN MEMORIAM: AECP REMEMBERS DEAR FRIENDS



## TOM MOURADICK

Thomas Cy Mouradick, "Tommy" to his family and friends, was a longtime supporter of AECP. He regularly attended our annual Galas, and throughout his life and in passing, he generously supported our programs in Armenia. Born and raised in Fresno, California, Tom joined the family business - M&A Distributing - a grape processing and cold storage company, shortly after graduating school. Eventually, Tommy became President of the company where he farmed and sold table grapes under the "Tommy Boy" label. He loved farming and the produce business and enjoyed many lifelong friendships while working in the field. Tom believed a good time and business went hand in hand. AECP is deeply grateful for Tom's generosity, commitment and friendship.



## LORETTA A. GELENIAN

Loretta Anahid Geleenian passed away in July 2023 at the age of 84. She had a love of reading and learning and nurtured this love and curiosity by traveling the world and meeting new people, spreading her kindness and intelligence to all those around her. She also had a talent for arts and crafts and spent many hours working on her beloved doll houses, quilting and creating unique cards for different occasions. Above all, Loretta felt it was important to be active in the Armenian community. She was one of the founding members of the Armenian Cultural Association and generously supported many Armenian charities, including AECP. Loretta left a significant bequest that will help support our many programs in Armenia.

# MARY ANN ZAMANIGIAN

Mary Ann Zamanigian was a dedicated and generous benefactor of AECF during her lifetime. After her passing, Zamanigian continues to provide substantial support to AECF through her estate. Mary Ann's keen interest in the medical field compelled her to pursue a degree in radiology. Later in life, she worked at the Rhode Island Blood Center for many years, becoming an integral part of the institution in many different roles. As a person of great kindness and character, faithful member of her church, talented photographer and caring individual, Mary Ann created a legacy of cherished memories for her family and friends. We are deeply grateful for Mary Ann's unwavering dedication to AECF and invaluable support towards our programs.



## HOW YOU CAN MAKE A TRANSFORMATIVE GIFT!

With a very simple planned gift you can help the Armenian EyeCare Project bring sight to Armenian eyes and make a real difference. Learn how meaningful - and how easy - it is to make a planned gift, which will make your generosity last for generations. Your lasting legacy and compassion will ensure that our organization's programs continue for generations to come while also providing some financial benefits to you and your family. Discover how simple and significant it is to make a gift through your will and forever help the people of Armenia. Remembering our organization in your will contributes to our organization's long-term financial strength, ensuring access to eye care for the people in Armenia. It is also the easiest major gift you can make. Scan the QR code on the right for more information or visit our website at [www.eyecareproject.com/planned-giving](http://www.eyecareproject.com/planned-giving)



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