CELEBRATING KEGHART AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA

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Friends of Keghart, January 2017

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Sponsored by *Friends of Keghart,* the program featured a *Kinetson,* or book dedication with wine, of *Keghart: Vol. III* – a compendium of editorials penned in 2015 and 2016 by the Keghart Collective.

A group of attendees

Nearly 30 guests invited by *Friends of Keghart* learned about the history of Keghart and independent Armenian Diaspora media from Abrahamian and about the objectives and achievements of Keghart from Tutunjian. Keynote speaker David Boyajian, an independent journalist based in Boston, discussed a number of contemporary American and Armenian issues and how these issues shape the public's understanding of current events. Mistress of Ceremonies Lucine Kasbarian, independent journalist and political cartoonist, introduced speakers Abrahamian, Tutunjian and Boyajian.

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The overall intention of the gathering was to generate interest in ensuring the future survival of Keghart. Citing circumstances such as mounting expenses personally taken on by Publisher

Abrahamian, Keghart suspended operations in September 2016. A group of concerned individuals called *Friends of Keghart* stepped forward in an effort to sustain the online opinion and analysis magazine.

Keghart – the Armenian word for spear or lance, referring to that which pierced Christ – was founded in 2007 by Dr. Abrahamian.

The assassination of Hrant Dink in January of 2007 was a major motivation in starting Keghart.com. Its initial mission was to inform and educate non-Armenian audiences about Canadian and international political and human rights issues, as well as issues crucial for the global Armenian nation. However, because of the March 2008 government killings of protesters in Armenia, Keghart decided to focus primarily on Armenian issues.

In some years, Keghart.com has reached close to one million unique visitor hits. Global readers hailed from more than 80 countries, predominantly the USA, Canada, Europe, Armenia, Russia, Australia, Latin America, the Middle East, India, in that order, and occasionally from China and Japan.

In his Introduction to *Keghart: Volume III,* veteran journalist Douglas Kalajian pointed out, "Keghart has become a unique voice in the Armenian media because it is independent of political parties and related interests, so its writers aren't pressured to bend the truth or to avoid offense. There is no hidden agenda. As a result, these editorials are unusually forthright and thoughtful. Reading them can be a bracing experience because none of Armenia's problems are ever sugar-coated by the Keghart team: corruption in government, corruption in the church, the underhandedness of Armenia's enemies, the treachery of Armenia's supposed allies."

The Ontario-based Abrahamian explained to the luncheon attendees the history of independent media in the Armenian Diaspora leading up to the establishment of Keghart. Abrahamian defined "independent" media as "not being beholden to any political organization, having the luxury of providing equal opportunity to various opinions, and reporting events as they occur without bending them to fit a certain political or other agenda(s)." Abrahamian used the term "Armenian Diaspora" to refer primarily to the foreign nations to which Armenians were dispersed after the 1915-23 genocide.

He spoke of the legacy and necessity of independent Armenian media, citing among them predecessors such as Antranig Zaroukian's *Nayiri*, Simon Simonian's *Spurk* (Diaspora), *Yeridasart Hay* (Young Armenian), the early editions of *AIM* and others.

Abrahamian's capstone message urged Armenians and others to utilize Keghart as a free marketplace of ideas in the Armenian struggle to spread truth in a media world tainted with propaganda and falsehood.

The Toronto-based Tutunjian, an award-winning newspaper and magazine journalist, spoke of his experiences with and contributions to Keghart. Upon joining Keghart, he surveyed editorials that had appeared in a dozen or so Diaspora Armenian publications. Tutunjian found that many of their

articles were overly partisan as the publications were owned by political parties.

The pieces lacked punch and there were often not enough "calls to action." Abrahamian and Tutunjian decided that Keghart editorials would stand out by being hard-hitting and addressing topics that most Diaspora papers hadn't touched. They wanted Keghart's editorials to emphasize independent thought and non-partisan approaches.

(L-R) David Boyajian, Jirair Tutunjian, Dikran Abrahamian & Mcee Lucine Kasbarian

Tutunjian said that Keghart editorials had another aim: to provide readers the English words, phrases, memes and facts which readers could use to present the Armenian Case to non-Armenians to rebut Turkish propaganda.

While Tutunjian could not be certain of the demographics of Keghart readers, he followed his gut feeling about what readers might respond to. His guess turned out to be accurate. Keghart soon began to receive many letters. Many agreed with the stands taken in Keghart editorials. Those who didn't were the trigger for stimulating exchanges among readers. Keghart discovered a "virtual political party" of Armenians... from such places as Sydney, Beirut, London, Switzerland, Honduras and Chile.

They comprised readers who were unhappy with the Armenian status quo and welcomed Keghart's independence with open arms. Keghart became an open market for constructive ideas about the Armenian world. Issue after issue, readers could see that Keghart provided a forum that aired ideas with which Keghart didn't necessarily agree. If a letter or article were coherent, made interesting points and wasn't abusive, Keghart would publish it, uncensored.

David Boyajian talked about several popular topics that the American media had discussed in the previous months, such as: "fake news," media bias and conspiracy theories.

Boyajian also assessed the performance of journalists of Armenian descent who reported on Armenian topics in non-Armenian mainstream media. He said that they were generally a disappointment but that their editors and supervisors were probably responsible because the latter were usually uninterested in, or unfriendly towards, Armenian topics.

Boyajian cited his favorite Keghart editorials in categories from the practical to the historical, the political and the humorous. He also talked about "Heroes & Villains" – among his favorite recurring features in Keghart – which annually singles out commendable and condemnable newsmakers in the global and Armenian worlds.

Boyajian also praised Keghart for taking up activist causes, hosting panel discussions and organizing public polls. In describing Keghart's unique position in the Armenian media universe, Boyajian said: "Keghart has a point of view: it's frankly Armenian. It vigorously defends Armenian interests. It does

not hesitate to critique – but in a fair way – the Armenian community, its leaders, the church, Armenia, and Artsakh – but also seeks to improve Armenian life, not beat it down. I truly cannot think of any other Armenian website that has editorials with such erudition, imagination, and wit."

Emcee Kasbarian praised Keghart for a series of articles that contained practical suggestions and guidelines to Armenian article and letter writers who wished to reach non-Armenians about the topic of the 2015 Genocide Centennial. Keghart sent these to every Armenian church and organization for which Keghart possessed email addresses with a request that they republish them in their newsletters.

Kasbarian also cited a memorable instance of media analysis and criticism in which Tutunjian excoriated Western media outlets for their dishonest coverage of the April 2016 Azeri attacks on Artsakh.

In his editorial titled "The First Casualty," reprised on p. 177 of *Keghart: Vol. III*, Tutunjian recited, chapter and verse, the typical falsehoods carted out by mainstream media. A modified version of his editorial was sent to – and appeared in – 15 non-Armenian independent and alternative media outlets.

Kasbarian concluded, "We cannot afford to lose Keghart."

Friends of Keghart took up the mission to continue Keghart's successful publication and expand its reach with professional editors and technical personnel at the helm. In October 2016, an online appeal issued by Dr. Berge Minassian raised over $22,000 in donation pledges. In connection with this *Kinetson,* donation pledges of more than $4,000 have been collected to date. When a new Keghart gets off the ground, a new guard of non-partisan individuals intend to approach those who pledged to fulfill their intentions to donate and discuss ways and means to remain self-sustaining.

Writer C. K. Garabed officiates the *kinetson*

Before ceremoniously pouring wine onto an open *Keghart Vol. III,* writer C.K. Garabed performed the *Kinetson* saying, "I dedicate this publication, in friendship, to all those free and independent spirits who refuse to be coerced into believing that they see the Emperor's New Clothes when their eyes clearly tell them otherwise."

The guest speakers were presented with gifts as thanks for their dedication and service.

To ensure the future survival of Keghart, *Kinetson* attendees suggested starting an online crowd-funding campaign through KickStarter.com or similar websites, establishing non-profit status, and engaging auditing firms to handle budgetary issues.

Friends of Keghart invites further suggestions and ideas from supporters and readers as it moves forward with garnering support for this unique and beloved online analysis and opinion magazine.

Additional donation *pledges* (not checks at this time) may be sent to Dr. Berge Minassian at: berge.minassian@sickkids.ca or Lucine Kasbarian at: editor@lucinekasbarian.com.

Keghart: Volumes I, II and III are downloadable on Keghart.com.

Publisher's Note

Dr. Minas Kojayan could not attend the *kinetson*. As the Armenian language primary editor of Keghart.com, he has been one of the pillars of the website. A veteran editor and teacher, Armenologist Dr. Kojayan has taken the pulse of the Armenian Diaspora through his well-informed and brilliantly-penned articles providing practical solutions to the challenges the Diaspora faces.