

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

With
Armond Gorgorian

Conducted By
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July 1996

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

- ARMOND GORGORIAN

Today is Wednesday July 10th, 1996. My name is Shoghig Kalaydjian Yepremian. I'm conducting audio history for the City of Glendale as a Planning Division's staff member. It's about 4:15 in the afternoon and we are sitting with a Glendale businessman and resident Armond Gorgorian. This is one of the City's audio history program interviews, and we will be talking to Armond Gorgorian about his experiences in life here in Glendale.

Shoghig Kalaydjian Yepremian:

Armond, I send you some questions last weekend I would like to begin with the first question. When and where were you born?

Armond Gorgorian: I was born in Tehran, Iran, 1946.

Shoghig: Where do you live currently?

Armond: Right now I live in Glendale.

Shoghig: How long have you been in Glendale or in United States?

Armond: I came to United States in September 1978, and moved to Glendale October 1978 and I've been living here since then.

Shoghig: Where did you come first when you arrived to United States?

Armond: When I came here I moved in with my aunt for a month. She was living in Alhambra. So I lived in her house and as soon as I bought my business here in Glendale, I moved to Glendale.

Shoghig: And, you bought this business, restaurant business first or...

Armond: Not this one, no, not this one. I bought another business on North Brand in October '78, and I had that until 1982 when that building was condemned because for Redevelopment Agency, so I looked for another business and bought this one here.

Shoghig: Okay, so there you had this business since then.

Armond: 1982.

Shoghig: Yes, what was the reason that you came to Glendale?

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Armond: I would say it was coincidental because I was looking to purchase a business and it just happened that the business that I bought, it was in Glendale. So, once I knew I'm gonna be doing business in Glendale I looked for a place to live in City of Glendale and I am very happy that I did it.

Shoghig: Good decision.

Armond: Yes, very good decision.

Shoghig: Okay, what did you think about Glendale when you first came here?

Armond: Oh, when I first came here I didn't know very much. I didn't know anything about this country to compare Glendale with any other city. The first months or maybe years I was just trying to help myself and my family to get established in the city and just taking care of our own business. But little by little when I had the chance to move around and to compare Glendale with other cities I noticed that it is very safe city to live in, it is a very nice place to raise your children. Let's not forget when I came here in '78 my kids were 3 years old and one and half years old so when the time came for me to be concern about what school they are gonna go to, I noticed that I am lucky to be in City of Glendale because the school district that is here. And, it was kind of bedroom city then. Weekends if I wanted go out with friend or my wife I had to go out of Glendale to go somewhere else for some action, but little by little it has changed a lot. I mean, little by little if I am comparing City of Glendale now in '96 and 1978 when I first came here, it's just not comparable. From point of view of the businesses that have moved in here. From point of view of residential neighborhoods. The work that has been done on the infrastructure here, the streets and everything, oh this is not comparable.

Shoghig: Lot of changes over time. What do you think now?

Armond: We're moving ahead.

Shoghig: We are moving ahead.

Armond: Very fast. Probably some people in City of Glendale are not very happy with the movement but myself being involved I think that this is a right direction. This

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is a right direction to be able to bring big business to the City, to have a better tax base, to be able to spend on the city and build a city that others would like to come and spend their money here, like I used to do when 10-12 years ago I had to move out of Glendale to spend my money over there. Now people are coming and its gonna get much better once the Downtown Strategic Plan gets implemented, and I think we are moving to the right direction.

Shoghig: Definitely. At the time you came to Glendale what were some of the things you liked or disliked about Glendale, what do you like or dislike now about Glendale?

Armond: I like the safety, as I mentioned. At that point when I came in that's the only thing think about because as I said I wasn't even sure where I am and what I am doing? The cleanliness of the City, friendliness of the people, and I can not recall anything that I disliked, and now at this moment maybe people aren't as friendly as they used to be in 1978 because of the diversity that we have in the City which I believe very good and positive point for the City, but the friendliness isn't there as much as it used to be. I like the progress of designing the City. The new attitude that the City has with the progress of thought in some points that come with it which you don't like very much. I don't like the homeless people more and more that I see on the streets. I don't like the attitude that some old timers, the City of Glendale have towards the new immigrants. I understand their point of view, but I can't agree with them because I believe there has been any period of this country in any period there have been new immigrants. After all this people have themselves or generations before they have been an immigrant and they have to go through the same thing. I understand that the new immigrants come here they don't know all the rules and regulations and the habits of people here, but they need time to learn and we all have to learn how to live together.

Shoghig: Armond, do you recall the number of Armenian population when you first arrived to Glendale?

Armond: It shouldn't have been less than 5,000 probably in 1978.

Shoghig: In 1978.

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Armond: It shouldn't have been 5,000 or less. I don't think it was more than that.

Shoghig: And, I would like to also know being a local resident in Glendale what are your contribution to the City of Glendale and the Armenian community. I know you are very involve with Homenetmen. So if you can tell us a little bit about that, and also the City of Glendale.

Armond: Homenetmen, Homenetmen is a world wide organization. Actually anywhere in the world that there is any Armenian community there is a Homenetmen, and Homenetmen is a youth organization serving the youth through athleticism or scouticism and what they try to do is to bring them in, keep them off the streets, to have them being them involve with scouting or athletics and make sure to make them good citizens. As I said keep them off the streets, to have them to be involve so much that they don't have time for other activities which sometimes can not be very helpful. Now, the chapter in Glendale was founded in 1978, December '78, and I was involved with it from day one. Different years I've been in the Board of Directors or I've been in charge of the athletic department. I've been the Chairman of the Board for several years and I believe I owe to the Armenian community by working at Homenetmen to do the best I can for the Armenian-American community. What we try to do we don't try to be separate from the rest of the community, we just try to have good Armenian-American citizens, and to raise our kids the way they're suppose to be. And, when I was young back in Iran it wasn't called Homenetmen it's called Ararat. It was same organization the same kind of activity. When I was young and I needed guidance from the others, I had a lot of it. So I believe that, I have to give something back to youth now. But in regards to City of Glendale with the same kind of thinking that I have that I need to give something back. Since I've living here since 78, I decided several years ago that I just can not live here and do nothing and ask for everything. I have to get involved. So right now I am Traffic and Transportation and Parking Commissioner, which I am very proud. I'm also involved with Downtown Strategic Plan. I am the chairman of the Transportation Sub-Committee. I am also involved with Neighborhood Task Force Program in the Steering Committee and chairman of the Transportation Sub-Committee and now recently, last 2-3, 3 weeks ago because of the success of the program we have formed an

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Implementation Committee to implement all the studies that we've done in the Edison School and Pacific Park area and I am chairing that implementation Sub-Committee. So I am pretty much involve with a City and although it takes a lot of time I have to cut down from my business or the family, but I enjoy doing it very much. It's a privilege to be able to work with the City and help the City.

Shoghig: And you're planning to continue being on these Committees as long as ...

Armond: As long as they want me.

Shoghig: Okay. (laugh). Very good. What are your thoughts or recommendations to other Armenians in the community in terms of the future of the Armenians in Glendale either for the young Armenians or adults? What are your recommendations as an Armenian-American living in Glendale for other Armenians to do in their communities?

Armond: If I was a teacher and I had some pupils in the class and I had to teach them, which I'm not, I would recommend to them that don't ever loose your Armenian heritage. The same time it doesn't necessarily mean that you can not become a good American citizen. This two can work parallel to each other because I believe although we all come to this country and become an American citizens and we are an American and very proud of that, it's good for ourselves and our kids to remember their roots or where they are from, who they are? Because if you don't know who you are you can not help anybody else. So, first thing I would say don't loose your heritage, don't forget about who you are, but become a very good American citizen. Get involved, it's a very competitive country here and we every one of us have to be sure that they achieve something. They graduate from college and that by itself doesn't mean anything now in these days. They have to get involved and study and be such a prepared person that can survive in this community. I would recommend to them what I've being doing in course of that to get involve with your community. We, every one of us, we live on a street on a city and the City you know communities and we can not ignore what's happening around ourselves. We have to be the part of it. If something is happening here we don't like, we can not fix it if we don't get involved. The system of governing in this countries is that you got to

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be involved and you got to do your share of it. You just can't sit down in your house in front of your television and wait for the City government or any kind of government to fix it for you. You have to work with them you have to help them, it's a partnership and we have to understand that. We have to understand that we have come to a new country. Although we wanna keep our own habits, although we wanna do everything the same way, we should learn the way they are doing here things are being done here. And as much as we expect from the people that have been lived here for so many years to be friendly with us to understand us, it's our job to be friendly with them and understand them to learn their language, and that I don't mind our youngsters have no problem with that but people my age or older it's a very good idea to learn the language, and be able to get into conversations with people here.

Shoghig: Because the public participation is something that we never had back in Middle East, so it's a new concept, as I said, for all the Armenians living in Glendale. So specially for the young people you have to encourage them to be involved in participating in local government.

Armond: Exactly, as you said it's a very good point. Most of us are coming from Middle East or a communist country which we never had the opportunity to participate in our activities in the community, even if we wanted too. Now it will take time for us to change our thinking and to believe that yes we can do it here. Actually one of the things that Homenetmen does here with our youth is exactly that. We teach them how to participate in decision making and we encourage them to be part of the activities in the community and in the City.

Shoghig: What are some of your programs or activities if you can give us some examples?

Armond: Homentemen has been involved, in the past years, in the graffiti cleaning that Parks and Recreation has it here. We have been working with Salvation Army very closely. Every Christmas Day our scouts and our volunteers, some of them actually because they can't afford to have all of us there. There is 2,000 of us but some of us, go to Salvation Army. We cook the food, we prepare the food and we go there and serve it to them. We have very close ties with Red Cross when they need blood donation

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or blood bank something like that. So, we work with different organizations.

Shoghig: You mentioned you have about 2,000 members in Homenetmen.

Armond: Only the Glendale chapter has 2,000.

Shoghig: Only Glendale Chapter. What are some of the other chapters around the Glendale?

Armond: Well, I know that there is chapters in Burbank, Pasadena, Montebello, and in the Valley all the way to Orange County, San Diego all the way North to San Francisco, and all it is, all together is 15 chapters in Western United States. But we are the... actually Glendale chapter is the largest Homenetmen in the whole world.

Shoghig: Wow! Wow!

Armond: Yes.

Shoghig: Even Middle East.

Armond: Even Middle East.

Shoghig: Wow!

Armond: Yes, 2,000 people.

Shoghig: And where is the headquarter of Homenetmen in California, Western United States?

Armond: In Western United States, the headquarter is in City of Glendale too.

Shoghig: Okay, so we are the headquarters of the Homenetmen.

Armond: Yes, yes.

Shoghig: Okay. Armond, we talked about the positive things about the Armenian youth and the Armenian community in Glendale. Do you see any concerns, or do you have concerns about the Armenian youths?

Armond: But when there is youth ...

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Shoghig: What are some of the issues that we are currently dealing with the Armenian youth?

Armond: When there is youth there is concerns also, Shoghig. I mean, I can not isolate Armenians only and say that I am concern with the Armenian youth because we have all eyes and we see around us. There is youth, there is concern, there is trouble, there is problems there, and in any ethnic group and any nationality or any language or religion. The Armenians or other groups when you immigrate to a new country and you do not have any friends, you do not know the language properly you do not know the ways over here to try to get around each other. Some people call it gangs and we have Armenian kids that are members of gangs and that is a big concern and that I don't know how long will take but I am pretty much sure that when the time comes we will see less and less of that. Once they get to mingle with the Community, to find out that they are not different from rest of the people who live in there, to feel better around or above their own community that would get less and less. But right now there is a problem, as I said, coming from the different countries bringing their own habits. Some of the things that they are taking care of the way that they are used to take care back there and it's not the same way here, but youth is the concern of the City and not only one ethnic group all of them. Probably the biggest concern not only for City of Glendale, but all of the country and there are programs that they tried to handle this problem and again one of the things that we were very proud of in Homenetmen since 1978 probably we have been through more than 10,000 kids that have come to our program and they got older and then they left or they came back and start helping us as a volunteers. I would say probably we didn't have more than ten bad apples. And...I mean, if I have to proud of what I'm doing in Homenetmen that would be the biggest thing because that's that you can't argue with that.

Shoghig: Good influence. Do you have any plans or programs to attract younger people that are involved in gangs or are there any efforts?

Armond: No, a few reasons. First of all Homenetmen here is a so small right now are facilities that we can not take any more new members. We are trying to move in to a larger place. If we are able to do that probably can get more,

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but we are not equipped to do something about gangs. We are equipped to prevent the kids to join the gangs, but unfortunately if they are in the gangs once they're in the gangs we are not equipped to be able to help them. That's probably has to be another type of organization, but unfortunately we can't help them. But we do our best not to let them get involved.

Shoghig: Armond, most of the members in Homenetmen they're Glendale residents or they come from other areas as well.

Armond: I would say 90% or even more are Glendale residents, but we have members from Encino all the way to Orange County that want to be Glendale Homenetmen rather than their own cities.

Shoghig: And, do you work closely with School District?

Armond: Glendale Homenetmen, you mean?

Shoghig: Right.

Armond: Well, school District is the organization that we need their help because of lack of facility that we have. Unfortunately we do not get as much as we want. The amount of help isn't there, and probably they have their own reasons.

Shoghig: What kind of assistance you need?

Armond: We need, we need, we used to use the school facilities for our scouting activities. We haven't been able to do that the past 5-6 years, and we have to move to another facility outside of City of Glendale and because of that we lost a lot of members.

Shoghig: So the lack of public facilities for to accomplish ...

Armond: It's something that the City and the School District are the people that can help us the most from point of view of facilities. The cost of the operation in City of Glendale is too high. You know, we have, every forth of July we celebrate the Forth of July with our own Armenian Olympics, Homenetmen Olympics and we use to use the facility in Glendale High School but the cost and the lack of cooperation got so bad that we had to move out of City of Glendale and now every year the past 4

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years it has been done in Wilmington High in Reseda. And, Shoghig if I gave you numbers you wouldn't believe how much difference there is. And the operation, cooperation, everything. I am sure that if they want they can have more cooperation with Armenian community and Homenetmen right now I'm talking about Homenetmen. But for reasons that they know better and I'm sure some of them can be logical, we are not getting as much help now as we can.

Shoghig: Armond, also coming back to City Commissions. You are a member of the Transportation and Parking Commission. Are you interested in joining other Commissions or why did you select the Transportation and Parking Commission especially?

Armond: Because before being a member of the Commission, I was involved already with Downtown Strategic Plan and the Neighborhood Task Force and I was chairing in both. I was chairing the Transportation Sub-Committee and I had done a lot of studies about the transportation in City of Glendale and I was involved in it already, so I applied for that position.

Shoghig: Do you have any background in transportation?

Armond: I wouldn't say background in transportation, but I am an architect.

Shoghig: Okay.

Armond: So being an architect you know a little bit about transportation and parking and anything that in regards with those. So my background was from the architectural part of it and also the studies and the work that I was doing in those two communities.

Shoghig: So you're background is architecture. And you were an architect back in Iran.

Armond: Yes.

Shoghig: And you never practice architecture.

Armond: When I came here, again, if I wanted to practice an architecture I had to spend a lot of time studying and giving test for AIA, and I just couldn't afford it. I had to start a business right away. Later on I was

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doing some architecture but then the business went down and the construction business and everything regarding the architecture and construction went so bad that there was nothing to do and I had my business already, food business, so it just happened that ...

Shoghig: Change of profession.

Armond: Yes.

Shoghig: And how long did you practice architecture?

Armond: Back home?

Shoghig: Back home.

Armond: Back home probably I practiced about 5-6 years. Over there my specialty was designing hospitals, and ...

Shoghig: And with that you dealt probably with site design and transportation parking as part of it.

Armond: Yes, yes.

Shoghig: So now for you to join City's Transportation Commission you can use some of that background.

Armond: Of course, if I didn't have anything to offer to the Commission I wouldn't have been elected by the City Council.

Shoghig: And this is your first term?

Armond: This is my first year here.

Shoghig: And you think you would like to continue?

Armond: If the City appoints me for the second term, sure.

Shoghig: Good. Anything else you want to tell me about yourself or about your future goals? Where you wanna be headed or what's the future of Armenian community in Glendale?

Armond: Myself I think my goal at this stage is to be involved and stay involved as much as possible the community, and give the same kind of direction to my two children. I have a son that is going to be in university, UNLV and his major is Political Science, and I believe I had

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something for him to going in that direction. I don't know after he gets his bachelors what direction will go but that's what he is going right know, and my daughter wants to be a psychiatrist. So my primary goal is to back them up which way they want to go.

Shoghig: To get education.

Armond: Yes, myself as I said to get involve, stay involved with the community in the city level or commission level or Homenetmen level which way, any which way I can help my community. I'm not one of those types that goes in the mornings to enjoy his business and then 5 o'clock that's it. I got to have job, extra activities. In the Armenian community I don't see anything but bright future, because these kids after all there is gonna be second generation, there is gonna be real American-Armenians and then again get better and better for them, and because of them for this community.

Shoghig: Good, So you have positive expectations.

Armond: Of course. I am coming from an Armenian community in another country. I mean everywhere we have been we have found our way. We have been prosperous, we have been educated and because of us the community is better. So I don't see why we can not be the same thing here in this community.

Shoghig: With the growth of the Armenian community in Glendale community over all can grow for the years to come.

Armond: It's an education and diversity, it's an education in different cultures and any way it is, what's this country is built. With diversity with many immigrants and that's what this country is.

Shoghig: Armond, what's the current population of Armenians in Glendale? I heard that it's about 25% of the total population.

Armond: Yes, exactly that's right. About 45,000 people.

Shoghig: Yes, from 5,000 the year you came to 45,000.

Armond: In early 80's it's just jumped.

Shoghig: With the new immigration then ...

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Armond: Yes.

Shoghig: Good. Any other comments Armond, before we conclude this interview.

Armond: First of all I have to thank you and your department for doing this interview with me and also thank the community to accept me here as part of the community, for the City to believe in me that I can help them, and thank you.

Shoghig: Well, thank you Armond for participating in this interview. The time is approximately 4:40 and we were sitting here with Armond Gorgorian in his current business "Castle Hall" restaurant. Thank you.