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## **Interview with Ruben Vardanyan, Co-Founder of the Aurora Humanitarian Initiatives**



The Press Office of the Global Campus of Human Rights had attended the Aurora Prize and the Aurora Dialogues in Venice and had the opportunity to interview the Co-Founder of the Aurora Humanitarian

Initiatives about the possible cooperation on the field of education, research and promotion of our humanitarian work.

### **Could you tell us more about the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative and your main objectives?**

Back in 2014, as the centennial anniversary of the Armenian Genocide approached, my partners and I wanted to carefully re-think and reflect on the events of the past in the context of the new era. Having suffered tremendous losses and been deprived of its lands and accumulated material wealth, the Armenian nation nevertheless survived. In reflecting on this fact, we arrived at the conclusion that the best symbolic response to the crimes of the past would be life-asserting success, and not just mourning for those who lost their lives. When we examined the history of the Genocide and the horrific events in the lives of our families, we found some truly incredible examples of heroism among individuals and organizations. While there are many accounts of victims and murderers, testimony concerning survivors and saviours is much rarer. We therefore set out to tell the general public about the forgotten heroic deeds of those who saved Armenian lives in the Ottoman Empire, and to express our gratitude to their descendants now living in different countries. Risking their own lives, their great-grandparents saved about 120,000 Armenian children, thereby giving the chance of life to almost one million Armenians living today. We want the theme of humanism, gratitude, selflessness, and the triumph of the human spirit, to become truly pertinent in the modern world.

In 2015, the project 100 LIVES was launched. We created a multi-functional online platform in six languages in which we revealed to ourselves and the world Genocide chronicles that had not been previously widely known. This online platform contains many stories about those who were saved and those who saved them. It kickstarted the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative, which was named in honour of Aurora Mardiganian, a woman who pioneered the raising of awareness of the Genocide among the world community through her book *Ravished Armenia* (1918), which describes the horrors that she had gone through. Her book, and the eponymous film in which Aurora played a leading role, spurred millions of Americans to donate money to help Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians. All in all, 115 million US dollars were collected (2.8 billion in today's dollars).

Originally conceived as an initiative designed to help the nation shed its victim complex, to pay homage to those who perished in the Genocide years, and to express gratitude to the saviours of Armenians, Aurora has evolved into an international humanitarian movement to honour today's heroes and to express our national gratitude through action. We were helped to survive, and today we help those fearless individuals who save the most vulnerable members of society at their own risk. The stories of present-day heroes urge people to go beyond passive sympathy and to move to action. We are glad we have become pioneers in this field: despite the wide scope of the global humanitarian agenda, there is not a single award that recognizes those valiant individuals who consistently risk their lives to save others each and every day. The Aurora Prize is also unique in that for the first time these wonderful individuals can not only apply for grants but give grants to others. Each laureate of the annual Aurora Prize is entitled to distribute 90% of the one million US dollars award among three organizations of their choosing.

### **Could you give us more details about the current activities of Aurora in the conflict zone in Armenia? Is there any campaign that our audiences could support right now?**

Our mission begins and ends with Gratitude in Action. All our donors who live in more than 20 countries share one important quality – they believe in the power of gratitude to change the world. Thanks to them, Gratitude in Action has become a global movement. More than 20 projects have been launched or are supported through Aurora Prize funds with the help of more than 20 local partners in over 10 countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Cameroon, D. R. Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Malaysia, Myanmar, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and others. More information about the Aurora Prize laureates and their designated organisations can be found at [auroraprizet.com](http://auroraprizet.com).

In the aftermath of the war in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh), Aurora has been providing direct aid to the people of Artsakh. Since the launch of the Aurora for Artsakh humanitarian aid program, Aurora has already allocated \$1,740,000 to support 80 projects in Artsakh implemented by both local and international partners and to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Artsakh through the Hayastan All Armenian Fund. Earlier this year the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative announced an adjustment to the structure of its flagship program, the Aurora Prize. From 2022 onwards, half of the Prize award will be directed by the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative to combat one of the worst humanitarian crises where human suffering requires urgent intervention. In addition, this year, considering the acute needs of the people of Artsakh, Aurora recommended the 2021 Aurora Prize Laureate to direct \$250,000 (or 25%) of the award to addressing urgent humanitarian issues in Artsakh. The Aurora Co-Founders, including myself, are committed to matching this contribution to bring the total amount to \$500,000.

The Aurora for Artsakh program also includes bringing the world's humanitarian leaders to the region to find new opportunities to help the local people, to support Artsakh's international standing, and to ensure effective solutions on the ground.

Starting from October 2020, Aurora has been using the #AraratChallenge to raise funds for humanitarian initiatives helping the people of Artsakh affected by the war. The #AraratChallenge is a global crowdfunding initiative addressing humanitarian needs in Armenia and Armenian communities globally. The crowdfunding campaign is set to increase the impact and reach of the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative to combat poverty, improve healthcare and provide education to those in need. Anyone can [join this movement](#) and give a second chance to those who need it most.

As COVID-19 began to spread across the globe, the #AraratChallenge movement made a \$120,000 donation to the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia to buy ventilators and to support local health professionals on the front lines. When a huge explosion rocked the capital of Lebanon, Aurora donated \$200,000 to help the citizens of Beirut and called on the global Armenian community for funding.

We urge those fortunate enough to have been rescued and given a new chance on life to express their own gratitude by becoming the next generation of saviours. Thus, the cycle of giving will continue, empathy will replace sympathy and in memory of the survivors, we will embrace all those who believe in our shared humanity.

**Please elaborate on your vision as a Co-Founder regarding the development of the courses, educational programmes, scholarships and libraries of Aurora.**

Answering your question, I would like to specifically mention the Aurora Gratitude Projects. These are humanitarian and educational initiatives which help children, refugees, and other at-risk groups. Through these projects, the descendants of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide symbolically express their gratitude to those individuals who at that time helped their great-grandparents to survive. Besides creating tangible public good, these projects play another important role as well. In today's world they are expanding the constantly narrowing circle of trust by including very different people, regardless of their influence, connections, and financial resources.

Educational projects include The Vartan Gregorian Scholarship (Research Grants) Program that supports early-career researchers of Armenian history in the 20th century and the Young Aurora Program intended to encourage student-driven projects offering sustainable solutions to humanitarian issues. The scholarships covered by Aurora allowed 62 students, all of them representatives of the at-risk and vulnerable youth, to study at the United World Colleges across the world, including Armenia (UWC in Dilijan), and the American University of Armenia. Individual scholarships include those named after Lamya Haji Bashar (given to Yazidi students), Amal Clooney (given to a female student from Lebanon

with a strong interest in human rights) and Charles Aznavour (awarded to students from France and Francophone countries). During the Aurora Dialogues, which are held in different countries and, of course, in Armenia, and bring together leading humanitarians, philanthropists, academics and journalists, a special platform is provided for young people to discuss humanitarian issues.

In addition to educational initiatives, Aurora supports programmes aimed at preserving Armenian heritage and history. In accordance with the Memory Act, the Aurora Grants support Armenia's national repository of ancient manuscripts, the Matenadaran, and the Armenian Genocide Museum-institute.

**What could be the added value you see in Human Rights Education for helping to prevent and resolve conflicts? How can international academic networks like ours in Venice (a city with a rich Armenian heritage and international reach) contribute to Aurora and their Laureates' humanitarian missions?**

Through our annual nomination process for the Aurora Prize, we have gathered over a hundred proven and verified stories of contemporary heroes – remarkable people who risk their lives, health and well-being every day to save others. These people are without question role models, and I believe it is extremely important to speak about as many of them as possible, especially to teenagers who are deciding on their path in life. After all, even in a profession as socially oriented as that of a doctor, there can be forks: you can become a successful and well-paid dentist (nothing wrong with that), or you can, like Dr Tom Catena, endure hardship and carry out your duty among people who have no one else to help them but you.

Our heroes and laureates did not know each other before the award, and I am glad that thanks to Aurora they were able to connect. They are very different, but what unites them is not their common country of origin, religion, organisation and so on, but the choice they have made to help people. As a co-founder of the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative I admire the laureates of the Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity, especially Marguerite Barankitse who saved thousands of children and provided aid to orphans and refugees affected by the civil war in Burundi and Dr Tom Catena, the only surgeon in the rebel-controlled territory in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, who has saved thousands of lives.

All our finalists and laureates are heroes. Most of them were unknown around the world before the award. That is why I believe that the important mission of Aurora is to make the whole world know about them. After all, everyone knows about Bin Laden, but very few know about Tom Catena or Marguerite Barankitse and the like. It is incredibly difficult to choose the winner of the Aurora Prize. Thank God it's not me, but the distinguished members of the Selection Committee – Nobel Laureates, former presidents, prominent political figures, highly respected humanitarians and well-known human rights activists.

I can see that academic institutions like the Global Campus for Human Rights in Venice can contribute to expanding and deepening the knowledge about these people, learning and analysing their experiences, identifying commonalities and patterns and promoting such role models in society.

**Could you give a personal message to the students, professors, partners and staff of the Global Campus of Human Rights?**

We have made great leaps in our technological development, but our ethical foundation is largely unchanged since the days of Plato and Aristotle. The world as a whole has come a long way in the fight against infant mortality, illiteracy, poverty and hunger, yet we see that many of the things that humanity has been trying to defeat for centuries still persist. Nevertheless, this is no reason to give up. Of course, evil is much more visible, but the people we have come to know through Aurora are many in the world, and this gives us the hope and strength to evolve.

For me, whose grandfather was rescued by a Turkish coachman and American missionaries during the

Genocide, Gratitude in Action is extremely important: it is not just gratitude – it is a need to continue the cycle of giving.

For more information contact our [Press Office](#)

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