

Reflections on Azerbaijan written by Susan Hesselgesser and Sandie Mants

As you all know, last spring our Dayton League, under the direction of then president, Sharon Harmer, was given a unique opportunity. Sharon applied for and received a grant from the LWVUS Open World Program to host a delegation from another country. Sharon felt the experience of an international exchange would benefit our League; and, she had the confidence in the relationship our League has with the City of Dayton and the surrounding communities to know we could plan a successful international program. She was right.

When our League was chosen for the grant and asked if we would accept, Sharon's notification to the Board was in her typically succinct email style....."I said yes." The flurry of activity following that simple email was both exciting and overwhelming because our acceptance came with a "slight" stipulation - our League had to be ready to host the delegates by May 29. Most Leagues have the luxury of six months to plan a delegate visit, our League had eight weeks.

A follow-up telephone conference call with the LWVUS and Open World officials followed and the details were fuzzy – we didn't know how many delegates we would have or if they would be men or women, pertinent information for determining the number of host families. Details of when they would arrive, at what airport or what time of day were also yet to be determined. Slightly frustrated I remember asking "Could you repeat the name of the country again?" Manuela Campbell, Global Democracy Specialist at LWVUS complied..... "Azerbaijan." I had her repeat it again and, phonetically, wrote the proper pronunciation on a sticky note: A ZUR BAI JON. I carefully sealed the name of this little country onto the top of my desk and, as I was later to discover, forever onto my heart.

Though details were scarce, we did understand the focus for the visit - we were to arrange for the delegates to meet with local officials to learn about municipal governance and community development. Sharon offered a tentative draft of places to visit, Sandie and I added more and deleted some – and we taped the list of places and contacts to the office conference room door. We made note cards with the ideas for potential events and assigned different colored markers to use on the charts to help us remember if the events were tentative, firm or potential. If our delegates wanted to learn about municipal governance and community development – they had come to the right city – Dayton had much to offer.

The next phone call from Open World gave us a bit of information we hadn't counted on – the delegates didn't speak English. Now this I thought, would be a challenge. Looking at our schedule I wondered how we would explain the complexities of our voting system, taxation, community activism, the American legal system, road and building construction, and volunteerism in Russian, Azerbaijani, and Turkish. Open World would provide one interpreter but, given the depth of the subject matter and the format for our meetings, we needed to find local interpreters to assist. With not much hope, we placed an article in the Dayton Daily News – "League of Women Voters Needs Russian or Turkish speaking Interpreters.".....the phone started to ring off the hook.

To say we had a dozen potential volunteer interpreters call the office is probably conservative. There were calls from immigrant Russians or students fluent in Russian or English speaking Russian students from which to choose. Sandie and I began the process of sorting through them – I did phone interviews and we finally settled on Jen, an American, and Nina, Zora and Julie all Russian natives now living in America. We wanted our visiting delegates to have the opportunity to meet and talk with people from their own country who had settled in America or with students who were familiar with Azerbaijan. It was the beginning of the amazing discovery of all that Dayton had to offer.

The Schedule - Nine Whirlwind Days In the Heart of it All

Our delegates would be with us for the nine days and we were determined to expose them to as many learning opportunities as we could provide. But first, we wanted to welcome them to the "heart of it all" in grand style. Sandie, our creative and innovative office manager fashioned a sign complete with a picture of the Azerbaijani flag and the word WELCOME in the Cyrillic alphabet to take to the airport. Next, we needed a place to introduce our guests to their host families. The conference room our League uses in Talbott Tower is far from luxurious – we needed a welcoming space. Dyer, Garofalo, Mann and Schultz occupy the top floor of the Talbott Tower. On a chance meeting in the elevator with a DGMS employee, I inquired into the possible use of one of their more fashionable 14th floor conference spaces. Within hours we had our answer – "Yes". Next we needed someone familiar with the city to welcome them, preferably an elected official. Sharon suggested former City Commissioner Chuck Curran, another phone call, another Yes. This began my personal love affair with the City.

Another conference call with Open World confirmed that our delegates were Muslim. Sandie and I held a meeting with our local volunteer interpreters to discuss Muslim customs and traditions. Jen and Nan offered a wealth of information and we were able to customize some of our events and activities to implement preferences – black tea would replace coffee, pork products would be removed from our menus, bread was considered sacred, was to be handled with respect and should be offered with every meal. For places of interest to Muslims, I wondered what Dayton offered that we might add to their schedule. Tentatively I Googled "Muslims Dayton OH" and was surprised by a variety of mosques, a Muslim school and the Outreach Muslim Free Clinic – one of only 10 in the country – in Dayton. I picked up the phone and wasn't disappointed –

Dr. Sharon Sherlock is the enthusiastic coordinator for the Muslim Outreach clinic - we and our guests would be welcome to visit, anytime.

The momentum for our planned schedule continued to grow with each inquiry. Every municipal and county office, every non-profit and foundation, and nearly every official we contacted welcomed the opportunity to meet and talk with our delegates. Many took the challenge to heart and planned receptions, lunches and full scale meetings around their visit. The nine days began to fill and so did our hearts – Dayton Ohio is a town full of compassion, style and grace.

A brief outline of our schedule included the following:

Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission hosted by Bob Steinbach

A working lunch and discussion with Mark Owens, local Democratic Party Leader and Greg Gantt, local Republican Party Leader. The discussion would focus on America's two-party system, something hard to comprehend for delegates from a country with 39 political parties.

A Board of Elections visit courtesy of Deputy Director Betty Smith and poll worker training coordinator Brian Meade would include a discussion about monitoring elections and voters rights and provide a ballot voting machine tutorial.

Under the guidance of Carolyn Rice, Montgomery County Treasurer, our delegates would tour the County Administration Building complete with visits to the County Engineer Joseph Litvin, Auditor Karl Keith, Willis Blackshear County Recorder, and include a visit with the department of Taxation and Weights and Measures.

Rich Lewis at Hithergreen Community Center agreed to host an event and provide our Azeri guests an opportunity to address American citizens about Azerbaijan.

A visit to the Kettering Recreation Center to discuss how a city provides services to its residents and also to learn about volunteerism with Rec Center Director, Mary Beth Thamen and Volunteer Program Director Bonnie Pittl.

The Kettering Foundation, arranged by Carolyn Farrow-Garland, allowed our delegation to meet with Foundation President David Mathews for discussion about what it takes to make democracy work. The Kettering Foundation also provided lunch and an incredibly generous use of their library. Many books and materials were given as gifts to our delegates in both English and Russian. What a wonderful and little known community resource.

League member Viv Himmell worked to pull together a meeting about the Dayton Priority Board system to demonstrate how community residents interact with elected officials regarding neighborhood concerns.

Dayton City Commissioners Matt Joseph, Dean Lovelace, Joey Williams and Nan Whaley – not only invited our delegation to attend their weekly commission meeting but also planned a Q&A session with city staff and a reception complete with refreshments and a prominently displayed Azeri flag.

The Dayton Bar Association led by Bill Wheeler agreed to a meeting to discuss the pro-bono legal system.

Dayton Daily News, Anthony Shoemaker, Jana Collier and Martin Goetlieb agreed to a meeting to discuss the American free press and provided a tour of the Dayton Daily Newsroom.

Sinclair Political Science Department, led by Bob Keener, offered the delegates an opportunity to sit in and participate in a classroom setting and have a Q&A with political science students.

A visit and tour of The Food Bank was arranged through Burma Rai, a chance to see the humanitarian side of Dayton.

A tour of The Job Center, a model for the collaborative efforts of many organizations to provide individuals with assistance programs and services.

Our nine day schedule of meetings concluded with a visit to the East End Community Center, arranged by Janis James,, present League president, and Development Director at East End. We were greeted by Jan Lepore-Jentleson, Executive Director and Leah Werner, Director of Housing and Development who talked about strategies they are using to rebuild one of Dayton's poorest neighborhoods.

As we were putting together our schedule we decided we should show our delegates as many sides of Dayton as possible. We felt confident we could show the bright and the not so bright sides of the city that included poverty and the local solutions, as well as the ingenuity of good community planning. We also wanted to include places like Tech Town and, of course, we wanted to be sure to devote some time to the inventive ingenuity of Dayton's pride, the Wright Brothers.

Open World must approve a schedule prior to the arrival of delegates in the host city. Though short of time, we had scheduled a week's worth of events that fit the profile of our proposal. On deadline, we e-mailed our plans and waited for the review. Sandie got the news first, from our new and, soon to be, close friend Chang Su at the Library of Congress. The Open World program is part of the Library of Congress and Chang found our schedule both impressive and ambitious. It was not common for Chang to contact delegate hosts but he was fascinated by the Muslim Clinic and impressed with the League's connection to the Kettering Foundation. In each case, Chang asked our League for an introduction and our contact information.

Our nine day plan for events was approved. We were thrilled and the Dayton community was ready.

We finally received the list of our delegates: three men and one woman. In hindsight we realized, given the nature of the country of Azerbaijan, we should have expected the majority of our guests to be male. Our facilitator was female, she would

assist with logistics and her primary responsibility was to accompany and assist the delegates with all the long distance travel arrangements, as the majority of our guests had never traveled outside Azerbaijan. Our interpreter was male and came highly recommended as a skilled interpreter and an important political activist in Azerbaijan. We anxiously studied the long awaited information that was sent to us in their biographies and profiles: Our delegates were:

Sadil Gasimov, Chief of a Municipality, formerly a teacher of Geography;

Damat Alakbarov, Chairman of Municipality in Barda, formerly a farmer;

Nizami Gahraman, Aran Humanitarian in the Barda Region, formerly worked for an NGO to fight poverty;

Irada Jafarova, our only female delegate, Head of a Regional Cooperation and Community Development Center formerly a teacher and we learned later a champion chess player;

Nigar Baimova the facilitator of the group – a project manager with the British Council in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Emin (Milli) Abdullayev; a freelance interpreter who, we came to understand, was also an active internet blogger and very well known in Azerbaijan.

As we read the comments from our delegates about why they wanted to visit America we were both touched and somewhat daunted. Azerbaijan is a small country, rich in oil and struggling to define its democratic form of government. Though bordering on the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, Azerbaijan has some very powerful neighbors: Georgia and Russia to the north, Iran to the south, Armenia on the south and southwest and Turkey on its northwest border. To create and maintain a strong democracy in this region of the world would be an uphill battle – we were being asked to give them the tools they could use. I hoped we would not disappoint them.

Arrival Day

Our delegates arrived on a Friday afternoon. Sandie and I had exchanged enough e-mails between Nigar and the delegates to feel as if we already knew them. They were as excited to be in America as we were to have them here. Once introductions were exchanged I began to feel relaxed, but differences in culture can come at times when we least expect them.

While loading baggage into the League vans, I noticed Damat seemed uneasy. We knew our guests would be tired and as we seated and belted ourselves into the car I was happy we had planned the upcoming reception to be short so our guests would have a chance to relax with their host families. I had yet to become accustomed to the flow of on-going interpretative conversation, but I did recognize something was bothering Damat. Seated next to me in the front seat, he was having an interesting exchange with the interpreter, Emin, and gesturing in my direction. Emin explained, "He wants to know how long you have been driving." Startled, I quickly did the math "About 40 years," I answered. Damat still seemed perplexed. It seemed Damat had never been in a car driven by a woman before and was concerned I might not be a safe driver. His gestures led me to believe he thought he should drive in my place. Laughing, I shook my head, smiles are universal – and though reluctant, he seemed to relax a bit. I did notice however that he had braced his hands firmly against the dashboard. When I pointed at that he shrugged his shoulders, fearfully resigned to the fact that I was indeed going to be the driver. Before releasing the dash he patted it, stroking the metallic letters, confidently he translated "Dodge." "Yes, Dodge," I said. Again he gestured to himself as though knowing the make of the car would inspire me to turn over driving duties. I asked Emin what the Russian word for NO was – but a headshake again finally sufficed. Now, crunched down and braced in the front seat, Damat accepted his fate and first clash with American culture. Carefully, we set off down the road into Dayton.

Because the delegates arrived on Friday, we had the entire weekend to tour the town before the serious work started. We began on Saturday morning with a visit to the Dayton Peace Museum – or, should I say we tried to begin with the museum. Standing on the street corner, waiting for Nizami to finish his first of many cigarettes, Emin was translating the curious comments from Sadil and Damat. Outside the Peace Museum, on this beautiful Saturday morning, were volunteers from a local church pulling weeds, planting flowers and mowing the grass.

"The guys" as I came to refer to them, wanted to know who these people were. "They are volunteers, helping maintain the property." "Why?" they wanted to know. "Who makes them do this?" "No one," I replied. "They want the property to be neat and beautiful." "How much do they get paid?" "No pay, they volunteer." I looked at Emin for direction. Emin explained that in Azerbaijan they do not have volunteers; people only work when they are paid, or bribed, and grass cutting in Azerbaijan is only done on government property. Moving closer to the building I was amazed by the attraction the delegates had to the volunteers. Introducing our curious group brought smiles and handshakes and soon a full blown photo shoot – pictures of the volunteers, pictures of the volunteers with the Azeris, pictures of Azeri's holding the yard tools – all with good humor and simple carefree joy. An impromptu cultural exchange not planned into our schedule – lovely.

The Dayton Peace Museum has a children's section that is part of an international exchange of art between students around the world. It was obvious our delegates were interested and touched by drawings of symbols of peace from around the world. Nizami, who seemed to be the elected spokesperson for the group, was especially moved. Speaking passionately through Emin, he conversed with our Peace Museum guide. Nizami exchanged business cards and promises – as soon as he got back to Azerbaijan, he promised he was going to establish a Children's Peace Museum. His sincerity was so apparent, everyone knew Nizami would follow through - a Children's Peace Museum in Azerbaijan – not bad for the first stop on our very first day.

In hindsight, Sandie and I both realized that touring the Peace Museum was the perfect beginning of our time with the delegates. Both countries have struggled through several recent wars. Azerbaijan is currently surrounded by war. Nizami told of his service to his country in two of those wars, our tour guide told of his wartime assignment while in the U.S. military – mapping the best places to drop bombs on the enemy. Tearfully, both men vowed peace was better than war – there wasn't a dry eye in the room as the men exchanged handshakes of peace and friendship. Two countries, thousands of miles apart, one large and established, one small and struggling; both held the same hope – peace for their countries, a better future for their children. At the end of the visit Nizami demonstrated one of the most enduring customs of his country, offering a small gift of thanks to their host. A simple gift, a touching tradition.

Later in the day, while touring Carillon Park we were joined by one of our guest interpreters, Julie, a Russian citizen and her recently nationalized mother Anna. It was a picture perfect day and during lunch, seated at outdoor tables, I was lulled into listening to the exchange in Russian between Julie, her mom, and Nizami. Emin was seated at another table but I didn't need an interpreter, I enjoyed watching our guests chat in their native language, share pictures of family and stories about their countries. As I glanced over at Damat, this big, tough Azeri man, I noticed him silently, peacefully, blessing his bread – lovely.

As we continued to stroll through the park, Emin fell into step next to me. Like a conspirator he whispered – “So, the Wright Brothers...they are a cult?” “Only if you live in Dayton,” I joked. Then, realizing he was serious, I explained the Wright Brothers were not a cult, but real home grown heroes, and the inventors of flight. Emin stopped in his tracks and pointed to the ground. “Here – in Day-Ton O–hi-o, flight was invented?” “Yes,” I said. “You never heard of Orville and Wilbur Wright?”

Emin is a well-educated, world traveler and I could tell he was totally shocked and amazed. “In Day-Ton O–hi-o?” he kept saying. Minutes later we walked into the building that holds the replica of the Wright Flyer III. On this particular replica the pilot lies prone on top of the wing in the center of the plane. Emin was beside himself with concern – he had a hard time understanding that the small brace positioned near the pilot's feet was the only thing that held him to the plane. Emin argued with the curator that there must be a strap missing somewhere – something that held the pilot in place? He shuttered at the thought. Later we watched vintage film footage of the Wright Brothers demonstrating their flying machine in France. Emin interpreted to the delegates the reported reactions of the French to the Wright Brothers airplane. “They were “agog,” repeated Emin. “Agog?” he said to me – “What means Agog?” “Amazed,” I offered, or “shocked, surprised.” Emin admitted to having never heard of the word – Agog. Fluent in seven languages, he quickly fell in love with this new expression – of everything he saw the rest of the day he was “Agog.” Later I heard him muttering to himself, “Dayton is agog-ing – I am agog-ed.” “No,” I corrected, “I think the word is just agog – it is French not English.” Completely ignored, I gave up the argument. If Emin wanted to be “agog-ed” it was fine with me.

Later that evening, League member Sally Mier, and her husband Millard, invited the delegates, our volunteer interpreters, the facilitator and anyone else willing to try Buffalo Burgers at their historical home in Yellow Springs. We had learned during our orientation from Open World that delegates enjoy spending time in homes with American families. Our delegates were no exception. While Sally and Millard along with League members Vivienne and Roger Himmell manned the barbeque, I and our American interpreter Jen Terry, took our guests on a walking tour of Yellow Springs, and my first confirmation of the rumor that Azeris love to shop.

On this occasion the women were looking at scented soaps and silver jewelry while the men roamed the street. I stepped outside to watch “the guys” and had one terrifying moment as I watched Nizami and Sadil approach a pony-tailed, tattooed Yellow Springs native who just happened to be sporting a cowboy hat. This self-styled cowboy was fascinating to Sadil and Nizami who, in no uncertain terms, were signaling they wanted to try on the man's hat. Standing almost a block away, I held my breath as I hurried down the sidewalk. I needn't have worried. The Azeri charm should be bottled and distributed. Through hand gestures and smiles they had somehow related they wanted to try on the man's hat and have their picture taken. Though I started to explain, I realized I didn't have to worry. Somehow their new friend understood and was pleased to be of assistance. He waited patiently while Sadil, Nazami and soon Damat all took turns trying on the hat and posing for pictures. The owner of the hat himself took many of the photos and then happily ended by posing for a group shot of himself and the guys. It was a fascinating exchange of good will and fun. I thanked the man who seemed to think no thanks were necessary. I thought to myself “Only in Yellow Springs” but I was wrong.....so utterly, gratefully mistaken.

The next day brought another opportunity to learn more about the Wright Brothers with a visit to the National Park at Huffman Prairie – the patch of grass where Orville and Wilbur perfected controlled flight. In the museum at Huffman Prairie, Sandie had arranged for the video-game type replica of the Wright Flyer to be activated so our delegates could take turns trying to take off and land. They were eager to give it a try – confident they would quickly master flying this simple machine. Standing close by, amused, was the Park Ranger who, on a nearby chalk board, kept track of the “crashes and deaths” occurring on the Huffman Prairie simulator that morning. Our delegates again and again delightedly took turns – challenging each other and striving for a few extra seconds “in the air” before the inevitable crash.

Leaving the Wright Brothers behind, we drove back into downtown Dayton to tour the Old Court House. BIG thanks to Mike Duff who came into work on a Sunday morning to allow us to tour the beautifully restored building and learn about the American presidents, including Abraham Lincoln and Bill Clinton, who spoke from and stood on its glorious steps.

Then, it was on to the Dragon’s Stadium. League member Lee Massoud had single-handedly, arranged for our delegates to not only attend a Dragons game but to be guests of Miller-Valentine in their Box Suite. No one knew what our delegates would think of American baseball. True to their nature, they relished the experience along with the beef hot dogs and pizza and hamburgers and were treated to a personal visit with Heater, obviously another photo opportunity. There was a special “Welcome to the Citizens of Azerbaijan” on the Dragon Stadium big screen and the opportunity to speak one-on-one with executives from Miller-Valentine and former Governor Bob Taft. Governor Taft had readily agreed to join us as a guest for the game, an opportunity our interpreter Emin, especially enjoyed. More surprising for our delegates was the beginning of the game when the entire stadium stood to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and sing the Star Spangled Banner. Our visitors seemed amazed that Americans honor their country this way and seemed surprisingly touched that we did.

Our weekend of playing the role of tourist and tourist guide was coming to an end....now down to the work at hand.....no more time for fun, or so we thought.

On Monday morning as I was getting ready to leave the house, the news broke that NCR was leaving Dayton. Like most people in town, I left for the work with a heavy heart. I wondered how Dayton officials could talk to our delegates about successful community governance when our region’s last Fortune 500 Company was packing its bags. But, true to its pioneering spirit, Dayton did not disappoint.

Sandie was doing the driving for half of our delegates and had taken control of Damat. As she pulled up to the curb of Louise VanVliet’s home, there he stood, waiting, all decked out in a beautiful business suit and tie. She couldn’t resist, shouting “Hey good lookin’, ready for a ride?” totally breaking what she was certain broke all sorts of Azeri traditions and totally destroying Damat’s stern demeanor.

As we all gathered in downtown Dayton, the group appeared eager to start on the work at hand. Stepping into MVRPC was like a meeting of the Board of Directors – the staff came prepared to discuss the business of street maps and roads and getting people to where they needed to be. Our visitors listened in awe. Americans have no idea of the value of the life we lead or, too often we forget. When Nizami rose to address the MVRPC staff he described a country that had lots of oil money but none that would trickle down to provide a transportation system like the one in Dayton. The Azeris inquired where the money for street repair came from – from taxes they were told. Azerbaijan has no tax system in place. Their streets are rough and littered with potholes. Sadil told of making a box and placing it alongside the road, in hopes that travelers would drop in coins to help with maintenance. To say the people in the room were humbled is an understatement. Ideas were shared, business cards exchanged, handshakes and, of course, gifts.

Later that evening, our League hosted a Pot Luck Dinner at Sharon Harmer’s condominium club house. To those League members who came and brought wonderful homemade dishes, many, many thanks. The dinner was a huge success and a favorite memory for our guests. They could not believe the warm reception and hospitality of the American culture. We were eager to introduce our guests to League members and you did not disappoint us. It was fun to share a little bit about each of our delegates and some insights into their individual characters. Little did we know how much more we had yet to learn from each other. A special thank you to Jayme Soulati who not only brought authentic food but also her Russian-speaking father, a delightful surprise. And to Lee Massoud who made the best hummus I have ever experienced. Our visitors thoroughly enjoyed the potluck dinner, talking about it for days as “The best food in America .”

On Tuesday, a tour of the County Building was organized by Carolyn Rice and was an amazing experience for our delegates. Carolyn had scheduled time in every department for someone to speak with our delegates about taxation, property value, streets, bridges and roads. While visiting the Department of Weights and Measures the staff was amused as the delegates took turns weighing themselves on one of the department’s accurately balanced scales, curious about how much weight they had gained since arriving in the States.

While visiting with county staff, the news about NCR was discussed openly as well as the impact the departure meant to our Dayton region. Nizami, compassionate soul that he was, commiserated with Dayton and talked about the struggles in the cities of Azerbaijan. Just for a moment I was happy NCR had chosen to announce their departure that week. It had, in a small way, leveled the playing field between two totally different countries and allowed us to share a little piece of common ground.

We had planned to attend a County Commission meeting that turned out to be cancelled due to NCR's breaking news and the public activities the county commissioners were obligated to attend on quick notice. This "hole" in our well planned schedule allowed our guests to accomplish some of their much anticipated shopping trip to an area mall. This was all of much concern for Susan, who was not sure how we would be able to keep track of six grown adults, four of whom spoke no English, let loose in a shopping mall. Suffice it to say, all were gathered back together at the end of their excursion and all were happy with helping to boost the local economy.

It was then off to the home of Vivienne and Roger Himmell for a wonderful casual sit down dinner that was reminiscent of the best of any family gathering. The Azeris seemed to think so as well, as the wine flowed and the food was passed. I had requested Viv to serve something "lite and easy" as the dinner was only a stop over before the delegates were scheduled to speak later in the evening at Hithergreen. My suggestions were quickly discarded as Viv went over the Azeri schedule – a lite dinner was like no dinner at all on this particularly busy day. Pounds and pounds of brisket were perfectly prepared along with delicious salads and sides. The Himmell's have a beautiful condo in downtown Dayton and, because Roger had to be out of town, Millard and Sally Mier, again, chipped in to help host; with Sally serving the sides, Millard pouring the wine and Vivienne serving her delicious brisket. It was lovely Viv, no one wanted to leave. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

The week with the Azeris was flying by – they spoke and were well received by the people at Hithergreen. The sincerity and humbleness of their story and the pride in their country was contagious. They were also brilliant in their knowledge of the history of their country and world history as well. What a pleasure and honor to introduce them to the people in our community.

In Azerbaijan they do not have community recreation facilities which made our visit on Wednesday morning to the Kettering Recreation Center, with its gyms and pools, exercise rooms and basketball courts almost seem embarrassingly posh. Walking by one of the open gyms, the Azeris asked about the game a few senior citizens were playing – shuffle board. While no longer startled by their willingness to approach anyone or try anything. I cringed as they approached a group of seniors, who were seriously involved in a competitive game. Within seconds however, Sadil and Damat were engaged in a lively attempt to learn how to play shuffle board. The language barrier, again, held no bounds. Laughter, patience and gestures were all that were needed to express instructions and to play a rousing, spontaneous game.

As we walked outside the center, I was disappointed that the sky was misting rain – we had wanted to show our guests the outside pool and the pond with the ducks. The Azeris had stopped in their tracks because of the rain I thought. But the looks on the faces of our guests were not of disappointment but of awe. Damat gestured and I looked to Emin for translation. "They want to walk on the grass, it is OK?" I looked to our Kettering Rec guide for approval. "Of course." was the answer. With that, rain and all, the Azeris were off to walk in the grass, something not allowed on public property in Azerbaijan. The delegates headed for the pond, the ducks and an unsuspecting fisherman who happened to be in the area. Within moments the guys were fishing and "talking" with their new friend, they had his pole, they had his net and the fisherman, somehow, seemed happy to oblige. Another photo opportunity quickly ensued.. Fishing pole returned, we went back inside to discuss how a Recreation Center was planned, built and managed by a city. Our Azeri delegates are wonderful listeners, and their questions were always intelligent, open and honest. Nizami was interested in the water quality of the center's pools. When told the water and plumbing were inspected on a regular basis, his next question came as a bit of a shock. "Who do you bribe to pass your inspections?" he asked. "Bribe? We don't give bribes to pass inspections," said the center's director. Noticing the unusually chilly tone, Nizami quickly realized he had offended his host and offered that, in Azerbaijan, the only way anything passes an inspection is when the inspector is bribed; and that taking bribes and giving bribes is the Azeri way of doing business; another amazing insight into life in Azerbaijan.

The discussion moved on to how the Recreation Center is staffed, and the very well organized Kettering program of volunteerism became the subject of discussion. It was explained that the City of Kettering has a large number of senior citizens who volunteer to work at the Recreation Center. Again, the innocence of misunderstanding, "So, you make your old people work without wages?" came the question. "No, they want to work, they enjoy volunteering." The Azeris shook their heads, incredulous.

Staying with the day's focus on city government, a meeting to learn about the citizen participation program of Priority Boards was a look at how neighborhood groups can have an impact on government and services to citizens. A reception, organized by City Commissioner Matt Joseph provided another opportunity for the delegates to talk one-on-one with city staff about specific municipal services and business cards and ideas were openly exchanged. What happened next, took our delegates aback. We had planned for the delegates to attend and observe a City of Dayton Commission meeting, and as they entered the meeting room they all, at the same time, realized that a full-sized Azerbaijani flag was on display right next to the

American flag, behind the Commissioner's dais. Cameras came out, photos were gleefully taken and an incredible memory was made. Dayton had again gone the extra step to make our guests feel welcome.

Another unique culture shock began around the middle of the week. Driving into Dayton the guys were again gesturing as we drove down I-75. Emin translated, "They want to know where all your police are." I checked my speedometer – "Well if I pick up my pace a little we just might find one," I joked. Nizami and Sadil didn't seem amused. "In Azerbaijan police are posted on every block," Emin explained. The guys wanted to know if we are safe without any obvious police presence.. I assured them that we were iabsolutely safe and, if police were needed, we could dial 911 for help.

Later that day, now Thursday, we were walking on the campus of Sinclair Community College and the Azeris spotted a campus police vehicle. Fascinated, they surrounded the car, studying every inch and posing next to it. Bob Keener, our Sinclair host, was equally fascinated and amused and quickly set off to find the campus policeman to introduce to the Azeris. When the unsuspecting officer arrived he became the joyful center of attention and the subject of an impromptu photo shoot. Later, after the classroom Q&A session with Sinclair students, we were enjoying some coffee and free time in the Sinclair campus library. To the delegates total joy, another campus policeman walked by – accosted immediately by our guests, he too became the good natured victim of their high regard and affection. When I thanked him for his patience, I explained what Emin had recently shared with me - that in Azerbaijan, police are admired and respected because the citizens trust them and know they are there to keep them safe. The young policeman was not amused, but introspective; he said softly, "Well, isn't that a refreshing attitude?" I hadn't thought of it that way. In America we avoid our policemen and hope not to see them because they signal trouble or danger. Somehow we overlook the assurance stenciled on every police car, "To serve and protect." How could I miss that? Never again.

By Thursday the guys had shed their quiet, polite morning greetings and instead took to serenading me all the way to the hotel to pick up Emin. Though a nice way to start the day I had the feeling that something was going on. Even when Emin got into the car, the singing continued. I mentioned the change of atmosphere to Emin. Conversation between the guys and Emin raised an interesting question. What were the plans for the evening? I pulled out my clipboard and read through the notes – in the afternoon. we had the tour at the Muslim Clinic and then dinner – just the delegates and Sandie and I. We had filled any spare moment of time with shopping, lots of it. We had been everywhere from the Dollar Store to Macys and the mall, Best Buy and WalMart. The discussion between the guys became quieter and more conspiring in nature – even Emin was caught up the mood. "What's up?" I asked. Emin seemed almost sheepish. "Would you mind if we didn't go out to dinner with you tonight?" My mind started thinking of other options – more shopping? A resounding "NO!" The guys had had their fill of shopping – "movie?" "are you tired? – do you need to rest?" Emin leaned close – "We want to go out," he said. "Well, dinner..." "No, just us, just the guys. Emin could tell I was surprised – so he continued. "We want to talk, have dinner, drink vodka." "A guy's night?" I stammered. "Yes!" was the loud reply. Usually a good sport, I personally dreaded the thought of spending a night on the town drinking with the guys. I didn't think it would be appropriate to leave them alone in a restaurant. They didn't have a car. How would they get home? I tried to talk them out of it, to no avail. When we met up with "the girls" I told them of the request from their male counterparts.

Nigar was thrilled, she wanted to go folk dancing at an area recreation center with Louise. Irada was elated, she was exhausted – we had filled our schedule with long days, loaded with activities. She would welcome a night to relax. Irada was the only woman delegate and at times it appeared that she was not really enjoying herself and she was not as engaged in the interaction between the delegates and our hosting organizations. It took time to discover the weight that this tiny woman bore on her shoulders, as the only woman delegate chosen for this visit. Irada was being very careful and measured in her interactions, amid all the whirlwind activity generated by the other delegates. Sandie had spent the most time with Irada and had more of a hint of what was hidden inside that beautiful mind.

Every morning when Sandie picked up her charges, she always inquired about how everyone was and if they were all ready to begin another busy day. That is Sandie, totally caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment. On a morning that followed a particularly long day, her greeting of "How did everyone sleep last night?" was answered very succinctly by Irada. "I slept like a dead person," she deadpanned. Sandie glanced in the rearview mirror of the van and saw the sly smile and quick wink of Irada's eye. This woman was "holding her own".

But back to the mutiny that was now on my hands. I was resigning myself to a night in a bar when Emin interjected – they really didn't expect me to stay with them, in short – they wanted a little freedom. Reluctantly I agreed. They filled me in on their plans – somewhere comfortable, with shish kabob and rice – their homeland traditional food - and vodka. Our hosting grant did not allow the League to spend any money on alcohol – but the guys quickly dismissed my fears. Not to worry - they would spend their own money. The Open World Program training had not prepared me for the all too American version of boys night out. But, again, that Azeri charm is irresistible. I contacted League member Lee Massoud who had a friend who owned a Turkish restaurant. The plan was, I would drop off the guys, have dinner with Sandie, Sharon and LWVUS member Zaida Arguedas who was visiting for the day. Then Sandie and I would pick up the guys and drive them home. Nizami, Sadil, Damat and even Emin seemed energized – it was time to party.

As promised, after the Muslim Clinic visit, I gathered the men, all of them, into the van. I had heard the restaurant didn't sell alcohol but the guys were not to be dissuaded. Against my better judgment we all ventured into Arrow Wine, where the men carefully selected a rather large bottle of Russian vodka. Alcohol wrapped in a brown paper bag - I thought back to a few parties in my own past. "You can't drink it in the car," I warned. "No, they assured me - in the restaurant." "But the restaurant is dry, you can't drink alcohol there either," I tried to explain. They paid no attention. The chatter in the car became loud and joyous with knee slapping and chuckles. Emin started to translate for me. I put up my hand "No need - enjoy, you're off the clock." Emin was amused and relieved. Some things just don't have to be translated. Arriving at the restaurant, we were greeted by my Lee's friend who wrapped his arm around Emin's shoulder and, with his other hand placed over his heart, welcomed him with the words "My brother." I started to feel better. I explained about the illegal bottle of vodka and our host escorted the men to the patio with a suggestion they keep their bottle out of sight. It was a beautiful night, twinkling lights on the canopy of the patio. I turned to say good bye and realized I had already been dismissed - boys' night had begun.

It was 10:00 p.m. when Sandie and I returned to collect our charges. Relaxed, happy and well fed, they were reluctant for their evening to end. Sandie and I stayed, sat through a few Russian jokes and another impromptu photo shoot before the guys were ready to call it a day. Piling them into the van I started to relax, my only mistake was deciding to stop to put gas in the van. Nizami was delighted to have the opportunity to buy cigarettes - he left the van while I filled the tank. Moments later I glanced up and noticed all the guys were MIA. To my dismay, I also spotted a Miamisburg police car in the gas station parking lot. "OH NO!!!" Struggling to replace the nozzle of the gas pump, I was too late. My guys had surrounded the policeman in his cruiser. The officer was on his phone and I immediately feared he was calling for back up. Not as easily amused as the previous officers, the Miamisburg officer needed a few minutes to assess the situation. But, before I started to explain, he seemed to realize he was being admired, honored and, yes, photographed. All was well. What a night.

When I dropped Nizami and Sadil at the Bridgman's home I walked them to the door. As Carolyn and Dick ushered them into the house, little Sadil quietly passed me and uttered his first, and only, complete sentence in English; "Susan... I love you." In that moment, I loved him too.

Friday morning ended the week with tours of the core of Dayton's caring side, The Food Bank, The Job Center and East End Community Center. The Azeri's were amazed at the giving, sharing spirit of our community. In Azerbaijan they each take care of their own families but not necessarily others in need. Prior to our visit to the Food Bank our League had collected money providing our Azeri guests with the opportunity to experience the feeling of making a donation to the food bank. An anonymous donor had matched our collected gift, dollar for dollar, making it a generous contribution. It was a great way to end our week.

The evening of the last day, the Bridgeman's invited the entire group to their home for dessert. I cannot describe the atmosphere around their table that night - toasts were given, speeches made, stories shared and gifts exchanged; tears and laughter, laughter and tears. I contemplated the name of the program that brought us all together - OPEN WORLD. We had opened our hearts and homes to our guests and they had generously shared their families, customs, hearts and minds with us. How lucky we were to have had this opportunity.

Saturday was a whirl of activity with the packing of bags and many trips to the airport. Emin was the first to leave. Sandie met me at Emin's hotel as she also wanted a quiet minute to say goodbye. When every word, every emotion and expression of conversation channels primarily through one person you become very close. Emin had been exceptional. We had been told our interpreter would need breaks, would not accompany the group to dinner, probably would not take part in non-educational activities - that had not been true of Emin. He was generous with his time. Our 12 hour days were also his and he seemed to enjoy every minute. I am directionally challenged, always trying to follow Sandie as we traveled through the streets of the city. Whenever we got separated, Emin became the cheerful though sometimes frustrated navigator - he didn't understand how I could never remember the color or license number of Sandie's van or the fact that Sandie didn't carry a cell phone. Frustrated yes, angry no, endearing, absolutely.

During our car rides he and I had had many opportunities to talk seriously about his country and the work he was doing there to encourage true democracy. Among the younger generation in Azerbaijan he is a national hero, Nigar had confirmed this, saying he is a champion for freedom and citizen rights. Knowing this, Sandie and I made sure he had quality personal time with many of the community leaders we had introduced to our delegation.

In other conversations, Emin shared that, in 2007, he had received a grant from our Congress to purchase cameras and equipment to produce his own version of television news through YouTube, thus usurping the government-owned Azeri media. The videos he produced were enlightening and insightful and challenged the youth of Azerbaijan to be active in the future of their country. If Azerbaijan would embrace this young man, this bold insightful patriot, the Azeris would have a brighter future.

It was difficult to let Emin go. His intelligent young wife lives in New York studying and working at Columbia University. Emin would be in the States for two more weeks and then return to his country. He couldn't help himself - Azerbaijan was where

his heart was. As I embraced this young man I gave him the simple piece of advice I had always given my daughters when they are going away. "Don't be stupid." He was amused, I was concerned. "I will be back," he promised. "I will be back here," pointing to the ground. "To Dayton Ohio, I want to study at the Kettering Foundation." Our visit to the Kettering Foundation had been especially meaningful to Emin because their international program includes hosting delegates from other countries by engaging them in the study and research of the concepts of how democracy works nationally and internationally. Emin had exchanged business cards, made his contacts and his wishes known. He was determined and I believed he would make that happen. I felt better.

Later I picked up Sadil and Nizami. Carol and Dick were waiting in the driveway with their charges as reluctant to say goodbye to them as I was. The ride to the airport was quiet, Emin was not there to interpret but we all understood – we had had a wonderful, meaningful, totally exhausting time. We have developed friendships we would never forget but we also knew we would never see each other again. As we unloaded baggage at the airport, again, though softly, my guys began to sing. I recognized the song, the national anthem of Azerbaijan. They missed their families, their home land, they were ready to leave and I was happy for them. We exchanged more presents at the airport. I totally broke tradition and hugged big old stubborn Damat goodbye. He had chosen to drive with Sandie after that first day. My driving must have scared him, but he had come a long way, telling Sandie on their last day that her driving was "OK". Damat had even helped with the dishes in Louise Van Vliet's kitchen and, when left on his own while Nigar and Louise went folk dancing, prepared his own dinner. Joyfully, one evening he had mowed Louise's lawn and, for his efforts, received applause and a homebaked pie from her neighbors. He had also warmed and won my heart when he showed off the tiny ruffled pink dress he had purchased for his little girl – not such a tough guy after all. I adored him.

Eight weeks and nine long days; Chang had been right, our schedule was ambitious...and exhausting. I realized I had spent an entire week smiling – when had I ever done that before? Sharon had been so right to encourage this experience and I will always be grateful to her for this opportunity.

Sandie and I returned the rental vans and even reluctantly said our goodbyes to each other – we had been joined at the hip during all the plans and preparations, all that was left was the paper work. We departed wondering what our own families were doing – time to find out. To the members of the League of Women Voters of the Greater Dayton Area, you have a right to be proud of your membership in this organization. Our members opened hearts, homes, minds, schedules and cookbooks to create a safe haven for these delegates from across the globe. Whatever Sandie and I asked, League members made happen. I want to express, a huge thank you to our host families Dick and Carolyn Bridgman, Ann Wilger, Louise Van Vliet and Joan Albrecht. Not only did they host our guests, they nurtured, entertained, cooked, shopped, reconfigured electronic devices and, in Louise Van Vliet's case, danced.

THE REST OF THE STORY CONTINUES IN A LAND FAR AWAY.....

By Transitions On-Line (TOL) an online coverage of post-communist countries (www.tol.cz) 17 July 2009

The arrest of two Internet activists is worrying for those young Azerbaijanis who choose not to follow the official line.

The use of social media – Twitter, Facebook, YouTube – in organizing and galvanizing protest against the presidential election in Iran has been a hot media topic of late, full of hyperbole as well as misinterpretation. But a short distance to the north, in neighboring Azerbaijan, the growing power of social and new media to mobilize opposition has also become readily apparent. And while Azerbaijani officials are not nearly as savvy in the online world as their Iranian counterparts, a recent incident shows they may finally be waking up to the new possibilities and clamping down.

On 8 July, two young Internet activists, Adnan Hajizada and Emin Milli, were sitting in a Baku restaurant talking politics with friends when, they say, two unknown men sitting at a table nearby attacked them. Hajizada received a broken nose and Milli a leg injury, but when they went to report the incident and file a complaint, they were instead accused of a criminal act and the two other men released. After an initial trip to the hospital, human rights organizations say, they were held for 48 hours without further medical care or access to their lawyer. A judge then ordered two months of pretrial detention for Hajizada and Milli, who have been charged with hooliganism, a crime punishable by a sentence of one to five years in prison.

While evidence has yet to surface that the initial incident was some sort of planned provocation, the subsequent behavior of the authorities has sparked widespread suspicion among youth activists, the opposition, and international organizations of a political subtext to the incident. Those who know the detainees say the accusation that they attacked anyone is absurd; "everyone knows these are non-violent people that couldn't hurt a fly," one youth activist told TOL. Neither Hajizada nor Milli is a prominent member of a political party, but they have both been thorns in the side of the authorities in their own ways,

especially as pioneers in the use of social media to spread dissatisfaction with the state's treatment of young people and other controversial policies.