



Retired businessman Papken Der Torossian founded Bay Shore Lyric Opera Company and owns Capitola Theatre.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

SENTINEL PROFILE

'Pop' goes the distance to support community

Philanthropist champions Capitola

By **ROBYN MOORMEISTER**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Papken Der Torossian, the man responsible for the small community theater in Capitola Village, is living proof the American dream isn't an empty myth — it's embodied in the generous, jovial businessman everyone calls "Pop."

"This country has been good to me ... it truly is the land of opportunity," said the

62-year-old Syrian-born millionaire and philanthropist, sipping his second cup of coffee in the lobby of the Capitola Theatre.

He should know he has it pretty good — not only because he can afford to buy his own show house and enjoys traveling whenever he likes, but because he's seen his share of corruption in his home coun-

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try and embraces his so-called American freedom with an uncanny optimism.

Retired in Saratoga and visiting his townhouse in Capitola every weekend, Der Torossian goes out of his way, or so it seems, to share his blessings with others and show them a respect he wasn't always given.

"People have stolen my money and treated me bad, but I do think that if somebody poops on you, you just take a shower," he said in his thick Syrian accent. "You always must treat people with dignity."

Now, as Syria's politics move into the American limelight following war in neighboring Iraq, Der Torossian thanks his lucky stars that his struggle half way across the globe brought him where he is today.

He holds a bachelor's degree in engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a master's from Stanford University and he's sent four children to college. He tours around Europe enjoying art, sipping expensive wine and taking in lavish opera productions.

And then, of course, there's the Bay Shore Lyric Opera Company, the nonprofit he and his wife founded in 1996 after purchasing and renovating the Capitola Movie Theatre and transforming it into a place for local artists to flex their creative muscles.

But Der Torossian's charmed life hasn't come easy.

He was born to an Orthodox Armenian family in Latakai, a small town in Northern Syria. He left home at 16 to attend an American Presbyterian boarding school, a place he credits for his positive world view and strong faith in God.

Meanwhile, the Ba'ath Party — the party of recently-ousted Iraqi president Sadaam Hussein — was collaborating with communist groups to topple the Syrian government.

Der Torossian speaks of battling factions of government, military and political parties that lie, cheat and imprison each other in the name of ideology and religion.

"People rationalize their actions, but you know what they say," Der Torossian said, shaking his head. "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Growing up, he wanted to be an engineer, while his parents wanted him to go into law or medicine.

"I wanted to build things," Der Torossian said. "I couldn't stand the sight of blood and I don't think lawyers really contribute anything of value to the world."

The Syrian government offered to pay for his college education in exchange for military service, but his father wouldn't allow it; he didn't want his son indebted to the regime.

To his father's joy, Der Torossian was awarded a scholarship to MIT instead, and got out of Syria just in time.

Shortly after his departure, he said, the military kidnapped, tortured and imprisoned his father for seven months because he was a communist.

Der Torossian said his father was actually the head of an anti-Communist group.

"I received letters from him



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Papken Der Torossian is responsible for small community theater in Capitola.

Papken 'Pop' Der Torossian

AGE: 62.

HOME: Saratoga.

FAMILY: Wife Claire, 43, and four children Greg Der Torossian, 40, Tina Hawley, 37, Jill Fries 35 and Jennifer Constantino, 32.

OCCUPATION: Retired engineer, business consultant, philanthropist.

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree from MIT; M.S.M.E degree from Stanford.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: received the "Ellis Island Medal of Honor" in 1995, founded Bay Shore Lyric Opera Company, owner of Capitola Theatre.

HOBBIES: Traveling and going to art shows, movies and dancing with wife Claire.

LAST BOOK READ: "A Peace to End All Peace" by David Fromkin.

while I was at school," Der Torossian said, his infectious smile fading. "They were always edited (by his jailers)."

He said his father eventually bribed his way out of prison and fled to Beirut. As soon as Der Torossian earned enough money in the United States as an engineer, he moved his family to America.

He's hasn't returned to Syria since.

"A lot of people don't understand how nice they have it here (in America)," Der Torossian said. "For those who don't like it here I say go live over there (in Syria) and see how it is."

"You cannot bribe the American government," he continued.

"To a large degree the American government is not corrupt. We have a free press, and there are no secret caucuses."

He supported the Bush administration's recent military action in Iraq, and he believes the invasion will only end up benefiting the Iraqi people.

At the same time, he is wary of a government with too much power.

"Sept. 11 really shook us up," Der Torossian said. "But I hope we don't go overboard with all of this security. There is no excuse to infringe on people's rights by changing laws. If we do that, the terrorists have succeeded."

A better life

Der Torossian arrived in America shortly after his 18th birthday with nothing but a suitcase and a cashier's check for \$300 from his father.

His academic scholarship wasn't enough to live on, so he worked as a librarian at the MIT library while he went to school.

He met his wife Claire at an MIT party in 1958. She was a student of fine arts. They were married two years later.

He went on to graduate school at Stanford, then worked his way up through the ranks at several electronics companies in Silicon Valley: He spent four years at Spectra-Physics and 12 years with Hewlett-Packard in various management positions.

He went on to become president of ECS Microsystems, an electrical engineering company that facilitates research and develop-

ment of communications technology and then president of the Santa Cruz division of Plantronics Inc., the world's leading designer and manufacturer of telephone headsets.

But even though he seems proud of his success in business, he doesn't want it to be his identity.

"When I die, I want people to say, 'He really added value to the world,'" he said. "I want people to remember 'whoever he came in contact with, he helped,' or 'I learned something positive from him.' Not 'he made lots of money.'"

Der Torossian is already being honored for his life achievements.

He received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor in 1995 from The National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations Inc. The award honors immigrants that have shown excellence as a U.S. citizen.

Der Torossian is supposedly retired now, but he serves on six charitable arts and religious boards including the National Conference of Christians and Jews, runs his own consulting business and is chair of the board of Therma Wave, a semiconductor enhancement company.

His friends and beneficiaries call him "Pop," fitting for this round man with deep pockets and a soft spot for just about every cause, especially the arts.

"You know what Carnegie said," Der Torossian said. "You have to spend the first part of your life making money and the second half giving it away. You have to give it away."

"You never see a hearse towing money, now do you?"

Der Torossian confirmed that he is currently worth more than \$3 million (\$10 million before the latest stock market crash) and that he has given away about \$5 million over the years.

He's put more than \$1 million into the Bay Shore Lyric Opera Company, and donated about the same amount to MIT for a computer lab.

A fan of education, he gives regularly to Stanford and UC Santa Cruz as well.

He has also bought houses for people, including construction worker Jim Santos of San Jose.

"Papken is a great guy," Santos said. "He's a saint in my opinion, just one of the nicest people I've ever met."

Santos was assisting with a construction project for Silicon Valley Group in 1988 when he met Der Torossian, who was then CEO.

The two struck up a casual friendship at work, and when Der Torossian needed someone to build a house for his mother, he called Santos.

Der Torossian lent Santos money for a down payment on a house that Santos was going to fix up, sell and share profits with Der Torossian. But in the meantime, Santos'

family moved in and Der Torossian said they could stay.

"He told me to just go ahead and take the house," Santos said. "His generosity is constant."

A young couple and a priest from Der Torossian's church also have "Pop" to thank for their homes.

"Some people pay me back and some don't," Der Torossian said. "I don't expect it."

His generosity makes his wife a little nervous.

"I'm sure he hasn't told me about a lot of the money he's donated," Mrs. Der Torossian said. "But I know he has given away a lot."

Der Torossian admits he might very well be broke if it wasn't for his wife vigilantly watching his back and monitoring his donations.

"I married a saint," Mrs. Der Torossian said, standing outside the Capitola Theatre in purple sunglasses and a black trench coat, tearing up between drags from her cigarette.

"Of course I'm biased, but he's given so much to this community. Sometimes I feel like he isn't appreciated."

Appreciating the arts

Der Torossian learned to play classical violin when he was nine years old. He had to give it up when he went to boarding school, but he never lost his appreciation for music.

"I think his love of the arts is part of what drew him to me," Mrs. Der Torossian said.

His favorite opera is "Madame Butterfly," and he admits to crying when Butterfly gives up her son and commits suicide.

"You wouldn't be human if you didn't (cry)," he said.

His daughter Jennifer is a concert soprano and has appeared in several of the Bay Shore Lyric Opera Company's productions.

Mrs. Der Torossian said she has heard insinuations that she and her husband founded the opera company to fund her daughter's

singing career — a sore spot for the proud mother.

She adamantly refutes the gossip.

She insists, as Der Torossian does, that the opera company was founded to support local arts.

Der Torossian bought the theater for \$1.6 million from a development group that had proposed a 60-room hotel and retail center there in 1995.

"It's Capitola's hidden treasure," said Bay Shore Lyric Opera Managing Director Barbara Sylvester.

In the past 18 months, the neighborhood theater company has produced three operas: "La Cenerentola," "Die Fledermaus" and "Carmen."

Der Torossian also leases out the theater for a wide variety of acts, including dance, children's theater and musical productions.

"We rent out to 120 different independent contractors," Sylvester said. "Do you realize the amount of young talent that is?"

She said Der Torossian enjoys it all.

"Papken is so willing to embrace so many people in performing arts, and he helps out with his time just as much as he helps with money," she said.

"He's been an usher and a parking attendant here. He helps wherever he's needed."

The successful millionaire often makes his employees and volunteers feel like he is waiting on them, confounding common preconceptions about wealth.

A young actor walked into the theater as Der Torossian went over the month's expenses with his small staff.

Der Torossian jumped up, greeted him with a big grin, slapped him on the back and rushed to get him a cup of coffee.

"How are the studies going?" Der Torossian asked the young UC Santa Cruz student. "How many sugars do you want?"

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