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Reflections of an Armenian Student: How It Can Be Done; The Armenian National Scientific and Educational Fund**Author**

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Article

After the collapse of the Soviet Union more than a decade ago, many changes have taken place in Armenia and in the lives of millions of Armenians around the world. By far, the most momentous transformation that has occurred is the inception of an independent and sovereign Armenia that welcomes us all. But, with the achievement of independence, we, Armenians, have also inherited many difficult problems, including the long-lasting conflict in Karabagh, the collapse of Armenia's economy, reevaluations of our values and priorities etc. These problems are quite distinct; they differ in their urgency and in the approaches that must be taken to solve them. The job of the Armenian government, during this transitional period, put quite simply and starkly, is to identify these problems, classify them by priorities, and administer solutions. But the real task of rebuilding Armenia falls on our shoulders, those of us who proudly share Armenia's centuries-old heritage, culture and history - without regard to where we live. We are ultimately the ones responsible when things go wrong. For example, currently there is widespread corruption in our nation. I believe it is, in part, the result of our negligence and lack of involvement. We should speak out without any hesitation and be prepared for action, instead of backing off and leaving the problem to someone else, while at the same time complaining that nothing is being done.

So the Question now is, "What should we do?" The contribution that we make does not necessarily have to be big. It can be sometimes as small as professional advice, or it can be in the form of entertainment - a visit to Armenia with your family and friends would give the country a much-needed economic boost. There are countless other ways to help.

Sometimes, however, we come across opportunists and "parasites" - very often they are fellow Armenians - who take the misfortune of a country as an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor and the desperate. This phenomenon forces us to be more vigilant, and, if necessary, to be more than just a financial contributor. But there are also people at the other extreme - great Armenians, exceptional individuals, full of energy and zeal, who are willing to push themselves harder than ever to make a positive difference for our nation.

At this point, I would like to present one example of how, in very practical terms, one can offer assistance, and this has to do, in this case, with the issue of helping scientists and scholars in Armenia. As a scientist who got his primary education in Armenia, this is a matter very close to my heart. The example is the approach of the Armenian National Scientific and Educational Fund, or ANSEF, established a few years ago in the United States. But, before going into any details, let us ask ourselves the following question, "Why do we need to support science, scholars and educators in Armenia right now?"

Almost every book on Armenians and Armenian history is replete with names of great scholars, scientists and teachers (from Movses Khorenas O Viktor Hambartsumian), who have profoundly influenced the character of our nation and minds of its people. It is important that we continue this tradition of intellectual accomplishments by supporting Armenia's scientists and scholars so that they may be given a chance to inspire us with their new achievements, and keep alive this important intellectual movement so that the next generation may be able to do the same. A continuous economic crisis in Armenia has resulted in a significant reduction in resources for science. Not surprisingly, many scientists have immigrated to other countries or just have given up. The problem is even deeper today when almost all developed nations have softened their emigration policies to attract the brightest talents around the world.

Now back to ANSEF. It was founded in New York City by over 20 well-known medical doctors, professors, scholars and lawyers. Its purpose is to support competitive research in Armenia. Every year ANSEF announces the number of research grants that will be awarded for next calendar year to the best research proposals. Individual grants are typically \$5,000, which at first glance appears quite modest, but this amount is enough to

support a 3-4-member research team for an entire year. After announcing a deadline for proposal submission, ANSEF begins the second stage of its work. At this stage the ANSEF Research Council collects all electronically submitted proposals, categorizes them, and finally sends the proposals to referees for evaluation. Since referees are not necessarily Armenians, all proposals are required to be in English, and this forces those researchers who submit a proposal to improve their knowledge of English, a critical element of modern science. At the last stage, the board identifies (based on reviews) the best projects to support in the upcoming year.

ANSEF has been very successful at its endeavor to fund Armenian scientists and scholars. But what is the key to its success? There are several critical elements that I would like to point out First of all, ANSEF manages to get into direct contact with researchers, and bypasses many types of institutional "constraints" and bureaucracy that exist in Armenia. Secondly, the ANSEF review team has almost no personal knowledge about the scientists in a research team. This ensures an impartial and fair peer review of the proposals. But perhaps the most important element of success is the ANSEF board itself, which is made up of professional and responsible people who are committed to preserve a world-class competitive science in Armenia.

The major obstacle that ANSEF faces is insufficient funding. The number of projects that get supported annually is only 20-30, which is only a fraction of the outstanding proposals (293 proposals were submitted for funding in 2003).

ANSEF is an example of how a group of exceptional Armenians is helping Armenia in a significant way by taking action into their own hands. It shows also that there are possibilities and ways to support and help our fellow Armenians, and it is up to us to transform our motherland to one of the most interesting and developed places in the world. In conclusion I would like to emphasize - to make a difference, one often has to try a little harder.

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