

Maria Stepanyan is a dedicated Armenian American leader whose faith and community involvement have shaped both her identity and her vision for service. Born in Armenia and moving to the U.S. at the age of four, Stepanyan says, “Being Armenian has always been a huge, huge part of my identity. But being involved in the St. Mary’s Armenian Apostolic Church community here in D.C. has really strengthened the Christian Armenian aspect of who I am, specifically putting my Christian faith at the forefront of my identity.”

Her journey began with active involvement in St. Mary’s ACYOA and the church choir, where intergenerational connections and mentorship fostered a deep sense of belonging. She reflects that the choir offers more than music. It provides meaningful conversations, guidance, and community support. “I’ve been part of the choir since I was 10,” she reflects, “and it’s been amazing to see how music brings people together across generations.”

Stepanyan is also the founder of One Thriving World, a nonprofit dedicated to bridging global health gaps. The organization’s first initiative is aimed at improving youth nutrition in Armenia, where non-communicable diseases account for roughly 90% of deaths. The initiative targets middle schoolers through interactive, culturally relevant, hands-on programs that teach healthy habits. “Even if we get one student to adopt healthier habits or drop unhealthy ones, that’s a huge impact that can save a life,” she explains. “That thought keeps me going.”

Challenges, particularly building and managing the organization largely on her own, have tested her resilience. “At the start, it was difficult to secure resources and handle so many moving pieces,” Stepanyan recalls. “But with support from the Armenian community and guidance from God, we’ve been able to work towards our goals.”

Looking ahead, Stepanyan envisions expanding One Thriving World globally, integrating data science to measure impact, and addressing public health and environmental concerns through partnerships with other organizations. She sees her faith, leadership experience, and community ties as the foundation for a lifelong commitment to service.

Stepanyan's leadership also extends to the Narek Bell Choir, which she revived as a senior-year project. “Our priest, Father Hovsep Karapetyan, had a vision that I would lead it,” she explains. “I had never played handbells before, but it was perfect timing. I could feel that it

was God's guidance." Today, the choir serves as a space for youth to connect with their faith, culture, and one another.

At the University of Maryland, Stepanyan serves as president of the Armenian Student Association (ASA). She emphasizes the importance of fostering connection among students who share a common faith, culture, and heritage. "It's amazing the number of people I've met through ASA who I didn't even know were Armenian in this area" she says. Under her leadership, ASA hosts cultural events like barbecues, organizes traditional Armenian celebrations like Soorp Sarkis Day, and actively collaborates with other Armenian student associations across the DMV, strengthening networks and community engagement.

When asked about Armenian traditions that hold special meaning for her, Stepanyan chooses Vartavar. "It's a tradition that I have loved since I can remember and represents my intertwined Armenian and Christian identities," she says. For Stepanyan, it's a reminder that culture, faith, and community are inseparable and that true leadership comes from nurturing these connections.

I'm honestly super inspired by Stepanyan's journey. Her dedication, faith, vibrant personality, and creative approach to leadership make her a fantastic role model, and I think her story is an example that many young people can learn from; showing how identity, service, and community can come together to make a real impact.