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## *giving new immigrants* **A Boost**

By Christa Weber

**L**ong-time Forest Hills resident Sophia Kerbeykian made a career out of helping immigrants overcome the same stumbling blocks she faced when she came to the United States. For more than 20 years, she taught English as a Second Language (ESL) to students 17-years-old and up in a special program at LaGuardia Community College.

"When I came to America, there were no ESL classes," she said. "I was a student at a Catholic school and I just had to learn as I went."

Kerbeykian's family came to the United States from Iran in the summer of 1969, because her father, a banker, was transferred by his company. He worked for a few years and then the family applied for and was granted residency. Kerbeykian was only 13 years old at the time and didn't speak any English.

"The adjustment was very difficult for me," she said. "Kids had already made friends and when you're a newcomer and don't know the language, people look at you differently. It's very hard to live in a new country when you don't know the customs. You find yourself making mistakes."

But Kerbeykian considers herself lucky in that her teachers were always very helpful and tolerant of her difficulties with the language. Her father spoke English and her mother learned by taking adult education classes. Gradually, through middle school and high school, Kerbeykian learned to read, write and speak English. In 11th grade, everything clicked into place.

"I did it on my own with the help of my teachers, but they weren't trained in ESL and there weren't any programs like students have today," she said.



Sophie Kerbeykian dedicated much of her career to teaching English to other young immigrants because of her own experiences.

Though she initially missed Iran, school and new friends quickly took over. Her homesickness only lasted a year and a few years later, her family established a routine of visiting Iran.

After high school, she earned an undergraduate degree in English Literature from New York University and then continued with her schooling, earning a Master's degree in ESL education. According to Kerbeykian, her experience as an immigrant made her uniquely qualified to teach English to young immigrant students.

"When you learn a language on your own, like English for me, as an immigrant and as a teacher you know you have to be aware of where

these students are coming from," she said "If you haven't been there yourself, it's hard to understand it and be aware of what they go through."

At LaGuardia Community College, Kerbeykian taught an intensive 20-hour program for students who were not yet ready to take regular classes. When her students completed the course, they were prepared to take university classes or train for a career.

When students came to her with questions or confusions, she was able to approach the problem differently than a teacher who had never been in a similar situation. She was sensitive to the fact that English can be a very dif-

ficult language to learn and often doesn't make sense, particularly the spellings. For her, it was like a flashback. She was able to identify with her students and give them hints that she herself had used.

"As a teacher, you have to approach learning a language with not only what you learned in college," she said. "You have to incorporate the real life experiences with it. You can't teach it in isolation and I really felt like I was doing something very positive for the students in bringing my experience to teaching. I felt like I was helping them in a way that someone else might not be able to."

Though Kerbeykian loved teaching ESL, she

was only working part time, and when an opportunity to make a change came, she took it. Today, she is the principal of Holy Martyrs Armenian Day School in Bayside, which has students from Pre-Kindergarten through 6th grade. She supervises teachers in the classroom, deals with parents, organizes and goes to meeting after meeting.

"It's a long day by the time I get home because what I do is not just sitting in the office and organizing things," she said. "So far it's been very rewarding, but also a challenge. The teachers are talented and cooperative. I couldn't ask for anything better and I'm glad I made the switch."

In her role as principal, she has also had the opportunity to deal with students who have recently arrived in the country and don't know any English.

"It's amazing how fast they learn," she said. "I see the same trends I saw in myself but the younger kids are so resilient and learn so quickly."

Kerbeykian hasn't been back to Iran since 1977 and now, most of her family lives in the United States. Nonetheless, she is curious to see what her native country looks like and how life there has changed.

"It's one thing to read it in the paper and another thing to live it," she said. "It's interesting to go back to the places you once knew and to see the changes. I probably wouldn't even recognize the street we used to live on."

According to Kerbeykian, Queens is a wonderful place to live because of its diversity and because it has everything a person could imagine.

"I feel like I live in the UN," she said. "I basically grew up here and I have very fond memories and good feelings about Queens."

THE QUEENS COURIER/Photo by Robert Stridiron