

## ONE STEP TOWARDS CHANGE

### ESC VOLUNTEERS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCE

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Volunteering is not just about doing good deeds—it provides meaningful opportunities for personal and professional growth, which are especially valuable in today’s world. Thanks to Salto EECA accreditation, HUJ Voluntary Service of Armenia welcomes long-term volunteers to participate in projects focused on environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation, and working with children, including those with disabilities.

These programs offer a chance not only to provide real help but also to immerse oneself in a new culture and gain unique experiences. We spoke to HUJ’s long-term volunteer coordinator, Elen Abrahamyan, to learn more about the impact of these efforts.

“Long-term volunteers, who stay for six months to a year, participate in projects at institutions such as the History Museum, National Gallery, Botanical Garden, Diaconia Charitable Fund, Arabkir Medical Centre, Muratsan Hospital Complex, Republican Pediatric Rehabilitation Centre, ‘Dzer Gitak’ Kindergarten, Zatik Child Care and Support Centre, WWF, and the HUJ office,” Elen explains. “Currently, we have 13 volunteers, but more will arrive soon. When all the projects are full, we can have a maximum of 18 volunteers.”

According to Elen, international volunteers who come to Armenia typically take about a month to adapt to local life. “On the other hand, the staff at the centers, foundations, and kindergartens where they volunteer quickly become friends with them. The children, especially, see the volunteers as older siblings and grow very attached to them. It’s heartwarming to see the bonds they create. When I visit the volunteers, it’s obvious the children love having them around.”

Thanks to HUJ, volunteers from countries like Germany, France, Italy, Denmark, Finland, and others are currently in Armenia. “We’ve had many cases where volunteers return to Armenia just months after completing their projects. Some even want to live here permanently,” Elen says.

**“I was warmly welcomed, and our love is mutual”**

We also had the chance to speak with some of the volunteers. Some are nearing the end of their projects, while others have been in Armenia for just a few months.

Hevin Donv Hirdchler, from Hamburg, Germany, shared why she chose to volunteer in Armenia. “Armenia was a revelation for me in this region. I came here to learn about the culture and language,” she says.

Interviewer: “You’ve been volunteering at the Pediatric Rehabilitation Centre for a month now. How have the children there received you?”

Hevin: “I work mostly with disabled children—playing with them, teaching them English, and helping with lunch. They’ve accepted me well, and our bond is mutual. I’m used to this type of work since I’ve volunteered with refugee children in Germany.”

Interviewer: “Volunteering with children, especially those with special needs, is both rewarding and demanding. What draws you to this kind of work?”

Hevin: “I find it easy to connect with them. As you’ve noticed, I tend to gravitate towards children with special conditions. I believe all children deserve equal opportunities, and I try to contribute to that with my work.”

Interviewer: “What memorable moments stand out from your experience with the children?”

Hevin: “One fun memory comes from the kindergarten at the rehabilitation center. After an English class, a parent asked their child how the lesson went. The child responded, ‘Wasn’t she speaking Russian?’ We had a hard time convincing the child that I only speak English!”

Interviewer: “Do you have any plans after your volunteering project in Armenia ends?”

Hevin: “I’ll definitely come back to Armenia. Together with other volunteers, I’ve been learning Armenian, and this is the only place I can practice it. Plus, I’ll miss the people here. The memories I’ve made in Armenia will stay with me forever.”

## "I FEEL SAFER HERE"

Said Ayadi Shares His Volunteering Experience in Armenia

Said Ayadi, who also arrived from Germany, surprised us by starting our conversation in Armenian. He's currently volunteering at the History Museum of Armenia.

Interviewer: "It's only been a few weeks since you arrived in Armenia, yet you're already speaking Armenian. How did that happen?"

Said: "My main goal was to learn at least basic Armenian. Before coming here, I started studying the language and familiarizing myself with Armenian culture, so I came prepared. People even mistake me for an Armenian when I'm in shops!"

Interviewer: "That's interesting! You do have an Armenian appearance. What differences have you noticed between Armenia and Germany, and between Armenians and Germans?"

Said: "Actually, I'm originally Dutch. In the Netherlands, people are more direct and clear about their intentions. In Armenia, communication can be more subtle. But Armenians are incredibly kind. They'll hold your bag for you on the bus or let you know if something falls out of your pocket. There's also a lot more trust between people here. For example, when you get on a bus, you don't have to pay immediately, which means people could just skip paying, but they don't. Also, the weather here is very pleasant. I just miss riding my bike—Yerevan isn't very bike-friendly. And, of course, Armenia is very safe. I feel more secure here than anywhere else."

Interviewer: "Tell me about the work you're doing at the History Museum. What discoveries have you made about Armenian history?"

Said: "I guide international visitors through the museum exhibits. The biggest revelation for me was learning that the world's oldest shoe was found in Armenia! I had no idea the country had such ancient history. I'm particularly fascinated by the museum's collection of carpets, weapons, and armor."

Interviewer: "What do you do in Yerevan outside of your volunteering work?"

Said: "I'm very active in sports, mostly playing football. I played tennis for eight years, so I'm currently trying to find a place to play here as well. Besides sports, I spend time exploring Yerevan, visiting various parks and museums."



## "I ALREADY SPEAK A LITTLE ARMENIAN"

Evan Techer, a 21-year-old from a French island, has come to Armenia for a year to volunteer at the Botanical Garden.

Interviewer: What attracted you to volunteering at the Botanical Garden?

Evan: I enjoy the idea of creating new life. The Botanical Garden requires a lot of care, and it feels like we're giving new life to nature. I'm really glad to contribute to that. Currently, I work in two different departments: one in the greenhouse, where we care for plants, and the other in a specially preserved plant reserve.

Interviewer: What do you do in Armenia besides volunteering?

Evan: As soon as I arrived, I visited the History Museum. I started exploring Armenian culture and mentality. At first, it wasn't easy, especially because I have blue hair and attracted a lot of attention, but I got used to the glances.

Interviewer: How does an international volunteer organize their free time?

Evan: I mostly do sports and have already joined a football team. I've also taken excursions and explored southern Armenia. I must say, the kindest people live there.

Interviewer: Let's talk about HUI. How were you welcomed in Armenia, and are you satisfied with the organization's work?

Evan: I have no complaints. HUI has been supportive in every possible way, and I'm grateful to all the staff members for their help.

Interviewer: What can you tell us about the Botanical Garden staff?

Evan: The more I get to know and talk to the staff, the better we organize the work, and I'm able to take on more specific tasks. The important thing is that they are friendly and always ready to help. I already speak a little Armenian and have started texting using Armenian words in the Latin alphabet. I've decided to learn the Armenian alphabet as well.

Interviewer: Based on your experience, would you recommend volunteering in Armenia?

Evan: Definitely. Especially if you're from Western Europe. It's good to step outside the classic mindset and realize there's another world out there.