



## ALUMNI OF THE MONTH

### DONNA BARSAMIAN SIROUNIAN

*Central Council Chairperson Mallory Maslar interviews Donna Barsamian Sirounian about her memories and life growing up in the Church, and involvement with the ACYOA*

**MM: How did you first get involved in the ACYOA?**

**DBS:** As a Sunday School student at St. Thomas Armenian Church in Tenafly, NJ, it was a natural progression to become a member of my church's ACYOA Juniors when I turned 13. I eventually became chairperson of my ACYOA Jrs, and then chairperson of the regional NY/NJ ACYOA Juniors in the late 1980s. This leadership experience led me to serve on the ACYOA Central Council.

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

**DBS:** Many of my lifelong Armenian friends were made in the ACYOA! And those who I lost touch with, I have recently been able to reconnect with through Facebook! My humble beginnings in the ACYOA empowered me to learn how to organize and plan events within the Armenian Church community and beyond. The ACYOA also instilled volunteerism in all aspects of my life.

**MM: What are some of your favorite memories being involved in the ACYOA? What about serving on Central Council?**

**DBS:** Back before email, texting, and internet/social media, I remember organizing outings and dances at St. Thomas the old fashion way: by picking up the telephone to encourage friends and members to attend, and mailing hand drawn flyers by a talented artist in our group to depict what event we were holding. I think our bonds were stronger because of this. I also loved attending Sports Weekend, of course.

When I served on Central Council in 1996-98, our council members were instrumental in revamping the direction of youth programming for the ACYOA at the Diocesan level; by asking for a full-time employee. We took bold steps presenting at the 1998 Diocesan Assembly! Again, leadership skills learned through the ACYOA.

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

**DBS:** There have been many people who have influenced me in a positive way throughout my life, helping to shape my Christian life and spirituality. First and foremost, my mom, Eileen Barsamian Jennings, taught me at a young age how important it is to attend church and to support the church...to always make it a priority in my

life. Rev. Louise Kalemkarian, when she was superintendent of the Sunday School at St. Thomas Church, taught me lessons that I carry with me to this very day as I serve on the Sunday School Leadership Board at the Holy Martyrs Armenian Church in Queens, NY. Fr. Mardiros Chevian, who is the dean of St. Nersess, guided me when I attended the St. Nersess Summer Conferences as a teenager and who I now work with as the Marketing Director at St. Nersess. And Fr. Patee Metjian, who founded and directed St. Vartan Camp, always encouraged me as a young camper...I now send my two children to St. Vartan Camp as campers and have been asked to serve on the Ararat Center Board. All these folks and experiences influenced my life, and I now pass it on to my children.

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

**DBS:** I am still very much involved with parish life! Before moving back to the New York area almost 5 years ago, I gathered all my church experience and helped to build the first Armenian Church in Arizona, St. Apk'ar, when my husband and I lived there for 10 years. I also taught Sunday School, served as the Superintendent, and led the fundraising and communication efforts. Since returning to the Northeast, I am now helping my kids, Stephen who is 14 and Isabelle who is 12, have the same experiences I was afforded growing up. That means, once again, I am actively involved in helping the ACYOA Juniors, Sunday School, acolyte program, church basketball teams (ACSA), and Hye Bar Armenian dance group at Holy Martyrs Armenian Church. Again, my foundation started with the ACYOA over 30 years ago!

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

**DBS:** First of all, make sure you always place your spirituality first. In this day and age, when everyone is overextended and overscheduled, remember who is most important in your life: GOD. Sports, music, activities on both the high school and college level, and work commitments tend to get in the way and shuffle our priorities. But when you place the church and God first, somehow things just work out. Also, be a leader. Don't expect your parent or advisor to do the work. Stop and figure out what you can accomplish, with the help of others. That's called leadership. Take on the responsibility and be proud!!