

## Class of 1995 Summer Service Fund Report Tom Ledford – Baku, Azerbaijan



**A map showing the location of Baku**

Over the summer, with generous support from the Class of 1995 Service Fund, I was able to travel to Baku, Azerbaijan to work with the NGOs Ümid Sosial İnkişafa Dəstək İctimai Birliyi (Public Union for Social Development Support) alongside the NGO Hayat (Life).

I had initially planned to work primarily with youth whose families had been displaced during the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict during the early to mid 90's. Many of these youth have never even been to what they still call their hometowns, and instead have spent their whole entire lives in converted housing on the outskirts of Baku. Though the Azerbaijani government has done a lot to help assimilate these migrants, in comparison to non-migrant Azerbaijanis, IDP (internally displaced person) children do not perform as well in school and have trouble finding well-paying jobs. Much of the work Ümid does is vocational training in fields such as auto repair and hairdressing for example, so that the youth can go on to establish businesses and careers.

Another very important area for Ümid is assisting refugees from other countries who are residing in Azerbaijan awaiting placement in a third country. The majority of the refugees come from Afghanistan and Chechnya, many of whom have been in Azerbaijan for more than ten years, awaiting placement in countries such as the US, France, and Norway. The organization Umid shares an



*An apartment building housing IDPs in Baku*

office with the NGO Hayat in the northern reaches of Baku to serve the needs of the refugee community. Though the size of the refugee community, around two thousand, is quite small compared to the population of IDPs which is estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands, there needs are no less significant. The refugee support center provides Azerbaijani, Russian, and English language lessons free of charge, and has a computer center where technology courses were taught. The center is especially active in the summer, as school is no longer in session.

As the needs of Umid are always changing depending on what projects are active, I found out what position I would be working in upon my arrival in Baku. By chance, I happened to be living only 5 minutes from where the refugee support center was located, and that was a center that Umid identified as being in particular need of assistance. My main responsibility was to assist in the English language lessons, and organize English conversation hours for both the staff, who frequently need to communicate with UN representatives, and the refugees themselves, many of whom will one day be living in an English-speaking country. As much of the center's resources are spent on securing donations and providing more basic assistance, such as housing and food, the quality of English language instruction was quite low. There were no formal lessons for adults, and the lessons for children were taught by an Azerbaijani who spoke only very limited English herself.

As I was volunteering for four weeks, the staff and I decided that it would be best to focus on



*Two of my students*

informal conversation hours open to anyone (usually teenagers and older) who was available. As the general English level of the refugees was quite basic, we stuck to quite simple topics, and I also used the opportunity to review some grammar. Interestingly, English was often the only common language between Chechen refugees, who spoke fluent Russian and Chechen but only very little

Azerbaijani, and Afghan refugees, who spoke fluent Persian and Azerbaijani, but very little Russian. The Chechens and Afghans, despite spending hours and hours within the same building, interacted very little with each other. By participating in conversation hours, they were able to learn more about each other and their respective countries.

There was some observable tension between the Chechens and Afghans. The Afghans did not agree with the Chechens' strict interpretation of Islam, which reminds them of the doctrine of the Taliban government they escaped, whereas the Chechens saw some of the Afghans as too loose in regards to their religion. In one of my conversation hours, an argument broke out after I prompted a

conversation about music. I, as well as the Afghan refugees, had not realized that Chechens do not listen to music because they regard it as sinful. When Aida, a teenage Chechen girl, stated this, Hakima, a middle-aged Afghan woman, saw this as being disrespectful to her own understanding of Islam. This was a lesson for me in terms of choosing appropriate conversation topics, but at the end of the argument, I was pleased to see that Aida and Hakima were able to express their opinions to each other mostly in English.

By the end of my time volunteering at the refugee center, I felt that I made an impact not only by helping refugees and also the staff with their English, but by introducing a cultural of volunteerism to Azerbaijan. Umid was very helpful in setting me up at the refugee center, but I was surprised to see how they were unaccustomed to and frankly quite perplexed by the idea of someone coming from the United States to help others without compensation. There are very few volunteers who go to Azerbaijan, and any that do usually are involved in the Peace Corps.



While volunteering and altruism were very much at the core of Soviet ideology at least in theory, today Azerbaijan, and particularly Baku, has countered the Soviet ethos by embracing a model where everyone watches out for their themselves, but increasingly less for others. People I interacted with were very pleased to see that someone from as far away as America cared about a country that is under most people's radar, though most did not understand why I came to volunteer. I was thankful that I had the language skills to be able to convince them of the importance of volunteering and service. Many people I spoke to would also have wanted to travel abroad to volunteer, but did not have the resources to do so. Without the help of all the alumni who supported the 1995 Summer Service Fund, I would not have either. I could have chosen to go some place closer to home, but I think the 15 or so hours of flying was worth it. Not only could I visit and learn about this fascinating and unique country, but I felt that I in some part was able introduce the idea of service, a core value for me and the Princeton community at large, to a people who by and large seem to have forgotten its significance. I hope the 1995 Summer Service Fund continues to support a diversity of projects to spread the spirit of service in the summers to come, especially in the post-Soviet world.

My most sincere thanks again,  
Tom Ledford