

Coach Jerry Tarkanian's Armenian heritage remembered in Fresno

By Carmen George



Fresno State head basketball coach Jerry Tarkanian with Fresno State President John Welty.

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Few Armenian events in Fresno were held without mention of Jerry Tarkanian.

Raffles and silent auctions hosted by the community regularly featured property owned or signed by the iconic basketball coach — even more than a decade after his retirement from Fresno State, said Rev. Ara Guekguezian of Fresno's Pilgrim Armenian Congregational Church.

"He was one of Fresno's stars and one of the big stars of the Armenian community," Guekguezian said. "We loved seeing him."

In the wake of Tarkanian's death Wednesday at the age of 84, Guekguezian said Fresno Armenians are recalling the coach's life with pride — many talking about his influence on the building of the Save Mart Center.

“For a guy who hasn’t coached here for a while, it’s amazing his abiding presence here,” Guekguezian said. “That speaks a lot to his legacy. It’s been an enduring influence on Fresno and Fresno State in a very positive way.”

The Naismith Hall of Fame inductee was even better known for his years at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where his 1990 team captured the NCAA Championship.

Tarkanian’s popularity extended overseas. During a 2006 trip to Armenia — the homeland of his immigrant parents — Guekguezian recalled how Tarkanian was stopped dozens of times on the streets by strangers asking for photos and autographs.

Guekguezian, who journeys to Armenia every year, led the weeklong trip that Tarkanian went on. Then in his 70s, it was the only time Tarkanian would visit the country.

It was a significant pilgrimage for the Ohio-born Tarkanian, whose parents escaped from Turkey during the 1915-22 genocide in which 1.5 million people were killed by the Ottoman government.

The Armenian Genocide memorial complex in Yerevan was an emotional stop for Tarkanian.

“He was there not just as a man in his mid-70s but as a man who was there with his son and grandson,” Guekguezian recalled. “The future was there in front of him while knowing that there was an attempt by people he didn’t even know to wipe his people off the face of this earth.”

In autobiographies, Tarkanian described how his grandfather, a government official, was beheaded by Turkish militia after being forced to watch his oldest son beheaded.

The group of about 20 people, including some of Tarkanian’s friends, later enjoyed a performance by elementary school students who sang songs describing the history of the Armenian people. Tarkanian loved it — so much that he “kept throwing money at the school principal,” Guekguezian said. Others in the group followed suit and together they donated a couple thousand dollars to the school.

Another highlight for Tarkanian: Meeting the coach of the national Armenian basketball team. Guekguezian acted as translator between the men, but most of the time, his services weren’t needed. They communicated happily through drawings of basketball plays on scraps of paper. Guekguezian said both coaches stressed the importance of good defense.

That thinking served Tarkanian well over the years, and his success bolstered Fresno State and UNLV, Guekguezian said, bringing the universities “light, energy and money.”

“That’s quite a legacy to have as a human being. ... I’m proud to have known the guy.”

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