

US Azerbaijanis Work to Keep Traditions Alive

By Mike O'Sullivan

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The modern state of Azerbaijan is just 15 years old, but the country, a part of the former Soviet Union, has maintained its distinctive traditions. Azerbaijani Americans are working to keep alive their culture and help others understand the nation's problems and potential. Mike O'Sullivan spoke with Azerbaijani Americans who attended a recent conference in Los Angeles.



Asmar Eyvazova (l) and Nazrin Baghirova

Nazrin Baghirova is studying educational administration at the University of Utah. She tells people about her country and its ancient capital, Baku, and often get quizzical looks, but says it is a great way to start a conversation.

"It is always exciting for me to give them information [about] where I'm from and showing them the location of Azerbaijan on the map, and seeing their reaction - oh, wow," she said.

Her friend, Asmar Eyvazova, works at center for distance education at the University of Texas, Arlington. When Asmar talks about Azerbaijan, reactions range from blank stares to limited recognition.

Some people know, for example, that Azerbaijan has abundant oil supplies. A few realize that its population is mostly Turkic-speaking and Muslim. On occasion, she meets people who have traveled to Azerbaijan.

"Those who have been to our country, they just really express it immediately that, oh, you are very hospitable," she said. "People are really nice and they like having guests and offer the best things that they have in their houses."



Azerbaijan borders the Caspian Sea and Iran, Georgia, Armenia, Russia and Turkey. The region was in the news in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the news for Azerbaijan was mostly bad.

A separatist movement of ethnic Armenians declared independence in the Azerbaijani enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, where they formed the dominant group. Fighting erupted and Azerbaijan lost 16-percent of its territory to Armenia. The dispute is unresolved, despite a 1994 cease-fire, and Azerbaijan is now coping with more than half a million displaced people.

Other Azerbaijanis are scattered around the



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Elin Suleymanov

world, and many have come to the United States to settle or study. Elin Suleymanov is consul general for Azerbaijan in Los Angeles. He estimates there are from 200,000 to 500,000 Azerbaijani Americans, a figure that includes ethnic Azeris from Iran.

"They share the language and the culture, and attitude, and cuisine and everything else," he said. "And increasingly they share the identity."

He says Azerbaijanis come from a difficult neighborhood, and part of the reason for holding this Los Angeles meeting is to get Azeri Americans to tell their story. He urged his countrymen to get involved in U.S. civic life and make sure their congressional representatives get to know them.

One participant at the conference is not from Azerbaijan, but is helping educate the world about the Caucasus nation.



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Betty Blair

Betty Blair edits a quarterly publication called *Azerbaijan International*. She and her husband, an Azerbaijani, started the magazine in 1993 to answer questions like this one she has encountered.

"Is this in Africa? Where is it? What is it," she said.

She says when she and her husband started the magazine, fighting was raging with Armenia, and Americans often heard the

Armenian side.

"That other side of the story was not being presented," she said. "And we just started very simply, 16 pages."



VOA photo - M. O'Sullivan

Traditional Azerbaijani dancing

Now, each issue the glossy magazine has 100 pages of articles and pictures on Azerbaijani history, literature, and culture. The couple also runs what is billed as the world's largest website about Azerbaijan, called www.azer.com.

Blair says that over the years, Azerbaijan has been under the rule of czars, shahs, caliphs and khans, and now, is coping with the problems of independence.

The country has been called an authoritarian democracy. Critics say its oil wealth remains largely undeveloped and that the nation is mismanaged and plagued with corruption.

But Azerbaijani Americans say their ties with their homeland are still strong, and

that they hope to play a role in the country's development.
