

Hundreds pack Fresno State for groundbreaking of Armenian Genocide Monument

By Rory Appleton



Hundreds gathered Sunday, Nov. 2, 2014, at Fresno State to break ground on the Armenian Genocide Monument, which is to be completed by the 100th anniversary of the genocide next April. RORY APPLETON — The Fresno Bee

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Hundreds of people packed a small outdoor ceremony at Fresno State to mark the start of construction of the Armenian Genocide Monument, which will be completed in time to mark next year's 100th anniversary of the genocide.

Leaders of the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church, Western Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America and Armenian Genocide Centennial Committee, Fresno joined local politicians, Fresno State leaders and throngs of community members at the event. The university set out 40 chairs, but a couple hundred spectators crammed around the site where the monument will be built.

Fresno State President Joseph I. Castro spoke for the university.



“Our primary mission (at Fresno State) is education, which is also at the core of this project,” Castro said. “We’ve had a rich history of involvement by Armenian students, faculty, alumni and friends — we wouldn’t be a great university without them.”

The primary message of the event was the importance of spreading awareness of the Armenian Genocide, which Fresno State Armenian Studies Coordinator Barlow Der Mugrdechian said killed as many as 1.5 million Armenians from 1915 to 1923. Der Mugrdechian said that on April 24, 1915, the Ottoman Turkish government began arresting and executing hundreds of Armenian religious, academic and political leaders.

The stone-and-concrete monument will be dedicated on April 24, the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the genocide. It was designed by local architect Paul Halajian and will consist of nine pillars representing the six provinces of historic Armenia, Cilicia, the Diaspora and the Republic of Armenia. An incomplete halo will rest on top of the pillars, which is meant to symbolize both the damage left by the genocide and the unity of the Armenian people. It will be the first such monument marking the genocide on a U.S. college campus.

It will be located on the Maple Mall walkway just south of the Satellite Student Union on Fresno State’s campus. Fresno State Vice President for Administration Cynthia Teniente-Matson said this prime location will allow every single Fresno State student to see and learn from the monument.

After the leaders addressed the public, bishops from the Armenian Church and local religious leaders performed a spirited ceremony, in English and Armenian, to bless soil taken from the Republic of Armenia.

Two Charlie Keyan Armenian Community School students, 11-year-old Zareh Apkarian and 10-year-old Sevana Vassilian, carried the blessed soil to the groundbreaking point, where they poured it in with the native earth. The soil is meant to represent Armenia on the Fresno State campus.

Levon Minasyan, a representative from the Armenian Consulate in Los Angeles, offered his gratitude to Fresno State and the local Armenian community.

“The establishment of this monument in Fresno on the threshold of the centennial of the Armenian genocide is evidence of the Fresno Armenian community’s important role in Armenian-American life,” Minasyan said.

Minasyan went on to say that the international recognition and condemnation of the first genocide of the 20th century has been a top priority of Armenian foreign policy for almost two decades. Minasyan told the crowd that, although many states and nations have officially recognized the genocide, this work will continue.

The recognition of the genocide was a central theme of the event, with many of the speakers making reference to those massacred and the lack of recognition of the genocide from countries such as Turkey and the United States. Among the speakers were Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, and Assembly Member Jim Patterson, R-Fresno.

Members of the Armenian Genocide Centennial Committee, Fresno were recognized during the ceremony for what Der Mugrdechian called their tireless efforts over the past year to find a way to honor the 100th anniversary of the genocide.

The committee is an umbrella association made up of members from the Valley’s religious, educational, social and political organizations.

Castro said the monument will be one of only about 30 Armenian Genocide monuments in the United States.

Der Mugrdechian hopes the monument will help heal the wounds of the genocide while also spreading a message.

“We are witnessing a new period in our history,” Der Mugrdechian said. “This will be a visual monument to show our spirit.”

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