



Alumni of the Month

December 2017

## Daron and Ani Bolat

*Central Council Chairperson Mallory Maslar interviews former ACYOA and Central Council members, Daron and Ani Bolat about their involvement in the ACYOA, the impact it had on their lives, and their current parish involvement.*

### **Mallory Maslar: How did you first get involved in the ACYOA?**

**Daron Bolat:** I was involved in the ACYOA Juniors growing up. I became involved in the ACYOA in college around the time the St. Mary ACYOA in Washington D.C. was just getting reorganized. The more I experienced what the college experience had to offer, and the more I experienced what the ACYOA had to offer, I realized that the ACYOA was the best place I could grow as a Christian and an Armenian.

**Ani Bolat:** My parish did not have an ACYOA or ACYOA Juniors chapter growing up (St. Sarkis, Dallas). I was involved in Greek life in college, and once college was over I found myself with a full-time job and more spare time than I knew what to do with. By that time our parish was forming an organized ACYOA chapter and my friend Evelyn encouraged me to join her at a weekend camp that the Seniors were hosting for the Juniors. After that, I was hooked.

### **MM: What impact has the ACYOA had on your life?**

**DB:** The ACYOA played a very important part in my formation as a Christian. It is because of the relationships I built in the ACYOA that I wanted to go to Badarak or an event at church, not just because my parents forced me to go. Through the ACYOA I was able to grow as a leader and, more importantly, recognize that a true leader is one who serves others. If I had not become involved in the ACYOA, I certainly would not have quit my job to study at and graduate from St. Nersess Seminary, I would not have worked at the Diocese, I would not have served as the full-time youth director at my home parish, I would not be a diocesan delegate, and I would not be a deacon.

**AB:** The two biggest impacts on my life have been church and leadership. I grew up attending a Catholic church and while the Catholic and Armenian churches are similar there are certainly some differences. The ACYOA Leadership Conference was where I really gained a sense of those differences and the history of the Armenian Church. The ACYOA also allowed me to grow as a leader through service in the church.

### **MM: What are some of your favorite memories being involved in the ACYOA?**

**DB:** Attending the first Leadership Conference and several after that had a profound impact on me. It was a chance to really talk to people about our faith and get to know people. It was the first time I had talked to a priest just as a person rather than with the trepidation and reservations young people often have when talking to a priest. At one Leadership Conference, we decided to play football during a break and Fr. Shnork Souin, who was new to our diocese, joined in. During one play, I stayed in to block and he blitzed. All I could see was

his collar barreling towards me and I didn't know what to do. He ran right over me, and as I lay on the ground staring at the sky, I thought to myself, "I like this guy!"

Participating in the ASP trip also completely changed my perspective on my life and my faith. We would be at church for Badarak, and us spoiled kids would be complaining about having to stand because there were no pews, but I'd turn and see an elderly woman kneeling on the stone floor for the whole time. When we volunteered at a camp for orphans, someone would complain that they didn't get a whatchamacallit bar; meanwhile, these kids would be thankful for anything they received. Whoever we met would treat us like a long-lost nephew or niece coming home. Even though I have no family ties to the current Armenian republic, through my experiences during ASP, I absolutely felt like Armenia was my home.

**AB:** Planning General Assembly and Sports Weekend in Dallas is one of my favorite memories of being in the ACYOA. Being so geographically removed from the majority of the attendees made us work that much harder to make sure it was well worth the trip!

**MM: What have been some of your influences in your Christian life?**

**DB:** My parents were the biggest influences in my Christian life. They instilled in me a sense of service to the church and always lived out their faith in everything they did. Growing up, Rev. Fr. Vertanes Kalayjian was my pastor. He constantly encouraged me to grow in my faith and my service to the church.

**AB:** My parents have been the biggest influence on my faith. They made sure I went to mass every week and attended CCD (Sunday School) from a young age. When Dallas had a visiting priest to celebrate Badarak, my church attendance was doubled for that week! Archbishop Khajag Barsamian also became a strong influence in my life once I began to serve on Central Council. Given his busy schedule, he always made a point to make himself available for us, whether we had an urgent ACYOA question or needed a sounding board off of which to bounce ideas. He also found a way to relate to younger generations and effectively communicate how our faith ties into our daily lives.

**MM: Are you still involved in your parish community?**

**DB:** Since moving to Dallas, I have become involved in the St. Sarkis parish by serving on the altar, serving on parish council, volunteering at the annual bazaar, assisting with the ACYOA, and helping however I can.

**AB:** I volunteer at the annual church bazaar and help with retreats that the ACYOA hosts.

**MM: Any advice for current and future ACYOA members?**

**DB:** Don't lose sight of the mission of the ACYOA. Everything the ACYOA does is rooted in helping young people grow in our Armenian Christian faith. Success isn't defined simply by the number of events, how much money was raised, or how many trophies were won at Sports Weekend, but by how much the ACYOA brought our youth closer to Christ. People often say the youth are the future of our church. That's not true; the youth are the here-and-now of the church. You have a voice-make sure it is heard!

**AB:** Enjoy school (whether you're in high school or college)! You may find the ACYOA taking the back burner during these years with activities that compete with the ACYOA, and that's OK! The ACYOA will always be there when you're ready.