



Characters

Seeds of Hope

Armenian villagers are reaping a better life with the help of British Columbia farmer Nick Kicey

BY BONNIE BAKER COWAN

It's a bone-chilling November afternoon in the village of Jrashen—population 4,000—in the Republic of Armenia. Squawking chickens skitter in and out of the two-storey structures that house livestock on the main floor and families above. Gas lines run above the ground, and the smells of propane and livestock mingle. Few houses have running water or indoor toilets.

As the light wanes, elderly women in long aprons walk down from barren hills, carrying baskets of greens for the evening meal. Younger women herd scrawny cattle. There is only one man—Nick Kicey, a 67-year-old berry farmer from Armstrong, B.C. He's a volunteer advisor with the Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO) who is here to help the women improve vegetable production.

Kicey—along with an interpreter—is in Jrashen at the invitation of ten local farming families who desperately need to improve their income. At present, most of the men must leave for six months of the year to work in Russia while the women and children subsist on what they can farm in Jrashen. For these families, Kicey, with his 47 years of farming experience and his gentle humility, is a saviour.

Tiny Armenia, a country of three million people on the eastern border of Turkey, is an ancient civilization that has lived under different foreign rule for much of its history. Most recently, it was the smallest of the Soviet republics. When it re-

gained its independence in 1991, the Russians departed, leaving vacant factories, crumbling roads and decrepit, 50-year-old farm implements.

This 16-day assignment to Jrashen is Kicey's third trip to Armenia, and he's barely made a dent in the problems. "Improvements take a year or two to realize," he says. "The people have no source of fresh seeds, no access to new varieties."

When Kicey joined CESO in 1999, the farthest he had travelled was to Toronto. And he felt intimidated by the word *executive* in the organization's title: "I'm just a farmer with a Grade 11 education," he says.

But Patrick Lohier, former public-engagement officer of CESO, sees it differently: "He has a deep agricultural knowledge. He's made a formidable impact with a great deal of humility."

Kicey purchased his first farm at age 20. "Land was cheap," he admits, "and I didn't go in for cars and girls." Instead, he went in for hard work, building a dairy from scratch and milking 55 cows a day for 17 years.

His farm location and crop have undergone several incarnations, but his love of farming has never wavered.

Eventually, he thought he might like to share that passion with like-minded but less-fortunate farmers, and a friend suggested CESO. Kicey's wife, Ida, remembers the moment in church 27 years ago

when she realized the depth of his commitment. “We were singing a hymn and the words were, ‘I’ll go where you want me to go.’ I looked over, and he had tears in his eyes,” she recalls.”

His first assignment was in an Aboriginal community in British Columbia, followed by one in Estonia. But it was his assignment to Gyumri, Armenia, in 2003 that hooked him by the heart. His task was to help farmers develop a business plan for raising vegetables, grain and livestock.

Arriving with seeds, and with a precision seeder and cyclone seeder in a sports bag, he was housed with a family that had been devastated by the 1988 earthquake that killed 25,000 people. And his hosts had been without running water and power for four years. “They treated me like family, took me on picnics,” Kicey remembers.

It was then that the gap between the poverty in Armenia and the privileges in Canada began to haunt him. “If a handle on one of my tools breaks, I buy a new one. But they carve a new handle from a piece of wood,” he says. “So when I returned from Jrashen, I couldn’t see myself buying gifts for my grandchildren,” says the father of six and grandfather of eight.

Kicey is always wishing he could do more. “I would like to donate the tools I have here, but you can’t just ship tools over. They disappear,” he

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explains. “All they had to hock when I arrived in Gyumri was a bit of jewellery.” Instead, he has given money, which they’ve used for computers and a washing machine. He has also given away his good workboots and even his reading glasses. The man who received the glasses exclaimed gratefully, “I can see, I can see!”

“It takes its toll,” Ida, 61, says. “When he comes back, it takes four weeks before his feet are on the ground again. The culture shock is here, our consumerism.”

When those in Armenia first heard about the Canadian farmer, they were skeptical. “I was concerned he could not adjust,” admits Artur Ghazaryan, the CESO representative based in Yerevan, the capital, “but he amazed me.”

Ghazaryan remembers escorting

Kicey on his second visit, in March 2004, to a village near the Azerbaijan border. When they arrived at 4 a.m., there was only a hot plate heating the host’s house. “Nick didn’t mind. He just slept in his coat and toque that night,” he recalls.

On his most recent visit, Kicey brought fresh seed potatoes—essential to Armenia’s food security as the second-most-important staple, after wheat. He advised the women on how to farm their potatoes to increase their profits.

“The people in Jrashen were crying when he left,” Ghazaryan says. “Now, they are selling potatoes. And thanks to Nick’s advice, they have confidence.”

That confidence is evident at their roadside stalls as they proudly hold up their plump, blemish-free vegetables. “One should feel blessed to know Nick Kicey,” Ghazaryan concludes.

These days, Nick is busy planting strawberries from Nova Scotia on his B.C. farm during the warm months and hoping for another assignment to help the Armenian farmers. “I’ve learned so much from them,” he says. “I am the one who feels blessed.”

ASSET ALLOCATION

At the dinner table one evening, our family was discussing investment possibilities. My wife said she was interested in buying some Wal-Mart stock. When our third grader asked what “shares of stock” are, we explained we would own a part of the company.

His suggestion: “Be sure to get the toy aisle.”

William Foulkrod