

ACYOA Alumni of the Month – October 2021

Ralph and Debbie DerAsadourian

St. James Armenian Church, Evanston, Illinois

Andrew Yenicag: How did you both first get involved in the ACYOA?

Ralph DerAsadourian: It was just part of church life. In my early teens, I got to hang out with the older group and participate in the activities like dances, picnics, outings, paper drives, and others. There was more of a social aspect for me at that point.

Debbie DerAsadourian: In the 1960's, St. James didn't have an ACYOA Juniors chapter, but I was introduced to the organization through a cousin who invited me to an ACYOA activity at the St. Gregory parish in Chicago. When I was older, I joined the ACYOA Seniors chapter at St. James.

AY: What impact has the ACYOA had on your lives?

RD: Through the ACYOA, I made friends with whom I am still in contact. They are spread throughout the US and Canada. Participating in events locally and nationally was fun, but being involved in planning on both of those levels helped to develop personal skills as well. I hope at the same time, I was able to contribute in whatever way possible to the success and progress of ACYOA programs.

DD: The ACYOA was the foundation for my service to my parish and to the Armenian Church. In 1975, I traveled to Armenia on an ASP trip which broadened my appreciation of being Armenian and introduced me to other participants from across the country with whom I remain friends today. After returning I was inspired to continue teaching Sunday School and volunteer where needed. I always felt as if I belonged in my parish.

AY: What are some of your favorite memories being involved in the ACYOA?

RD: It's difficult to choose. Helping plan Sports Weekend in 1981 at St. James/St. Gregory is one of the highlights. Playing and coaching basketball with the Juniors at St. James also stands out. Attending the General Assembly in Providence, RI as a young teen and seeing people actually campaigning for Central Council was memorable. Working on the Central Council many years later was like coming full-circle.

DD: Annual Christmas caroling at parishioners' homes with our pastor and the ACYOA comes to mind. I also attended many ACYOA Assemblies and Sports Weekends and retreats. The ACYOA gave me the opportunity to make new friends and travel to various cities and parishes with my sisters and friends.

AY: This one's for Ralph! Do you have any favorite memories from your time serving on Central Council?

RD: I simply enjoyed being with the other Council members. Although we were from different parts of the country we shared common interests and optimism about promoting the ACYOA and its mission. Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, of blessed memory, presided at some of our meetings at the Diocese. His devotion was always inspirational and his comments were always thoughtful.

AY: How special is it that your daughter, now Yn. Danielle DerAsadourian (who is married to Rev. Fr. Samuel Rith-Najarian), also served on Central Council?

RD & DD: We are very proud that Danielle became involved with the ACYOA and served the Armenian Church through the Central Council. As with many of you who serve on CC while pursuing careers, she fulfilled her duties on CC while busy working with Teach for America and going to graduate school. She made many friends through the ACYOA and also by attending St. Nersess Summer Studies Programs.

AY: What, or who, have been some of your influences in your Christian faith?

RD: My parents were both faithful and devoted Christians who loved God, loved the Armenian Church, and were conversant in Scripture. They gave me a good start. I also learned from many devoted clergy who I was fortunate to meet and by attending workshops sponsored by ACYOA or Sunday School. Our longtime pastor, Rev. Fr. Varoujan Kabaradjian, showed true devotion by traveling many miles in the surrounding states to minister to the spiritual needs of many Armenians. Participating in Lenten services and simply reading the English translation of our Divine Liturgy pew books has been motivating and instructional. Traveling to Jerusalem helped reinforce my belief. Finally, my wife, Debbie has been a real inspiration and blessing. She is always strengthening her faith through study, prayer, and participation in all aspects of church life.

DD: Being a life-long member of St. James, I remember as a young girl walking into the building and being greeted by many of the elderly grandmas who, I now know, had survived the

Genocide. They would always be together talking and, I believe, supporting each other. Their faith always touched and inspired me. I was also influenced by my great-grandmother, grandparents, parents, and pastor... everyone leaves an impression on your heart.

AY: Are you still involved in your parish community? How have you both served the church following your ACYOA days?

RD: I have been fortunate to contribute in just about every area of church and community life: as a Sunday School teacher, basketball coach to ACYOA Junior boys, Parish Council member, Street Fair tent coordinator, Sports Weekend 1981 Treasurer, and past and current Diocesan delegate. Debbie and I also participate in our local outreach program known as Family Promise, providing meals on a rotating basis with other local churches to a small number of families. It's all been fun and worthwhile.

DD: Yes, we are both very committed to St. James and the community. For many of the past 50 years, I have served in the Sunday School. I have also served on the Parish Council as a member and as the chairperson. I also served as the chairperson of the Hye Camp Board for several years. Joining the Women's Guild and serving with so many other committed women has also been a highlight. Currently, I serve on the Women's Guild Central Council.

AY: Do you have any advice for current and future ACYOA members?

RD: Practice your faith. It might seem difficult to understand the Divine Liturgy, but with some effort it becomes very clear and fulfilling. Use the many resources available from our Diocese as well as your pastor to learn the scriptural foundation for our sacraments. One can find Bible studies available from many parishes, if not your own. Understanding scripture will help one find meaning and appreciate the rich, beautiful, and traditional ways we express our Christian faith. Be an example for others by learning, then teaching. Our duty is to preserve and build up this vessel of our ultimate salvation.

DD: The Armenian Church has so much to offer. There are now so many ways to learn about our Church and faith online and in person through so many meaningful programs that the ACYOA now offers. It's important to get involved and learn about your faith and develop your values. Get involved with the ACYOA, make friends, and serve your community... don't wait to be asked.