

Collective Dilijan: The Gap Year You Wish You Had

NEW PROJECT INVITES YOUNG ADULTS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD TO ARMENIA



Dilijan Collective 2018 members on their balcony

Jeppe Strands is pretty ambitious for a 20 year old. The young Dane came to Armenia to study at United World College (UWC) in Dilijan when he was 18. He discovered what many others have before him—a place where ideas can form and personal projects can become reality.

After graduating from UWC, Strands was not quite ready to leave Armenia, and he certainly wasn't ready to move back to Denmark for university. One idea that did appeal to him about his homeland, however, was the højskole: a "folk school" where students lodge and learn, albeit without earning degrees. Students have the opportunity to pursue subjects that interest them without the pressure of a typical post-secondary structure. This usually happens during a gap year that many Danes take between high school and university. As Strands says, "In Denmark, everyone takes a gap year. There is a joke that Danish people take 'gap lives.'" Instead of backpacking as a tourist for a year, Strands' goal is to make deeper connections. "I feel like [so many people spend their gap years] traveling around the world, but it seems so fake, and you only see the superficial side to a place."

This is how Collective Dilijan came to be. A small group of participants from all over the world, between the ages of 18 and 21, share a home in Dilijan, and each participant works on personal projects while also volunteering in the local community. Strands describes Dilijan as a developing town. He says there used to only be one restaurant, but once the school opened many more businesses started. He said children are also learning English. But, he says it's still a "bubble."

Strands envisioned the Collective as a way for like minded young adults to grow and develop without being bound to traditional structures. "I'm very bad at institutions. I love school. I love the people in it, but performing and giving teachers what they want, following others' expectations and boundaries—my brain doesn't work with it," he says. "Every time a teacher has given me an assignment, I just end up writing something else that I find way more interesting."

As with any international project, however, there was the concern that Collective Dilijan would become a small bubble of Westerners in an exotic locale. Strands decided the best way to avoid this is by consciously cultivating relationships and fostering cooperation at every opportunity. That's why Collective Dilijan is partnering with the Dilijan Community Center and the Peace Corps, as well as more specialized programs uniquely centered around arts and music.

Strands has a wistful vision for the Collective. "I would like to create an international institution that actually has something to do with the city." Strands said he wants to conduct workshops, music nights, and poetry hours. "I know it can be a challenge because of language barriers, but it will be nice to settle down here where the neighbors know us. We'll eat dinner together...and have a fun, local experience. We want to be good neighbors."

"It will be nice to settle down here where the neighbors know us. We'll eat dinner together... and have a fun, local

While these ideas may sound a little too free spirited to some, Strands has received the advice and support of many influential figures, including former Armenian ambassador to Denmark Hrachya Aghajanyan and business leader and philanthropist Shant Hovnanian.

experience. We want to be good neighbors."

The Velvet Revolution has also influenced the formation of the Collective. Armenia is embracing a season of renewal and change, much like the young adults who will be shaping their adulthood at the Collective. Less metaphorically, this is the most interesting time to be in Armenia. Suddenly, people from all over the world are interested in what the country will become.

A dozen people have enrolled for the 2018/2019 school year. Elena Vedovello was the first to join Strands' project. A UWC Dilijan alumna, Vedovello hails from Italy and, like Strands, she also connected deeply with Armenia during her time at UWC. "When I speak Armenian, people ask me if I am Armenian, and I say no. But somehow I feel like I am in my heart," said Vedovello. "I have no Armenian blood, but I do feel the connection. Sometimes words come to me in Armenian before they come in Italian."

"I have no Armenian blood, but I do feel the connection. Sometimes words come to me in Armenian before they come in Italian."

Last year, Vedovello launched an environmental education project called Kanach Dilijan (Green Dilijan), for which she ended up receiving a scholarship. It was supposed to be her final year in Armenia, but she designed Kanach Dilijan as a six year plan. For Vedovello, combining Kanach Dilijan and Collective Dilijan was a natural union. Her project interposes environmental education into the primary school curriculum, by having trained volunteers visit classrooms twice a month to teach young students about ecology. The program includes storytelling, hands on projects, and field trips. It follows students from first to sixth grade.

Vedovello's project has already captivated Armenians. Elina Sargsyan, a UWC student active in Kanach Dilijan had this to say, "Kanach Dilijan is a great project for this city, as the mindset and the values of the younger generations are still to be developed. By teaching them sustainability from a younger age, they will pass it on from generation to generation. In a small country like Armenia from a small project like this, a global issue can be solved easily if there is awareness raised and actions taken."

Other projects are more personal. Many participants want to take the time to write books, while others want to pick up a new instrument and learn Armenian folk music. All participants want to volunteer and participate in the community with educational and environmental projects. Strands gets visibly excited when he talks about the group. "They are free-spirited, crazy, creative people who seem like they know exactly what they want."

Collective Dilijan is only in its first few weeks of operation; the group is excited about its future impact on the region. If you are interested in learning more about the project you can go to the [website](#) or follow Vedovello's [video blogs](#).



Latest Posts



Maya Adivi

Maya Adivi is an Israeli-born Torontonian who has been living in Armenia for the last two years. She has worked for many years in the beauty industry, as a writer, makeup artist, and cosmetologist, but she also has a keen interest in politics, sociology, and social change. If you manage to find her when she's not working, she'll probably be engaging in fierce debate or strumming her ukulele.