

National

PROFILE Maria Mehranian, urban planner, captain of industry, Armenia Fund chair

From April 24
protestor to urban
planner

by Paul Chaderjian

LOS ANGELES – In the heart of this basin, a dozen miles from the Pacific, skyscrapers sparkle in the morning California sun. In an elegant and private dining room at the members-only City Club on Bunker Hill, on the 54th floor of the Wells Fargo Tower, stands a figure metaphorically and literally above the millions who inhabit this ever-changing, developing, and re-developing global capital.

She is a captain of industry, a chief financial officer, urban planner, partner in the high-profile, multi-million-dollar civil engineering and construction management Cordoba Corporation, a role model, a mentor, community activist, humble volunteer member of the International Board of Trustees of the Armenia Fund, and a builder of nations.

"My father Ashot was my role model," she says. "His construction company carried out infrastructure projects such as freeways and express ways connecting Iran to its neighboring countries. He was building roads and bridges, bidding for government contracts, putting together proposals."

Her fascination with urban planning, engineering, construction, the roads that make nations, and the infrastructures that fuel civilizations developed early in life. The place was the shah's monarchy of Iran, and the time was before and during the Islamic revolution that baptized a nation with the name of a faith. Here, this future dynamo would watch her father at work and wonder how complicated structural systems worked together, how their relationships affected one another and the people who would live and use them.

"As a teenager at an all-girls private school," she says, "when I had to decide what I wanted to do with my life, I chose anthropology, because it had to do with the study of humans, the humanities, and with the development of communities. I was fascinated with social development."

As the daughter of a proud and ancient community of Armenians, the young community activist and future nation-builder began her activism by organizing students for April 24 demonstrations, which were illegal at the time.

"We would get in trouble, and a few students would get arrested," she says. "Any type of protest was considered threatening to the government at the time."

Arrests and the political climate would fuel debates about democracy, justice, and freedom, forcing the daughter of a mover and shaker in Iranian society to look to the West, where her inquisitive mind and love of travel to France and Italy would eventually lead her to graduate school in the United States.

"Urban planning was not a very traditional career path," she says, "but for me it was interesting because it brought together a lot of technical expertise together with public policy, which I was always fascinated with."

Her driving force was the public policy aspect and the question, "If

I build this here, how would this affect people's lives?" She says a human being can influence people's lives through public policy or through urban planning.

"You bring change to people's lives by the way you build cities, the way you build transit, the way you build housing," she says. And she has done just that. Changed lives. She is changing lives and building nations, building her ancestral homeland, one water tap and one road at a time.

The introduction

Meet Maria Mehranian. Dressed in a conservative yet sharp earth-tone suit, she commands the private dining room at the City Club on Bunker Hill. She is comfortable in her skin, in this club where formal attire is one's show of respect to another, where fine dining above the city is a sure sign of success, of one's arrival. Maria is not just a member here; her business partner, George Pla, helped create this place.

This place, the city, her career are hers. She's earned it, deserves it. Period.

"We hired Maria 20 years ago and put her on a field project," says Mr. Pla, president and CEO of the Cordoba Corporation. "The project was to develop the metro rail in Los Angeles. To plan it before design and construction. Just to plan it."

Maria's complicated task-at-hand back then was to create what was not yet designed. Her directive was to figure out how the rail line routes would be aligned, where the stations would go, what would be the impact of a rail system on the city, and how an underground mass transit system in the City of Los Angeles would serve the population best.

"Every day, she would finish her work," remembers Mr. Pla, "and after she was done, she would come to the downtown office and say, 'What else can I do?' That was the start of our friendship."

Since then, says Mr. Pla, looking at his managing partner, "she has developed in many ways, not only as the total executive, but as the total person. Not only did she develop as an urban planner, but now she is an executive partner in real estate finance, design, and construction projects."

Maria knows her role and has played it well, leading projects ranging from the largest produce-distribution network in China to subway stations in southern and northern California.

"My strength is that I know how to get something done, and it could be anything," she says. "In my mind, I know the process of how to think and streamline something, how to cut through the clutter."

Maria says she likes to go into situations where there are a lot of problems. She says she looks at the bigger picture, thinks about how to "troubleshoot this and make it work." She says the challenge is putting together a plan that is going to resolve the issues at hand. "I just get a kick out of it all the time."

Her kicks have included planning of transit and water distributions systems at home, renovating schools and universities, and improving airports.

Maria Mehranian and her team wanted to ensure the safety of the new runway at the Los Angeles International Airport that facilitates the landing of the new Airbus 380. Under her supervision, projects in-



President Ghoukassian of Nagorno Karabakh, Chairperson Maria Mehranian, and Senior VP of Lincy Foundation Harut Sassounian at Armenia Fund's Telethon 2006. Photo: Armenia Fund.



Maria Mehranian, Mark Geragos (center), and Sarkis Kotanjian (left) represent the United States Western Region delegation at Armenia Fund's International Board of Trustees Meeting" Photo: Armenia Fund.



L to R: Maria Mehranian with Martakert Hospital Architect Arturo Fribourg, former Chairman of Armenia Fund Zaven Khanjian and Mrs. Khanjian. Photo: Armenia Fund



President Kocharian of Armenia bestows a Presidential Commendation to Maria Mehranian for her years of volunteer service to the Armenia Fund, during the Fund's 16th Annual International Board of Trustees Meeting. Photo: Armenia Fund.



"Maria Mehranian, Managing Partner of Cordoba Corp. (far left) and George Pla (3rd from left), CEO of Cordoba Corp, led a team to relocate the critically important south runway at Los Angeles Int'l Airport (LAX). Cordoba Corp. incorporated several innovative practices in their plan to reduce environmental impacts from construction on areas in and around LAX". Photo: Cordoba Corp.

volving other multinationals have taken flight – all possible because of her intuition and ability to use science and finance precisely and meticulously.

"We have ignored our barriers," says Mr. Pla, explaining his firm's and Maria's successes.

"People that know us think we are crazy and just are willing to crank it up higher every single day. People ask me for a secret, and they are amazed at the level of effort day-in and day-out. [The secret is] the vision and the passion you have and the willingness to get after it every single day."

Maria has the passion and will- ingness. She has arrived at board

meetings, city halls, foreign embassies, halls of power, dinner tables, and Thanksgiving telethons with an open, bright mind, trained herself to be disciplined and focused, educated herself at great universities, and practiced her career with principle and dedication.

"Maria has educated and developed herself in arenas like finance and accounting like no one else," says Mr. Pla. "She tells bankers and CPAs what to do. I have watched her develop as an executive and as a person, develop her family, become involved in her community, and earn the chair of Armenia Fund. As you

get older, you know the important things are family, friends, community."

Maria's community involvement hasn't been limited to her post as a planning commissioner for the city of La Cañada Flintridge, the place she calls home. From this City of Angels in this Golden State, this modern-day hero has not only taken on large infrastructure projects stateside and in Third World nations, but she has applied and is applying the same dedication to the far-reaching grassroots Armenia Fund campaign that is building and rebuilding her ancestral homeland.

National

Maria Mehranian: mother, friend, volunteer, and modern-day Armenian woman

“The important things are family, friends, and community”

by Lory Tatoulian

LA CAÑADA FLINTRIDGE, Calif. – It brings great pride and joy to see an Armenian woman climb the corporate ladder and distinguish herself with prowess and competence in a field that is unequivocally male-dominated.

Maria Mehranian's expertise in urban planning, civil engineering, and construction management has not only led her to build multi-million dollar structures across the globe, but it has spurred her to carry out grassroots work in Armenia. She serves as the chair of Armenia Fund Inc., the Western U.S. affiliate of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund.

Growing up in Tehran, Maria witnessed how her father could alter cityscapes by building roads and bridges. His intimate connection to the land and soil itself influenced Maria's love for cities.

“My father was my role model. Sometimes I would join my father and watch projects being built,” Maria recalls.

Education

While attending college at the American University in Iran, Maria veered away from industrial expansion and instead focused her attention on the development of the human race.

Her undergraduate degree was in anthropology, which provided her with the basic principles that allowed her to explore the complex ways in which humans interact with their surroundings.

In 1984, as the political climate in Iran changed, Maria was accepted into the School of Urban Planning and Architecture at UCLA. She wanted her emphasis to be in urban planning, knowing that very few universities had graduate programs in that field.

In graduate school, Maria made major strides that went beyond what was expected of the average student. She delved deeply not only into the practical aspects of her studies, but wanted to be aware of the philosophical concepts that underpinned city planning.

She became inspired by the progressive teachings of the former dean of UCLA's School of Architecture, Harry Perloff, and the architectural advances of Victor Gruen's designs on the American landscape.

Maria studied Gruen's vision of revitalizing cities and developing shopping centers that have now come to define the culture of Americana. These teachings stayed with Maria and helped her form the core values that she practices in her current endeavors.

Urban planning

By the early 1980s, transportation became one of the main areas of interest for urban planners. Maria caught onto this trend and made a mark for herself by writing a relevant thesis that examined the needs for a regional transit systems and driving patterns of downtown employees.

Not only did the thesis help Maria get her degree, but it also



Maria Mehranian.

assisted with developing specific regulations for commuters that eventually changed the law. Her dissertation concentrated on finding out how free parking plays a role in ridesharing, and how ridesharing helps alleviate transportation problems.

From the studies she conducted, Maria found out that if free parking was available for large buildings in metropolises, like downtown Los Angeles, most likely people did not carpool.

She made a trip to Washington, accompanied by her mentor and professor Martin Wachs, to present her paper to lawmakers. As a result, Regulation 15, a city ordinance, was passed. Companies that employed more than a hundred people had to charge for parking and encourage workers to rideshare.

Cordoba Corporation

Just after graduating college, Maria was hired to work at the Cordoba Corporation. With her dedication and tenacity, Maria quickly climbed the ranks in the company and soon became an executive partner in the multimillion dollar enterprise. Little did she know that her first job would lead to a distinguished, 25-year-career with the firm.

In 2004, the Harvard Business School did a case study on the Cordoba Corporation, exploring the growth of the company, while also examining its unique entrepreneurial culture. Maria was quoted in the Harvard journal explaining her role, at the time, as the new chief operating officer: “You see, I found it rewarding to work with George [Pla] directly, in terms of what I learned, how I developed my career, and most importantly in my own personal development.”

Cordoba CEO George Pla says, “What is unique about Maria is that she is fearless about taking things on. I needed someone who will do what is required, even if it involves doing things in a manner that are not traditional.”

As the company grew and undertook larger projects in the multinational sphere, it eventually evolved from a planning firm into a company that focused more on

program management in the areas of transportation, educational facilities, and water.

Both George and Maria have charted the volatile seas of corporate management and have experienced the inevitable challenges and triumphs that are attached to building a multifaceted company.

On a day-to-day basis, Maria is busy dealing with banks, budgets, management issues, and executing new projects.

She has supervised an array of venerable projects including developing the Metrolink transit system in Los Angeles and the BART system in northern California.

She also served as the project manager for the construction of the world's largest food distribution center in China, among numerous other projects that run the gamut from building water facilities to managing the construction of schools and colleges.

Maria has mentored many individuals along the way and has drawn young Armenian professionals into her business stratum. Narbeh Issagholian has been working as a project coordinator with Maria at the Cordoba Corporation for over a year.

Issagholian describes his experience of working with Maria: “Through my experiences with Maria, I have come to admire her willingness to help. Whether it be her philanthropic undertakings or providing opportunities to young professionals like myself, she displays the same type of dedication that has brought her professional success.”

Family, community

Over the years, Mr. Pla has witnessed Maria “grow in many ways, not only as the total executive, but the total person.”

Maria is married to Armen Khachtourian and has two teenage boys: Alain who is 17 years old and Artin who is 14 years old. Mr. Pla is Alain's godfather.

Maria's brother Yeprem Mehranian is also passionate about serving the community. Dr. Mehranian serves as the principal of the Krouzian Zekarian Vasbouragen Armenian Day School in San Francisco.

(See the *Armenian Reporter*, August 25, 2007.)

In her own community, Maria is planning commissioner for the city of La Cañada Flintridge. In this position, she directly handles the policies and mandates that will transform the public space.

“La Canada is the microcosm of a bigger universe, although it's a very affluent community. My motivation is to preserve the natural aspects of life there. The values that I take to La Canada are the core values that I apply to any project,” Maria says.

People are talking

California State Assembly member Anthony Portantino has worked closely with Maria on various projects involving the 44th District.

Mr. Portantino says, “Maria Mehranian is an asset to the community of La Canada Flintridge. She brings a unique expertise to the city's planning commission where she has helped resolve numerous residential disputes while helping to develop the community's commercial corridor.”

The Assembly member says his community is fortunate to have Maria volunteer for the city and for the school district. He says he is fortunate to call Maria his friend.

Armenia Fund

Maria has not only applied her expertise to her community in Los Angeles, but she has extended her altruism onto a distant land that lies thousands of miles away.

In 2004 Maria became the chair of the Armenia Fund, a job she approached with just as much devotion and reverence as she does with the Cordoba Corporation.

She has spearheaded the Armenia Fund by actively bolstering grassroots efforts in Armenia.

Her work has been pivotal in transforming the reputation and accountability of the organization by managing to implement over \$160 million dollars of infrastructure development and humanitarian assistance in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Maria has always believed in the mission of the Armenia Fund, and as chair, a volunteer position, she has been able to mobilize the international Armenian community by channeling the diaspora's benevolence into improving the economic and structural foundations in the homeland.

“The Armenia Fund is an institution that the president of Armenia really cares about,” says Maria. As the chair of the organization's Western U.S. affiliate, she has a huge impact on what the organization does and how it does it.

Ms. Mehranian recognizes that there are over 250 nonprofit Armenian organizations in Los Angeles soliciting donors; despite this large pool of nonprofits, Maria has been instrumental in making Armenia Fund the largest Armenian-American charitable organization the United States.

Maria takes her business savvy and extensive experience in the corporate realm and applies it into the framework of the Armenia Fund. Each year, she meets with her counterparts from around the world and Republic of Armenia officials, including the president, to discuss and plan the Fund's global efforts.

Sarkis Kotanjian, the executive director of the Armenia Fund, expresses his joy and admiration of

having the opportunity to work with Maria.

“I am fascinated with Maria's ability to dedicate so much time to Armenia Fund between her work, her family, the La Canada Planning Commission, and a myriad of other things she is involved in. I have been blessed with the unique opportunity to learn from her and I do it every day. She is a dear friend,” says Mr. Kotanjian.

The core fundraising event for the Armenia Fund is its telethon that is aired every year on Thanksgiving Day.

Months before the telethon begins, Maria is assiduously working to ensure a polished broadcast in addition to making sure the telecast raises as much capital as possible to fund their developmental projects.

On November 22 this year, dozens of terrestrial broadcast stations, cable networks, satellite channels, and the Internet will be taking Maria's message to a wide demographic of non-Armenians, European Armenians, American-Armenians, and people in Stepanakert and the villages of Karabakh, where the people who fought in the liberation struggle have dedicated their lives to their ancestral homeland and the region that gave birth to the Mashdots alphabet.

The Armenia Fund has made significant changes on the Armenian landscape including the construction of the Goris-Stepanakert Highway that links Armenian to Karabakh.

“What does a road do to people's lives?” Maria used to wonder growing up. “I really thought about it seriously. I always wanted to know the real story of a person who lived by the road and how that person's life changed because of that road.”

What draws her to Armenia Fund is that she is able to see the results of the infrastructure she is helping develop in Armenia and in Nagorno-Karabakh.

This year the Armenia Fund is focusing on regional revitalization by promoting economic and agricultural development in the remote villages of Armenia.

Greg Boyrazian, director of development for the Armenia Fund, says, “Maria's strategic planning and policy development abilities truly amaze me. Whether it's working to make the airport runways at LAX safer or delivering world-class healthcare to a rural region in Armenia, Maria's multitasking and wide scope of knowledge in infrastructure development is simply astonishing.”

Mr. Boyrazian says wherever Maria goes, her high standards of achievement become the norm.

“We are grateful to the long term, strategic development plan that Maria has set in sight for the Armenia Fund,” says Boyrazian.

Maria is a visionary who has channeled her progressive ideas not only by altering the surface of a terrain, but by transforming the inner landscape of people's lives.

Only a visionary could see beyond a telethon that builds infrastructure and develops the economy of the homeland. She believes, “People watch the telethon, and they decide if they want to come to Armenia this summer or not. The Telethon is the face of Armenia to the diaspora.”

And Maria Mehranian is the face of success with commitment to family and community. ■■■