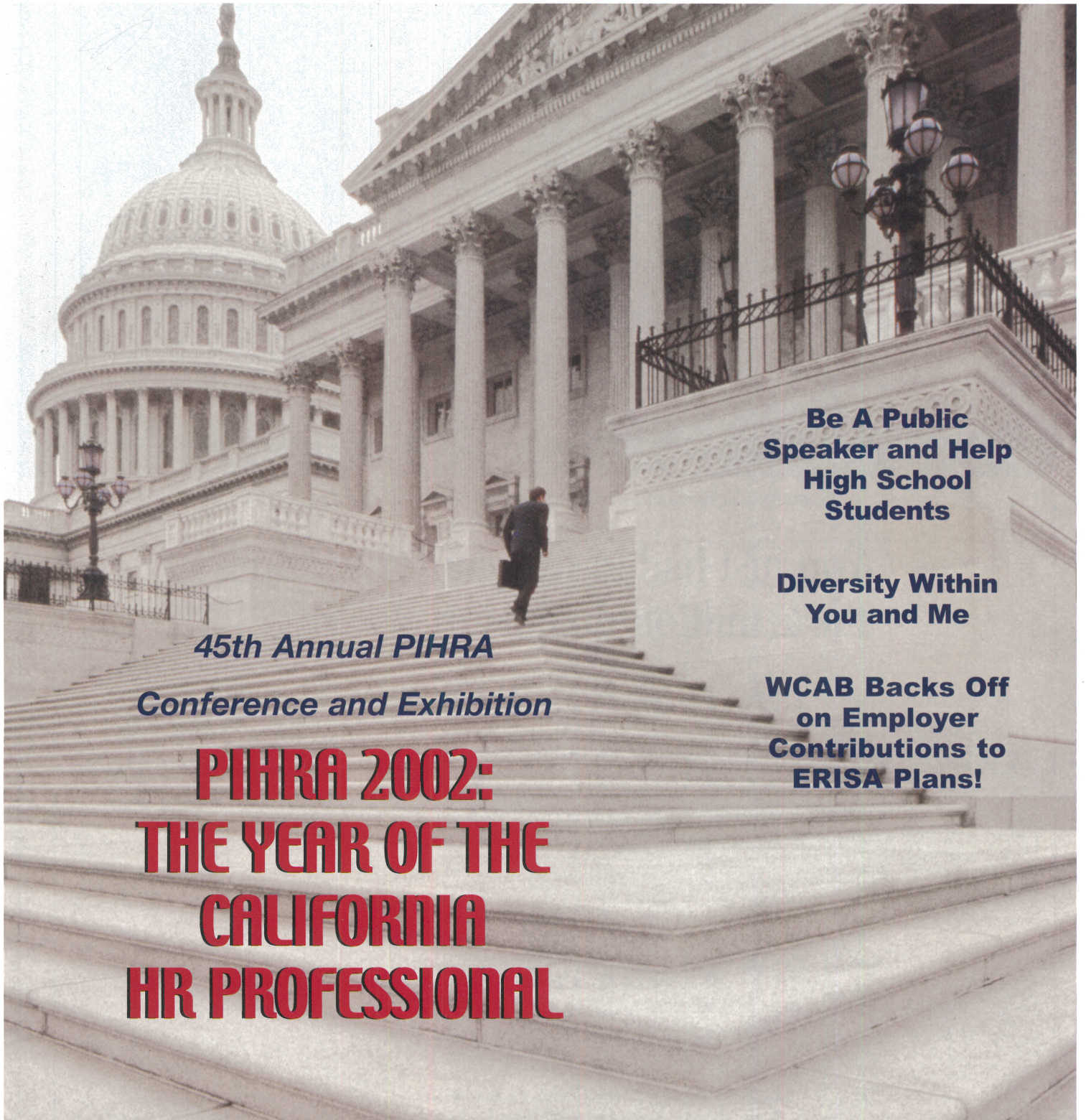


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Diversity Within You and Me

*by Alice M. Yardum-Hunter, Diversity Task Force Member
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When I agreed to write about diversity, my initial questions were: What is diversity and how does it apply to me? You might be asking yourself these very same questions. First, as a fledgling member of PIHRA's Diversity Task Force, I'm learning that diversity isn't one concept. It has many facets, and is dynamic in that it changes over time. Next, I had to assess who I was. I am a Caucasian woman of Armenian heritage. These factors are what make me a diverse individual. In a way, all of us are diverse in that we possess attributes that set us apart. The remainder of this article will discuss how my diversity affected my career choice, and to illustrate that by being sensitive to diversity, we come together as one. This is the purpose of diversity: to allow us to function as one in workplaces consisting of many diverse individuals.

My four grandparents all immigrated to the United States from Turkey and Georgia in the early 1900s. All four were ethnic Armenians. Each had such a fascinating story, that they instilled in me a deep interest in international affairs, and particularly the field of immigration law. Through my career I give back to the community from a colorful family heritage.

Turkey and Iran at that time, and today, comprise part of what was ancient Armenia. Georgia was and is today, an independent country near what is now Armenia. Historic Armenia is the home of Mount Ararat, the mountain upon which Noah's ark landed. Armenia was the first Christian nation on the planet, and it stood at the trading crossroads between Europe and Asia. During the rise of communism, both Armenia and Georgia were engulfed within the Soviet Union, and at its fall, Armenia became the first former Soviet Republic to declare independence.

When I grew up, no one knew what an Armenian was in Queens, New York. There had been a huge migration of Armenians from Turkey in the early 1990s as a result of the first 20th century genocide that killed between one and two million

people. But most of those who made it to the US settled in localized communities such as Fresno, California and Cambridge, Massachusetts. Some may know the expression "Starving Armenian" but probably little else. When the Soviet Union fell, a second large migration of Armenians began. Some of these more recent émigrés have had difficulty adjusting to American life as a result of completely different governmental and social systems.

As a child, I heard much about how my maternal grandmother at age 12 saw her mother murdered by Turkish authorities. Aghavni (Dove, in English) was the youngest of eight children. She abruptly departed her home with one sister, named Maryam. They walked across the Syrian Desert for two weeks, and lived on nothing, or the goodness of those who may have been viewed as traitors by Turkey. I remember stories of great hunger and thirst. One story goes like this. Aghavni talked Maryam out of throwing herself into a water well in order to get a drink of water. That quenching of thirst would have cost Maryam her life as there was no climbing out of the well. Then there was the story of the cattle car train. The girls were en route to Aleppo, Syria because their father, before his earlier departure from home, and whose whereabouts were never discovered, had given them a piece of paper with the name of a business associate there who would help them. Reaching the top of a hill, the train stopped. The door opened, and into my grandmother's lap was placed a package of uncooked rice. Only the hand that placed the rice was visible, which then closed the train door. So hungry were the sisters that they ate the rice raw, as they cried.

The girls arrived in Aleppo where they lived in an orphanage for five years. An elder brother had been in the US already, in anticipation of the genocide, and he did not know the whereabouts of the family, or even whether they were alive. One day, a notice was posted at the local Armenian church by the brother who

had put word out through the US Consul in hopes of finding his family. Someone saw the note, recognized the girls as his family, and relayed the information to the orphanage, which then contacted the Consul. The girls were picked up by a driver from the US Consulate and each given \$500.00. This was big money in 1918. So unusual was their story at the time that upon arriving in the US, my grandmother and her sister's story and photographs were featured on the center of the front page of the largest Boston newspaper at the time.

Since the Armenian men left Turkey first, as they were the first targets, there was an abundance of men when my grandmother arrived in Massachusetts. She had her choice of husbands. She chose my grandfather out of a field of many suitors for three very good reasons: A) he made her laugh; B) she believed he was very clever; and C) he cleaned up in the kitchen. Remember, this was not yet 1920! Based on results, her choice was excellent. Harry arrived in the US with \$25.00 in his pocket, a third grade education, ambition, and yes, humor. Over the course of the next four decades, he taught himself calculus and became a pioneer in snack food manufacturing. A self-taught mechanical engineer, he had 20 patented machines he invented, the most famous of which was the automated ice cream sugar cone machine. Before Grandpa Harry, all ice cream cones were hand rolled. Needless to say, this and his other works were used worldwide. He employed hundreds of people (had HR staff too!), put smiles on the faces of millions of kids, became very wealthy, and was a major benefactor to various philanthropic organizations in the mid-1900s. How could his brilliance and his generosity not inspire me? It was as if I was born to be an immigration attorney.

If these two people were not enough to form my career interests, my paternal grandparents were also each stunning individuals. Vincent was the first Armenian

"A major social responsibility of every organization is to assure equal treatment of its employees and to recognize that our differences can also be our strengths."

attorney in New York. He was Oxford educated, and was not only the only Armenian with a British accent I'd known in my youth, but he was over six foot tall, which for an Armenian born at the end of the 1800s was very tall. His clients included the Armenian Diocese of North America.

One day, as a young attorney, Vincent went to a Broadway play. He had heard about this beautiful Armenian dancer born in Georgia who was dancing in the show. A stage door Johnny, Vincent fell in love with my grandmother, Marguerite. Marguerite was a Pavlova-trained ballet dancer who had also previously lived in an orphanage in Aleppo, Syria. She and my other grandmother did not meet until they were both in the US though. Marguerite danced on Broadway, as well as in silent films in Hollywood.

Marguerite's arrival in the US was also remarkable. Both her parents had died, and there was no older brother waiting for her here. She united with an uncle, a doctor located in Omaha, Nebraska. She attended the university there and not only was she likely one of the few women, she was possibly the only Armenian. I remember the stories of when she got a cold or flu, she'd string garlic around her neck. Fortunately not only did she have the strength to live through such experiences, but the where with all to move to New York to follow her dreams to dance.

This background is diverse, and colorful. It inspired my decision to give back because I received so much just as a result of knowing who these people were, and the way they enriched my life and the lives of many other people. But I am not alone in this kind of story.

What does this family history have to do with diversity? You probably have a story of heritage to tell too. In such stories we see the similarities of humanity: issues of pain, love, tragedy and achievement. And through the diversity we embrace our commonality and respect our differences. Isn't this the goal that we hope diversity achieves? ▲

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