

# Meet the Neighbor



Just as a fish needs water, Armena needs to be part of the non-profit sector. Helping others is essential to her being, not only because it has been her calling from a very early age, but because of event in her life that have placed her in that world.

Armena was born in Armenia and came of age in her native country during the aftermath of a deadly earthquake in 1988 that killed 45,000 people in a matter of seconds. The devastating quake fell in the shadows of the demise of the former Soviet Union, and the events have shaped her character, which is a woman of compassion, vision and action. "I was immersed in the nonprofit world when I was 13 years old and have been in it since," Armena said. "My aunt and mentor launched the first nonprofit in Armenia with my uncle right after the quake. I was watching and helping them, so I guess I was one of the first pioneers, too." By the time she was 18 she had already been a volunteer for five years. When she was old enough to work, she became a part-time employee of the same nonprofit, while studying full-time for her Bachelor's degree, although during that time, life was far from easy for Armena. "We went through such cold winters, had very limited food and electricity, no heat or air conditioning and extremely limited cold water. Hot water was non-existent." In her youth, she stood in long lines for hours with her family outside of the local bakery to buy bread." They would cut the bread into appropriate pieces based on the number of people in the household," she recalled. "Then I would go off to school."

Determined to become a strong professional, Armena taught herself to speak English. "I was reading the English-American and Armenian-English dictionaries thousands of times for nearly a year straight and listening to the same American radio channel each night to learn how Americans pronounce the words." Today, she is the Executive Director of Lutheran Social Services of Nevada (LSSN) and has held the position for the past eight years. In her role she has worked to expand nutrition, social, homeless prevention, employment and wrap around case management services in the community. Under Armena's dedicated leadership, Lutheran Social Services of Nevada has provided more than three million pounds of perishable and non-perishable food, nutrition education, homeless prevention, rapid rehousing and employment support to tens of thousands of people in need. "I'm very proud of the fact that we are the first organization in our area that will be launching a digital food pantry," she said. "A person will shop for fresh produce, meats, dairy and non-perishable food items in our pantry for free by using a touch screen computer. Each family will be assigned a point system based on the size of the household and by each item chosen so points will be subtracted from the family's account. Groceries will be packed by LSSN staff and volunteers. Seniors will continue to use our current grocery style pantry but the introduction of the digital food pantry is a huge improvement for our inventory system and the efficiency of our operations. It will also reduce wait times for our families."

When asked if there could possibly be any other occupation or career she would pursue outside of the nonprofit sector, she replied, "Writer," although she's already accomplished that too. She is the author of two children's books and numerous articles, poems and novels, and is a translator of four books using her fluency in Armenian, Russian and English.

At the end of each day, the devoted wife and mother of two sons thanks God for another beautiful day. "If I have put my heart, mind and thoughts into making a difference, a real difference in helping others, then I have fulfilled my calling."

*Recent interview from Zip Codes Magazine with Armena Mnatsakanyan, Executive Director of Lutheran Social Services of Nevada (July/August 2016)*

**Armena Mnatsakanyan**