



Dr. Noubar Afeyan (Leo Gozbekian photo)

## Making Immigration Great Again at Tribute to Afeyan

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By **Alin K. Gregorian**

BOSTON — Immigrants and their unique and vital contributions to the success of the US economy since the nation's founding were the dominant themes of a program paying tribute to Dr. Noubar Afeyan, biotech innovator and philanthropist, on Wednesday, September 18, at the InterContinental Hotel.

The program also was a fundraiser for the maintenance of Boston's Armenian Heritage Park on the Greenway and it did not disappoint; the roughly 500 people gathered there raised \$700,000.

Throughout the evening, the phrase “coming together on common ground” was stressed. The immigrant theme goes to the heart of the park, which has become a gathering place not only for Armenian commemorations, but also the site of the annual welcome reception for new US citizens who are sworn in at nearby Faneuil Hall, as well as other creative programs.



From left, Raffi Afeyan; Taleen Afeyan; Anna Afeyan, Noubar Afeyan, Alex Afeyan. (Leo Gozbekian photo)

In his remarks, honoree Afeyan singled out for praise his Swedish-born wife, Anna, his partner in his philanthropic endeavors, and expressed his hopes for his four children.

“My kids are descendants of an Armenian father and a Swedish mother. They are 100 percent Armenian, 100 percent Swedish and 100 percent American,” he said.

A special guest at the program was Dr. Vartan Gregorian, the president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Afeyan’s partner at the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative, as well as an immigrant himself. Gregorian is the former president of Brown University as well as the New York Public Library.

Afeyan noted that he was especially delighted to have Gregorian there. “There is really no word to describe what he is. He serves as a role model and mentor to me. I look up to him even though he is half my size,” he said, eliciting chuckles. “I bow to his heart, his mind and to his legacy.”

Afeyan, the founder and CEO of Flagship Pioneering, one of the Boston area’s biggest venture capital firms specializing in biotech and life sciences, said that his phenomenal success had its roots in his immigrant experience, adding that it was no surprise so many innovators are immigrants.

“The immigration experience includes hope, optimism, fear, uncertainty, struggle, leaving, adaptation, courage and above all, the feeling of being uprooted and being rootless,” he said.

“What is good about immigrants is that they are the ultimate founders; they are the founders of a new life. That is a huge, huge advantage.

“They are innovators,” he added.

“That is why the city has progressed. Thousands of firms in this country’s history have been founded by immigrants,” he said.

“When you are uprooted and unrooted, it is a very different feeling,” leading to survival and revival.

During his talk he asked the first-, second- or third-generation immigrants in the audience to rise. “That is 99 percent of the room standing,” he said. “To the rest of you, thanks for welcoming us.”

Afeyan also spoke at length about the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative that he, Gregorian and Russian-Armenian entrepreneur Dr. Ruben Vardanyan had founded four years ago, and its mission to express gratitude for the help Armenians received in their darkest hours.

“We need to leverage what we have gone through to help other people,” he said. “We find heroes that are helping people. It follows the works that exactly caused us to be saved. These are folks that come from Myanmar, Burundi, South Sudan. It is the notion of gratitude in action.”

Gratitude, he said, is the ultimate “renewable resource,” infecting giver and receiver positively.

He also noted the organization's #AraratChallenge, a global crowdfunding campaign aimed at supporting those in urgent need of basic humanitarian aid around the world.

Afeyan was born in Beirut and his family later moved to Montreal, Canada. He did his undergraduate work at McGill University and completed his PhD in biochemical engineering in MIT. He received the Golden Door Award in 2017 from the International Institute of New England in recognition of his contribution to the US as a foreign-born American.



James Kalustian, Founding President, Armenian Heritage Foundation; Board Chair, Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy with Cindy Fitzgibbon, emcee (Leo Gozbekian photo)

### **Bringing People Together**

The program featured as emcee WCVB's Cindy Fitzgibbon. The Maine-born and respected longtime meteorologist on Boston area television stations, praised the park as a "really welcoming place for all people."

Representing the city of Boston was Marty Hernandez, head of the Mayor's Office of Health and Human Services. He thanked the organizers on behalf of Mayor Martin J. Walsh, adding, "We thank you for bringing the park to us and keeping it. The park symbolizes our diversity. Boston is a city built by immigrants."





Marty Martinez (Leo Gozbekian photo)

He also said that according to the most recent statistics, 29 percent of the population of the city is foreign born. He added that the newcomers bring in hundreds of millions of dollars in taxes to the city and state.

He called the park as a “community partner” for the city, one which gives an arena to immigrants to “tell their stories.”

Hernandez and many of the other speakers stressed that in the current anti-immigrant mood, it was important to hold just such a program and discuss the “common purpose and shared values” of all people.

Hernandez added: “I am proud of what this country has become. My grandparents came to this county and [so did] my mother. They set us up on the path to success. I am the first generation in my family to go to college. We should tell that story, especially now.”

It was a message reiterated by Dr. Avak Kahvejian of Flagship Pioneering, who was chair of the benefit. Kahvejian introduced and recognized the representatives of the five different organizations serving immigrants and refugees: The greater Boston Immigrant Defense Fund; International Institute of New England; Irish International Immigrant Center; Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition and Refugepoint.

Kahvejian serves on the board of the International Institute of New England.

The representatives, when singled out, received thunderous applause.

Afeyan added his praise to the organizations that were recognized for their work and especially the timing of the recognition “at a time they are very much needed.”

“I congratulate them and thank them for being here,” he said.



Dr. Avak Kahvejian (Leo Gozbekian photo)

### **Focusing on the Park**

In her opening comments, Barbara Tellalian, a tireless fundraiser for the park and the wife of it's designer, architect Donald Tellalian, said the park — as well as the evening — “was dedicated to what connects us, celebrating the American immigrant experience.”

Next, Armenian Heritage Foundation President James Kalustian brought a congratulatory message from Gov. Charlie Baker. (Baker and Walsh, as well as Middlesex County Sheriff Peter Koutoujian were honorary chairs of the banquet.)

He praised the park on three levels: It is a beautiful public space, a park rich in symbolism and a place that celebrates the immigrant experience.

It shows that life, hope and opportunity triumph over tragedy and despair, he said.

“Noubar, like so many immigrants who survived the Armenian Genocide and their descendants triumphed [over tragedy] and the world is a far better place for the contributions of our honoree,” Kalustian said.

He praised Afeyan and his family for giving back to the community. In honor of their donations to the park, he presented Afeyan with a miniature version of the split rhomboid dodecahedron abstract sculpture that is the centerpiece of the park. (Each year the two halves of the sculpture are pried apart and reconfigured in a new way, to symbolize leaving the past and creating a new life.)

The park was opened on May 22, 2012 with a celebration that included then Gov. Deval Patrick and an official delegation from Armenia.



Celebrating! Park's Newest Benefactors – Megan (third from left) and Ron (2nd from right) Hovsepian with their family with Noubar Afeyan. (Leo Gozbekian photo)

The park is a unique collaboration between the state and a private group, the Armenian Heritage Foundation, which has created the park and is tasked with maintaining it. A total of \$3 million has been deemed necessary by the foundation for the maintenance to go on in perpetuity; of that total, \$2.1 million has been raised thus far.

Several political leaders were present at the program, including Middlesex County District Attorney Marian T. Ryan, Koutoujian, former Registry of Motor Vehicles head and Secretary of Labor Rachel Kaprielian and California State Assembly Member Adrin Nazarian.

Short films were shown about the park and the evening's honoree.

At the conclusion of the event, Afeyan said, "I am happy that the occasion brought this many people out to support the Armenian Heritage Park."