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Lobbyist helps protect rights of welfare recipients

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When Kevin Aslanian first became involved in welfare issues, he was working at a string of menial jobs, had only recently learned to speak English, was on welfare himself, and was angry with then-Gov. Ronald Reagan for pushing welfare reform.

"I thought it quite unjust that Reagan did not pay taxes but received subsidies, and he was complaining about poor people receiving money to house and feed their children. That prompted me into getting involved with welfare rights," said Aslanian, the son of Communist parents, a former resident of the Soviet Union and now the lobbyist for the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations.

A Daily Recorder Profile

That was in 1971 and Aslanian, then 28 and a San Jose resident, joined other welfare recipients and founded the Welfare Recipients League.

"We needed to protect ourselves from constantly being abused by the county welfare department, who seemed to have the notion that you're guilty until proven innocent," he said. "The theory was that if we stood together, we might diminish the amount of abuse recipients were subjected to."

ASLANIAN, who taught himself welfare law and never attended college, worked with the league for eight years, eventually founding the welfare rights coalition to lobby the Legislature on behalf of welfare recipients.

The coalition, comprised of local welfare groups statewide, only began receiving funding two years ago. Aslanian came on staff in July to work part-time directly assisting the needy, and part-time as a lobbyist. The coalition also employs one full-time attorney and operates on a yearly budget of \$100,000 from foundation grants and private contributions.

Aslanian, now 43, says he has lived most of his life as a poor person. When he was six, Aslanian's parents emigrated with their three children from the United States to the Soviet Union and experienced extreme poverty.

"Five of us lived in two rooms with no shower, no bath, no hot water and no kitchen. We would eat potatoes three times a day, sometimes," he recalled.

His parents had thought of Russia as a

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"heaven on earth" said Aslanian. They had both been members of the Communist Party in the 1930s, and although they later dropped out, "they still believed in the propaganda that Russia was a paradise. At that time, Russia was the place to be for progressives."

Aslanian's parents decided to move to Russia at the start of the McCarthy "Red-baiting" era. "They moved there not for themselves, but because they wanted to raise their children in a better society," he said.

The Aslanians found out they were wrong about Russia, but could not emigrate back under the reign of Stalin. They remained in Russia for 14 years, until Kevin was 20. Aslanian was working as the light man for a movie theatre at the time.

Aslanian cited a joke as an example of their situation: "One Russian asks another Russian 'what would you do if they opened up the borders?' The man answers, 'I would climb a tree to avoid being stamped.'

Everyone in the Soviet Union wanted to come to America, he said.

BUT IN MOVING back to America, Aslanian was amazed to find the same level of poverty existed here.

"I never thought that similar situations would occur in this country, and yet I know of 10 people living in two rooms, two AFDC (welfare program) families who can't afford the rent on their own.

"It is so common here in the land of milk and honey," he said, adding that Russians would not believe that sort of poverty exists here.

Aslanian was destitute upon his return, did not understand English and possessed few skills. He enrolled in San Jose City College to learn English, and speaks eloquently now, although with a heavy accent.

Growing up in Russia has made him very non-materialistic, said Aslanian.

"I have no need to keep up with the Joneses. I don't care."

Owning a car in Russia would be unthinkable for the common man, he said. The average wage is 120 rubles a month, and a car is about 5,000 rubles. "You don't think about having a car there. Now I have a TV, a house and a car; that's heaven. What else do I need?"

Aslanian, who currently earns \$20,000 a year, said his wife, Diane, is occasionally frustrated by his non-materialism. "She grew up here," he explained jokingly.

He has been married to Diane for 15 years. They have three children. Karena, the eldest, is 15, Seda is 13, and David is 11. When he was beginning his career as a lobbyist for California Rural Legal Assistance in San Francisco, Aslanian recalled bringing his children to Sacramento with him for an adventure. "I would put them in an empty committee room, and they would sleep, and I would take off to do my work."

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Aslanian worked with California Rural Legal Assistance, a federally-funded but state-administered legal aid program, from 1979 until this year, lobbying for welfare and food stamp recipients.

Between his work with the Welfare Recipients League, the CRLA and the coalition, Aslanian said he knows the welfare system better than those who administer the programs. "You have to,

Aslanian said he is frustrated because people don't really understand poverty and have many misconceptions about the poor.

otherwise they'll try to get you with a loophole."

Aslanian said he spends most of his time helping the needy get through the welfare system.

"YOU HAVE to keep in touch with the people you represent," he said. "It makes me remember when I'm lobbying that I just spoke to a woman this morning who can't pay the rent this month because she was cut off (of welfare) for not showing up to an appointment. For me, it makes it more

real, rather than an abstract concept."

Aslanian said he is frustrated because people don't really understand poverty and have many misconceptions about the poor. Poverty is a systemic problem, he said. It benefits a capitalistic society to have a percentage of people unemployed; "with full employment, you have an overproduction of goods ... the economy falls apart. Some people have to be poor, and should be taken care of.

"There is this notion that you have huge families on welfare for years and years, when actually, the average length of stay on welfare is about two years. In most cases, it is a single mother with one or two children," he said.

A big defeat for Aslanian was the recent passage of the state workfare program for welfare recipients. The welfare rights coalition was one of the few groups to oppose the popular bill.

Working for your dole is not a new concept, said Aslanian. There were workhouses in the 16th century. He says workfare is a punishment for being poor.

"SOCIETY HAS decided that mothers with children are the undeserving poor," Aslanian said. "The day will come when seniors or the disabled will be seen as the undeserving poor. They're definitely next."

Aslanian, who is 43, envisions his future as working for the coalition until he retires, but says that in a better world he wouldn't have to work on welfare issues at all.

"There should be no need for organizations like ours," Aslanian said. "That there are is proof that the current welfare system doesn't work for those that need it."