

ABMDR Annual Gala And Fundraiser Celebrates Milestones, Honors Supporters And Volunteers

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[Los Angeles Mayor with Abmdr Board members and guest](#)

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GLENDAL—At its annual gala, “Match for Life 2009,” the Armenian Bone Marrow Donor Registry marked several milestones, including the opening of its Stem Cell Harvesting Center in Yerevan in April, and recognized several supporters and volunteers for their outstanding service to the organization.

Among the evening’s honorees were VivaCell general manager Ralph Yirikian, who was named ABMDR Man of the Year; and Volunteers of the Year Steve Artinian, VP of advertising at Closet World and chairperson of Homenetmen Western U.S.; Susanna Avagyan, a registered nurse at Glendale Memorial Hospital; and Taleen Khatchadourian, executive director and franchisee of Sylvan Learning Center of Studio City/Sherman Oaks. In addition, The Comedy Store, of Los Angeles, was honored as the ABMDR’s Business of the Year.

“Match for Life 2009” also raised funds for the ABMDR’s ongoing activities and a slew of planned projects. While the Stem Cell Harvesting Center continues to grow and the ABMDR organizes bone marrow donor recruitment drives throughout the United States and Armenia, the next overarching objective is to establish a stem cell transplantation center in Armenia.

“Given the fact that 60 percent of our stem cell donors are from Armenia, the opening of the Stem Cell Harvesting Center in the country was of vital importance,” said Dr. Frieda Jordan, president of the ABMDR Board of Directors.

[ABMDR volunteers](#)

ABMDR volunteers

“Now that this has been achieved, thanks to both grassroots and major-benefactor support, much of our focus is on launching a dedicated transplantation center, which would give thousands of patients access to affordable, life-saving stem cell transplants.”

More than 500 supporters, including several guests of honor, attended the ABMDR banquet. The roster of dignitaries comprised Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa; Burbank vice-mayor Anja Reinke; Glendale mayor Frank Quintero and City Council members Ara Najarian and Laura Friedman; Armenian deputy consul general Mesrob Shaboyan; Rev. Dajad Yardemian of the Western Diocese; Morre Dean, president and CEO of Glendale Adventist Hospital; and Bob Quarfoot, senior vice-president of business development at Glendale Memorial Hospital.

As the cocktail hour began at 6:00 p.m., a great many attendees kicked off the fundraising effort by purchasing glasses of champagne with unlimited refills and a chance of winning a diamond necklace, which was donated by Design by Naz. Guests also bid on a variety of silent-auction items.

After the doors to the banquet room were opened at 7:00 p.m., the evening’s masters of ceremonies, Lara Yeretsian of the ABMDR Board of Directors and Sam Tripoli of the Board of Advisors, welcomed the attendees and invited Mayor Villaraigosa to the podium. In his touching address, the mayor reflected on his close relationship with the Armenian community and expressed high praise for the ABMDR’s life-saving work and mission.

Villaraigosa's comments were followed by Banquet Committee chair Naz Atikian's welcoming remarks, after which Father Yardemian performed the invocation. As guests enjoyed a sumptuous dinner and fine wines, images of the ABMDR's activities in the past year were projected on two giant screens, accompanied by music.

ABMDR Board with survivors

ABMDR Board members with leukemia survivors Alique Topalian (third from left) and Richard Boyajian (fourth from left).
ABMDR volunteers.

Next the attendees heard testimonials about the work of the ABMDR by two leukemia survivors: Alique Topalian, whose diagnosis ten years ago served as the impetus for the establishment of the ABMDR; and Richard Boyajian, a nurse practitioner at Boston's Dana Farber Cancer Institute, who has survived the illness thanks to a stem cell transplant. Living proofs of the procedure's effectiveness, both Topalian and Boyajian encouraged the guests to become bone marrow donors and support the ABMDR cause. "Being at the ABMDR gala, in a room filled with Armenians whose sole purpose for being there was to save the lives of other Armenians in need was an emotionally moving experience for me, as a 12.5-year survivor of leukemia," Boyajian later said. "Too often in our daily lives we forget what is truly important but at that moment in time we remembered."

The evening's program continued with the screening of a video which highlighted the ABMDR's latest activities, including stem cell recruitment drives and the opening of the Stem Cell Harvesting Center. As Banquet Committee member Nectar Kalajian took the stage, she described her family's journey in search of a matching bone marrow donor for her cousin Aram. She was joined by Carlo, a young father from Pasadena, California, struck with leukemia, who is soon to undergo his own life-saving bone marrow transplant.

Building Tree of Hope

The Tree of Hope

Both Kalajian and Carlo thanked the ABMDR for its vital support, emphasized the ongoing need for stem cell donors, and urged the attendees to "be an angel, save a life." At this, the hall was suddenly filled with little girls dressed as angels, who floated through the tables and collected donation pledges. Subsequently the pledges were announced and for each contribution a symbolic angel was placed on the "Angel Tree" (or "Tree of Hope") at the podium.

Following a brief set of performances by the Element band, Mark Geragos, chair of the ABMDR Board of Directors, recounted the beginnings and evolution of the registry. As he outlined nine years of groundbreaking achievements, the chairman underscored the registry's importance to Armenians throughout the world.

Also delivering remarks were Dr. Frieda Jordan and Dr. Sevak Avagyan, executive director of the ABMDR in Armenia. Before she spoke of the registry's future plans, Dr. Jordan thanked all supporters for making the dream of having a Stem Cell Harvesting Center a reality in record time. On his part, Dr. Avagyan stated that the Armenian-American community not only started and sustained the ABMDR for many years, but inspired the public in Armenia to join forces for the creation of the Stem Cell Harvesting Center, as a one-of-a-kind institution that serves the global Armenian community. "In Armenia today, the high level of support for the ABMDR's work is tremendously heartwarming," Dr. Avagyan said in a later statement. "As the Armenian public and government alike have embraced the registry's life-saving mission, we have great hopes that we'll be able to open a stem cell transplant center under the auspices of the Health Ministry."

After a brief video message from Dr. Bella Kocharyan, honorary chair of the ABMDR, awards were presented to the evening's honorees. ABMDR Man of the Year Ralph Yirikian, who was unable to attend the event, relayed his appreciation through a video message which encouraged

"Be an angel, save a life." The group of little "angels" who collected pledges during the gala.

all Armenian individuals and corporations to support the registry's work. Commenting on the far-reaching benefits of the Stem Cell Harvesting Center, Yirikian said, "We will realize the importance of this project in a couple of years... We can save the lives of cancer patients... And by being a center of excellence which is unique to the region, with

its own bone marrow donor registry, this facility will significantly improve Armenia's overall health profile."

"The ABMDR has had a wonderfully productive year," Taleen Khatchadourian said. "It is the combined effort of so many that has made this endeavor such a success. I encourage everyone to take the opportunity and devote some time to this worthy cause. The satisfaction of contributing, if only just a little, is worth more than anyone can imagine." Steve Artinian also praised the work of the registry and stated, "Being recognized by the Armenian Bone Marrow Registry as a Volunteer of the Year is a true honor."

Susana Avagyan, the third Volunteer of the Year, said, "Assisting the ABMDR has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life. And a big part of that fulfillment has to do with the knowledge that our volunteer work – whether through stem cell donor recruitments or follow-up health tests – helps save lives, especially those of young people."

The gala program concluded with the drawing of the winning raffle and champagne tickets. But guests continued to enjoy themselves well into the night, as they socialized and danced to the music of the DJ duo Aram and Allen.

Major sponsors of "Match for Life 2009," which raised \$100,000 for various ABMDR projects, included the Foundation Laboratory; Mr. and Mrs. Linda and Stepan Vartanian; Mr. and Mrs. Dr. Cyrus and Rita Razmara; Mr. and Mrs. Dr. Arpenik Avagyan and Dr. Sokurenko Evgeni; and the Greek Armenian Society.

About the Armenian Bone Marrow Donor Registry: Established in 1999, the ABMDR, a nonprofit organization, helps Armenians worldwide survive life-threatening blood-related illnesses by recruiting and matching donors to those requiring bone marrow stem cell transplants. To date, the registry has recruited over 15,000 donors across three continents, identified 1,305 patients, found 1,033 potential matches, and facilitated nine bone marrow transplants.

For more information, call (323) 663-3609 or visit abmdr.am.

Photo Credit: All photos courtesy of the Armenian Bone Marrow Donor Registry.