

UWC Dilijan College Presents Graduating Class of 2019 Ahead of Fifth Anniversary



UWC Dilijan College Class of 2019 (Photo: Raffi Elliott)

DILIJAN—On Saturday afternoon, more than 100 students hailing from 61 countries graduated from Dilijan College—forming the fourth cohort to graduate in the picturesque mountain town since its founding almost five years ago.

The cutting edge **institution** was established in 2014 to, as its mission statement reads, “make education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future.” The brainchild of billionaire banker and philanthropist Ruben Vardanyan, the College has been the linchpin of a vision to transform Dilijan, and indeed Armenia, into a global center for knowledge and education. The project to create Armenia’s first English-language International Baccalaureate program benefited from the **then-controversial** law to allow foreign language education in Armenia.

As the 14th member of the 17 member-strong United World Colleges (UWC) network of international preparatory schools, Dilijan College serves as a sort of spiritual successor to the historic Melkonian Institute which educated generations of Armenian Diaspora students in Cyprus for over 40 years. While encouraging enrollment from across the world, the College nonetheless reserves 20 seats for local Armenian students on scholarships. Students from the Armenian Diaspora are also enrolled in the program. Additionally, almost 80-percent of international students receive scholarships through the generosity of the College’s donors. Tuition costs up to \$75,000 for the two-year program.

At the convocation, first and second-year students, seated at opposite ends of the hall, burst into cheers, laughter and tears as a procession of their classmates delivered heartwarming speeches. Lilith van Amerongen from Germany told the audience that only in Dilijan could she sleep in a bunk next to Peru, brush her teeth next to Chile, have breakfast with Iran or study after classes with Nigeria, referring to her classmates' countries of origin.

American Anabele Davis teared up as she shared her experience on breaking down walls and learning to make friends with classmates from places she grew up knowing as 'hostile nations.'



President of the Board of Directors of the Free University of Brussels, Pierre Gurdjian (Photo: Raffi Elliott)

President of the Board of Directors of the Free University of Brussels Pierre Gurdjian left the graduating class with some wise advice: "You have the responsibility to make this world better. You will impact the world, but the world will also impact you," he said.



Veronika Zonabend, UWC Dilijan founding partner (Photo: Raffi Elliott)

Veronika Zonabend, the College's founding partner along with her husband Ruben Vardanyan, laid out her dream of turning Dilijan College into the core of a more comprehensive project for sustainable education. This project, in fact, is already underway. Two years ago, she **announced the effective launch** of the Dilijan Educational Cluster project in partnership with the Armenian Ministry of Education. Back then, Zonabend explained the concept was about "creating an educational environment that facilitates the development of the skills that children will need to succeed in a post-industrial society, and on the other, raises the level of professionalism within the educational sphere, attracting the best teachers into the profession."

Last to take the stage, College Headmaster Gabriel Ernesto Abad Fernandez called on the graduates to follow their dreams. "It has been a privilege for all of us to live and learn with you," said Fernandez to the graduating class of 104 students. "You have touched our lives, and you have had an impact on the College community, Dilijan and Armenia—the country that welcomed you, surprised you and that you now love. Thank you for becoming new ABCs: 'Armenians by Choice.'"

Also present at the ceremony were Bishop Bagrat Galstanyan of Tavush, IDEa Foundation CEO Rafi Baghdjian, Dilijan Mayor Armen Santrosyan and Tavush Governor Hayk Chobanyan.

At the reception following the convocation ceremony, Sarin Tashan from Istanbul shared her experiences at UWC Dilijan. "Representatives from the College visited us at Gentrnagan (Armenian high-school in Istanbul). Since I was looking for a challenge and had never been to Armenia, I decided to apply," she told the Armenian Weekly. Armenia was both fascinating and cathartic for her. She mentioned countless encounters with surprised locals who weren't aware that Armenians still existed in Turkey, but nevertheless, came to find a home in Armenia. She intends to continue her studies in Germany, where she wants to receive a PhD in forensic psychology.

Shushanik Hayriryanyan from Artsakh is equally determined. She applied to UWC Dilijan because she wanted a glimpse of cosmopolitanism. She felt it was her duty to represent Artsakh in the international collegiate community. She plans on taking a year off from her studies before pursuing a degree in oenology in France. In the long term, she wants to help develop Artsakh's burgeoning wine industry.

UWC Dilijan College will celebrate five years of operations this October. Currently, 218 students from around the world are enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program with 39 faculty members.

 **Bio**

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